



MY

VIETNAM

STORY



PAUL GOCHNOUR

AS TOLD TO DENNIS BETTS

Forward to Paul's Story of Vietnam 3-1-19

When Paul asked me to help him write his experiences in Vietnam, I was honored to be asked and agreed to do so, with anticipation. I wanted to hear what he went through and thought this would be the best way to experience his story.

The fact that I was in the Marine Corps gave me some insight to many of the things he told me, although I did NOT experience a Vietnam tour like he did. I was a "peacetime Marine" having served from 1959 to 1963, all stateside.

The words herein are Paul's words with no embellishments by me, only minor corrections of some grammar and sentences to make it flow better. I DID try to make some insertions, but Paul made the decisions to either use them or not; usually not and I am happy with that.

Paul is my close friend, and we spent some time going over each episode of his life in his story, and I became closer as a friend during this period. Everyone probably has a story they would like to tell, and Paul has been holding this one in for a long time.

Paul was a Lieutenant in the Army, a leader of men during a war time period of the United States, and he performed well as such. I salute you LT and am proud to know you.

Dennis Betts

Every adventure has a beginning or starting point. I have to say mine began from a place called Ligonier, which was my hometown in Pennsylvania.

Ligonier is a small borough in Westmoreland County of Pa. In the last census in 2000, it had 1695 population, so it is not a large place in which to live. I grew up there and had an uneventful time in this part of my story. This small inhabitation is more noted for the tourist attraction Idlewild Park, one of the oldest amusement parks in the country. Ligonier was a waypoint for getting there, being on Route 30, an east/west roadway.

Another attraction was and still is the Ligonier Days parade and whereas the site of the reconstruction of Fort Ligonier was erected to show the French and Indian War settlement that was there originally. The Seven Springs Mountain Resort is nearby, which also brings people to this area of the country. It was a decent place to live and grow up in and I enjoyed this area very much.

I graduated from Ligonier High School in 1965 and knew little about Vietnam in High School. I do recall hearing about something regarding the Gulf of Tonkin incident that occurred on August 2, 1964. This was something that made Congress grant permission to President Johnson, in a resolution, the authority to assist any Southeast Asian country whose government was considered to be jeopardized by communist aggression. In effect this resolution served as Johnson's legal justification for deploying U.S. conventional forces and in reality, commenced the opening of warfare against North Vietnam. There were servicemen already in S. Vietnam at that time, and some were already dying there. By November 1963, there were 16,000 American military personnel in South Vietnam, up from Eisenhower's 900 advisors. The Gulf of Tonkin resolution was also one of the first lies the government made during this war.

I did not know any of this information and in the summer of 1964, it seemed like a minor thing happening in a land far away. I did NOT know of anyone who had been to Vietnam or was in Vietnam and did not have any or very little contact with military people, or stories of this area of the world.

After high school graduation I was committed to going to Gettysburg College, because my father graduated from this college and I wanted to follow in his footsteps. I now know, this is not a good reason to pick a college.

### College and Early Military

As soon as I began looking into Gettysburg, I was aware that there was an ROTC program there. This is the Reserve Officers Training Corps program to train college students to become officers in the U.S. Armed Services. I thought, or maybe it was my parents' thoughts, that being an officer was the best way for an "educated" man to serve in the military.

I started college at Gettysburg, where my Major was Business Administration and Minor in Math and did investigate and interviewed for the ROTC program during my sophomore year of 1966-67. I took various tests at that time, and after the results, I was not accepted into the program. In my sophomore year it is my belief that the ROTC lowered their standards at that time, because they needed more officers due to the build-up of Vietnam involvement. I did accept an offer to join ROTC late in May of 1967 when it was offered to me. I had the impression that by being an officer in the Army that I would

later have a much easier time, such as an executive versus a factory worker and it would help my career in the future.

I was not a “good student”, at Gettysburg, but managed to somehow graduate. I did enjoy college, maybe too much, enjoyed intramural sports, mixers at area female colleges, and fraternity life. It was here that my faith journey was strengthened. The college Chaplain was Pastor John Vanorsdale and he was a big influence on my journey of faith.

I went to Fort Benning Army Base in Columbus, Georgia for my first ROTC summer camp in 1967. This was very similar to basic training with additional leadership training. We were also shown some spectacular fire power demonstrations.

During my Junior and Senior years (1967-1968 and 1968-1969), I attended ROTC classes and drills at the college. The classes covered various military topics such as tactics, weapons, military justice, leadership, etc. and I received college credits for attending these classes. We would drill one day a week and were doing marching and close order drill. It was not the most exciting time, doing this, but part of the program.

Another base I ended up at was when, in 1968, I attended six weeks at Fort Indiantown Gap Military Reservation located in Lebanon County, Pa. This base was not up to standards and was like stepping back to the past.

When I was commissioned as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant at my college graduation in 1969, I had a 2 Year active duty obligation and then 4 years in the reserves. I was thinking very little of Vietnam even then. Each candidate could make a choice of branch assignments and I made either quartermaster, air defense artillery or finance. I ended up in Infantry and was shocked and apprehensive about this.

#### Active Duty

I had to go to Fort Benning again after graduation for the infantry Basic Officers Course. The training at Fort Benning was actually very good and I learned more about tactics, more about weapons of all sorts, map reading, intelligence gathering, military justice and things like the military chain of command. These were all by the book, learning subjects and what was lacking, as I learned in Vietnam later, were the specifics about how small units operated together. Also, a fact that came to mind was not all military units operate the same way.

From Ft. Benning I went to Fort Polk which is in Leesville, Louisiana, located on 198,000 acres, not a small base at all. This was my first duty assignment, where I was a Basic Training Officer and taught Military Chain of Command and Military Justice. I was there mostly to be sure all training was conducted properly and safely.

While at Fort Polk, I received orders or at least the fact I was going to get orders, while I was in training there. The Battalion Commander came out to the training area and said to me, “Lieutenant you have your orders”. I asked him, “To where” and was not surprised when he said, “Vietnam.”

I was still confused about the Vietnam War, but knew I had to go. I know my parents were proud, but I am sure they were worried also.

The orders finally arrived and with them, I had a one month leave, spent at home, before my trip to Vietnam. On the way, I had orders to go to the country of Panama for two weeks of Jungle Training, prior to continuing onto Vietnam. That was an experience in itself. I remember instructors showing us a chicken being killed by ripping its head off, though none of us had to actually do that. I can't remember the "why" it was necessary to do so, other than to kill the thing for eating.

Another wonderful thing to do was, we were given a chance, or required, to taste and eat a critter called a Coatiundi. That was an animal that is a member of the raccoon family or at least related. It is known, in English, as the hog-nosed coon, so I ate a coon type animal while there. Not bad, not good, was food, I guess. We didn't have to eat any snakes, ugh!

When left Panama, I went to Oakland, CA,, spent a couple days in San Francisco, and then flew on a commercial airline to Vietnam. I arrived in Vietnam on Oct 7, 1970. We landed in Bien Hoa, Vietnam, five years after the first deployment of troops on March 8 1965. Those first members amounted to 3500 Marines and the total armed forces members increased to 200, 000 by December of that year.

#### Vietnam Arrival

Anyhow, I arrived in Vietnam on Oct 1970 and I remember three things about this time that stands out in my mind. It was hot, hotter than what I experienced in Panama during jungle training and it was hard to breathe. It was also very humid. My clothes were sticking to me and sweat was pouring down my body as I looked around the tarmac. I remember soldiers coming off helicopters at the airport which were attached to the 1<sup>st</sup> Cav unit looking beat. They were tired and had very heavy ruck sacks on their backs and I wondered how anyone could do this. I realized it wouldn't be long for me to find out. The other thing was the horrible, stinking smell that permeated the air around me. I would find out that this was due to the "shit burning", that was a constant duty to do, in Vietnam. It had to be done.

I was picked up and we went to a replacement center before being assigned to a unit somewhere in Vietnam. I recall the movie that just came out in the states, called M.A.S.H., and it looked like a movie acting set that was transposed to where I was. There were long haired doctors, mass confusion, helicopters coming and going, very loud speakers blaring out noisy instructions of info that could not be understood. It was somewhat surreal to experience it in person.

I checked in and was told I would find out further details as to where I was going and had nothing to do during this time, other than wonder around and spend some time at the officer's club, drinking beer and talking to other FNG's wondering where we were going to end up in Vietnam.

Found out eventually I would be assigned to the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division and the rumors said that was not good. The 101<sup>st</sup> was working in I Corps in the northern most area of South Vietnam.

I would like to say a word about the two patches that appear on the cover of my story. First, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne patch "The Screaming Eagle". This is one of the most well know patches of all military units. At the time I was in Vietnam most of us in the 101<sup>st</sup> were not airborne, I did not jump out our airplanes. At that time the unit was called Airmobile, for the constant use of helicopters; a new type of combat that has developed into what is today called Air Assault. There is now a training school for this at Fort Campbell, KY. the home of the 101<sup>st</sup>. All of our training was on the job. Second: the Alpha Avengers Assassins Patch was developed by men in the company sometime before I arrived. This was a

completely unauthorized by the army however, it was and still is today a sense of pride for all who wore it. While in the bush we wore these patches just as you see them - white and bright, at least officers and NCO's. Enlisted men did not have their own uniforms but took what they got. So, there we were, in olive drab clothing from head to toe, including socks and underwear, towels, ruck sacks, everything except these two white patches one (101) on our left shoulder and the Alpha Avenger on our left breast pocket. I believe that the 101st was the only unit in Vietnam that did not subdue it patch. We were proud and a bit macho, I guess.

I, and some others were sent to the SERTS or "Screaming Eagle Replacement Center", for a final determination on my assignment. It was at a different place and I remember, while standing there in the rain, all the confusion, lack of direction, and why, just why, did troops walk around in the rain without any rain gear, like poncho's? We were the best equipped army, so why the discomfort?

Finally, I was assigned to the 3/506 Infantry, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, U.S. Army in Vietnam. It had quite a history and it sounded ok to me. My unit had just returned from the only "authorized" excursion into Cambodia. Rain was a constant in Vietnam, so I waited until a break in the weather, and a resupply "bird" (helicopter) was my transport to my new outfit and platoon. I would be assigned to the I Corps Tactical Zone. I Corps consisted of Quang Tri Province, as it's most northern area of responsibility, then Thua Thien, Quang Nam, Quang Tin, and finally Quang Ngai Province. The firebases were carved out of the Vietnamese jungle and were easy targets for the Viet Cong.

That was my first permanent assignment and I was hoping for a good experience. The bird landed on a hillside and when I jumped out of the dang thing with my ruck sack on my back, I twisted my ankle, which was just a GREAT first impression for my new outfit. I spent the night there since I could hardly walk. The next day I tried to hobble around but it hurt too much. The decision was to return me to the rear again and so another bird took me back.

I found that without a heavy ruck and on a level ground or pavement, it was not hard to walk. The Battalion Commanding Officer asked if I would want to be a bunker guard, officer in charge or go to another battalion. For the life of me, I do not now know why or the reason, but I told him I would go to another battalion to be a Platoon Leader in the field.

My ankle healed quickly as it was not broken, but sprained, so I was assigned to the 2/501 infantry unit and became a member of the Alpha Company and eventually the Platoon Leader for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon. The bird took me to that location and I flew in and did not sprain anything this time.

I met my Platoon Sergeant, Staff Sgt., John Wentworth. It turned out he was a great soldier and I learned much from him. I also met my Company Commander, Captain Tom Dooley at this time. He was replaced by Jon Zimmerman at one time, later. I eventually met my fellow Platoon Leaders, Pete "LT Cherry" Chenette and Robert "LT Boo Boo" Joyce.

One of the first things we did as a company was to cross a river nearby and we spent the night there and then, the next morning, we went back across the same river, which seemed strange to me then and still does. We did it for no reason that I could think of, but many things in the Army are done that way, I found out. We then did a platoon sized operation of movement for another unknown reason.

#### TIME IN THE BUSH

This began my time as an infantry platoon leader, the job I was "trained" to do. The battalion would be assigned to a firebase and one of the four (4) companies would occupy the firebase as security. The other three (3) companies would patrol the area around that firebase. During my time we were on and around Firebases Brick, Tomahawk and Bastogne. Each platoon of the company (there were three platoons) would usually operate separately. A platoon had an assigned strength of 40+ men however, we would normally have only 25-30 at any given time. A platoon consisted of a platoon leader, platoon sergeant, 3 squad leaders, medic, 3 RTO's (radio operators), 3 machine gunners, 3 men with grenade launches and the rest had M-16's.

Our normal (if there is ever such a thing in life let alone in war) was something like this: Awake at first light and ambushes returned to the platoon, eat breakfast (C-rations) and begin moving for the day. We would normally move single file; the first man or "point" would have to cut his way through the thick jungle. Behind him was his "slack man" whose job was to protect the man on point. Then came a machine gunner and his assistant and I followed next along with my RTO. I felt a need to be near the front to control the direction of movement.

We would take breaks as necessary to keep everyone as fresh and safe as possible. The heat, rain, hills, jungle, streams etc. would all play a factor in how fast we could move. In the late afternoon we would usually stop and set up a day defensive perimeter (DDP) and send out patrols who would be searching for the enemy but also for a place to spend the night. Just before dark we would move to our night defensive perimeter (NDP) and set up guard/sleeping positions for the night. One or two manned ambushes would be sent out in addition to numerous "mechanical ambushes". Mechanical ambushes were ingenious devices that would set off explosives by a trip wire. The manner in which some of these operated were truly genius in design. None of these were issued or approved by the U.S. Army but, were designed and built by guys in the field. Once all was in place artillery fire would be called in to various locations in case it was needed quickly during the night. In the morning ambushes, manned and mechanical, would be brought in and the day would begin as all the rest.

I would like to tell you a little more about mechanical ambushes that I previously mentioned. As some of you may know the NVA and Viet Cong used "booby traps" to injure or kill U. S. soldiers during the Vietnam War. These simple yet effective devices were unmanned explosives that were set off in various ways. Normally they were set on trails that they thought we would be walking. They would easily kill or injure one or more soldiers and generally cause havoc among the troops. The enemy would set these up then leave the area. The "booby traps" would stay in place until exploded or rendered useless. It is probably less common knowledge the U.S. troops also used "booby traps". OK, since they were given such a bad reputation, we called ours "mechanical ambushes". We would not set ours and leave but, set them at night and remove them each morning. Also, they were not something issued by the Army but, made with our young soldier's ingenuity using whatever they had available. One example: guys would use a claymore mine, (usually set off using a small hand held "clapper" to generate electricity), and wire it to a used radio battery with a break in electrical line. The circuit was completed using a mouse trap connected to a trip wire. When exploded the claymore would cut a man in half.

We were told, to expect to be resupplied every three days but, to be prepared to last five days...and it could be more. Resupply would bring everything that we needed well at least in theory. To be resupplied it was best that we go to an LZ so the "bird" could land. They would kick out our supplies and any men returning for duty and take others back to the rear for such things as R&R, medical reasons or deros. This would all take only a few minutes as helicopter drivers did not like to sit on the ground and honestly we would like for them to leave so we could move to a location not so obvious to the enemy. If we could not get to an LZ the helicopter would hover and just kick the supplies to us on the ground.

One thing (OK, there were really a lot of things) the Army did well was getting mail to us in the field. Whenever a chopper came to our location, for whatever reason, they would have the BRIGHT RED mail bag. with them. While mail service wasn't always as timely as we would have liked, once I did receive a letter in the jungle of Vietnam that was written only four days prior, in Ligonier, Pa.

While encountering the enemy was always on our minds, there were many other things that were constant reminders, or should I say discomforts that were impossible to ignore. Being wet from the heat or rain was a constant discomfort but, it was not the only problem. Of course trying to keep clean, an impossible task, was important not just to keep comfortable but, also to keep infection away... boils and cellulitis to name just two. Leaches were found on every part of our bodies despite trying all kinds of ways to keep them off. Adding to our discomfort was what we had to carry. Each member of the platoon carried 80+ pounds of equipment and supplies. Some of what we carried: 21 magazines for M-16 ammo, 200 rounds of M-60 Machine Gun ammo, food, water (at one time I carried 10 quarts), fragmentation grenades, smoke grenades, C-4, claymore mine, flares, and personal item. Of course, the radio men had the radio and 3 extra batteries in addition to his regular load. The Medic had any medical supplies needed and would often help with additional ammo etc.

At what seemed like random times, we would go to the rear area, Phu Bai, for "stand down". This was a time for rest, relaxation and training. Honestly, the training part was minimal. It usually consisted of a "mad minute", a time to shoot off all our old ammunition... more fun than training. Although there was no such thing as a secure area in Vietnam, when we came in for stand downs, we had to surrender all of our weapons. I think this was mostly for our own safety as there was plenty of drinking during this time. We would also have USO shows and entertainment.

While I described a "typical" day in the jungle of Vietnam, there are a few incidents that stand out in my mind that were out of the ordinary; at least for me. These events now make me laugh and I expect others to laugh at or with me when I tell them. However, at the time they occurred they had me shaking in my boots (I guess that is where that comes from), scared for my own safety and the safety of the young men who were my responsibility.

The first of these events happened 7-10 days after I became the platoon leader. It was Thanksgiving and we were going to be taken to Phu Bai for Thanksgiving dinner. One half of the platoon would go one day and the other half the next. I went on the first day and my Platoon Sergeant went the second day. During my training it had been told to listen to all senior NCOs as they are the backbone of the army and know what they are doing. Now, I will honestly say this was not always the case but, my Platoon



Sergeant, SSG John Wentworth was just such an NCO. He was on his second tour in Vietnam and was a no-nonsense leader. I am not the least ashamed to say that during my first days as the Platoon Leader I did what SSG Wentworth said. When it came time for that second group of the platoon to return, I immediately learned the SSG Wentworth had stayed back to have his eye looked at. It was then I said to myself "holy shit I'm in charge". I guess he had taught me enough because we made it. A side note, the Thanksgiving Dinner was a feast to behold. Every imaginable typical food, from shrimp to turkey to pumpkin pie. Oh yea, we got to shower too!!

Knowing where we were was in my mind the most important part of my job as a Platoon Leader. It allowed us to be resupplied, picked up my helicopter, have support troops brought to us, allow for artillery support, or air support and others that I am forgetting. Of course, back in 1970-1971 there was no such thing as GPS so, keeping track of our location was done with a map and compass. As I was often asked and sometimes believed: "what is the most dangerous thing in the army? ..... A 2LT with a map and compass... ha ha ha. Anyway, once after being inserted into a landing zone and walking a few hundred meters, I thought I should check to be certain what was our exact location. To do this I used a process called dead reckoning. This involves using a compass to check the direction to a known location (to be accurate it takes two locations). In this situation I was using a spotting round fired in the air at a given location. So, I stood up and faced where I expected the round to go off..... When it exploded I immediately realized it was behind me.... I WAS LOST. Well not totally, using my map reading skills I was able to find our location. I now realize that the reason for being "lost" was that our fine young "helicopter drivers" did not always land where they were supposed to land. With that small criticism of these crazy, brave, young men, I have nothing but praise for what they did and were willing to do for those of us on the ground.

No report of a year in a person's life would be complete without a mention of Christmas. Of course, in Vietnam that meant the "Bob Hope Show". Each platoon was to send half of their men to the show while the rest remained in the field. I decided to send the guys who had the least time left in Vietnam while the rest of us stayed behind. Honestly, I had no big desire to go myself. I felt the show catered too much to "REMFs" and not enough to the guys in the bush. I will admit those who went had a great time, of course anytime out of the jungle was good in my view. So then came Christmas and I was looking forward to another trip to the rear and a meal fit for a king. We were working the area around Fire Base Tomahawk and had picked a location near an LZ and by a quiet stream to spend a few days. Like Thanksgiving half of our platoon would go and half would stay but, this time we were going to the Fire Base not the rear area. I thought still should be a good meal and maybe a quick shower. I went with the second group and had heard all was good with the first. Not so for us!! By the time we got there the mess had run out of the "good food" and we were fed cold cut sandwiches. YIKES! I would have preferred to stay in the field since we had a good location and lots of goodies from "care packages" sent from home. I think we did get a quick shower – canvas bags with a shower head were hang and we just stood under them...not the best. Maybe the best part was seeing "donut dollies" (Female, Red Cross volunteers) watching us.

Another frightening event that happened again without the enemy being involved. We were patrolling around Fire Base Bastogne, when one of the guys in the platoon got involved in a heated argument with

my Platoon Sergeant, SFC Jerry Prigmore. I vividly recall the young soldier yelling at Prigmore "you better hope we don't get into a firefight", the clear meaning to all was the he would be the one who would shoot SFC Prigmore. Prigmore in his quiet unassuming manner, simply took the safety off his M-16 (a round was already chambered) tossed it to the soldier and said, "don't wait for a firefight". I am sure this whole event took less than a minute but, so much went through my head, such as how was I going to explain my platoon sergeant being killed... luckily cooler heads prevailed and as quickly as the argument started it was over.

At this point in my story I would like to relate some excerpts about dogs in our platoons while in Vietnam. On a few occasions we would have a dog and his handler come out to the bush to help us track or find the enemy. I will readily admit that we were fortunate that the dogs that came out with us never found the enemy... this was always kind of my goal. It was always nice to have a dog with us as they seemed to be happy enjoying their time... and I must say we were not having fun. Two dog stories come to mind. First involves a dog that was not with my platoon but, with another platoon of our company. The dogs and handlers would only be with us from 3-5 days at a time. This coincided with our resupply times. On this one occasion the platoon with the dog was not getting resupplied on schedule. This meant that the dog and handler had to stay longer than planned. I heard a conversation on the radio that went something like this. RTO: "The dog handler says we have get a bird here asap".. Platoon Leader: "Why is that" RTO: "He is out of dog food" PL: "Tell him to give the dog C-Rations we have plenty" RTO: " Get this he says the dog can't eat them" Now at this point there are comments from every radio in the company... such as WTF, your fucking joking, hell I can't eat them either, etc. All of these comments were from guys who had been in the bush for 2-3 weeks eating c-rations, wearing the same clothes, dirty, hot, wet, scared.. ... and this dog couldn't eat C's. It wasn't long after that that platoon got resupplied and the dog got to go to the rear. In defense of the dog, C's were probably too rich for him however in this case I think it was the handler who wanted to get out of the bush.

My second scout dog story was a time when Blitz and his handler were travelling with my platoon. It was near night fall and we were preparing to set our night time positions. We were standing near a small foxhole when the dog handler said: "hey LT watch this" He went on to say: "Blitz would you rather be in the army or dead?" Just then Blitz quickly jumped into the foxhole, rolled on his back with his feet in the air. If you are picturing this, you can clearly see Blitz was playing dead. I think this was the best laugh I had in Vietnam.

While in the rear area there were always stray dogs hanging around obviously looking for food. We had two, a male and a female, that stayed in our company area for quite a while. So, we had to name them: "Pimp and Whore.

Remembering things that occurred in Vietnam, some things that happened were never mentioned in training beforehand. Simple, (now) things like caring for equipment in the constant rain there, such as the important radio, calling in artillery or air support, how to make a simple mechanical ambush, what goes and not goes into a ruck sack, and the chore of how to write awards for those who earned them from actions in the field or even everyday ones. All this had to be learned in what could be called, on the job training, but there could have been a better way of doing so.

Prior to 31March1971 while on Fire Base Bastogne we were being prepared for a special mission. This

mission with handpicked troops, still to this day wonder why I would be among those being picked, was to be carried out at night in an area near or in the A Chau Valley. We were even issued camouflage sticks, something I had not seen since having young soldiers use them in basic training, so we could be undetected at night.

This changed on 31 March when heavy NVA activity was detected around the abandoned FB Veghel. The first platoon was inserted onto a small LZ near Veghel and took on heavy fire. At this point the decision was made to CA Alpha Co and C Company 2/501 onto Veghel. Veghel being abandoned was a bare hilltop in the middle of enemy forces. As soon as we arrived, we began receiving mortars and machine gun fire from NVA who clearly had us in their sights. At that time and still today I wonder why we were put into such a dangerous situation.

We were not idle on this Firebase, as we did fire a LAW at one of the machine gun positions firing at us. While I don't think we took him out, he certain was aware of this projectile coming toward him. I also vividly recall air strikes taking place around the Firebase. In particular were those of some from the Australian Air Force; their planes seem so slow and deliberate as compared to our Air Force or Navy or even the Army's Cobra Gun Ships. Even though they seemed to be moving in slow motion they were very accurate. From FB Veghel, The Third Platoon was CA'd to an LZ nearby.

#### HOT LZ:

This was my one "Hot LZ", or Landing Zone. On a regular basis, we would "CA" (combat assault) from one location (in the field, rear area or fire base) to a location in the jungle. Ours were usually one "bird" (helicopter) landing zones, meaning there was only room for one bird to land at a time. As platoon leader, I would be on the first "bird" I needed to be ready to throw green or red smoke. Green meaning no enemy activity and red meaning I saw enemy, or we were taking fire.

We landed on an LZ near abandoned Fire Base Veghel. When we landed, I threw green smoke as we took no fire. the second "bird" was hit, and the 4 members of my platoon got off and the helicopter took off and it had to make an emergency landing on a road nearby. On the first "bird" was myself, my RTO, Tim Leonard, machine gunner, John "Tex, Fair and his assistant gunner. The second "bird" had Jim Ivy and 3 others. There were eight of us on the LZ and I am unable to remember the names of four of them, but the spectacular job they did that day is forever in my mind.

I saw two enemy running and yelled for "Tex" to fire, but he was on the other side of the LZ, so I got off a couple of bursts in their direction. I informed our CO Cpt. Zimmerman and the Battalion Commander, who was overhead in another bird, of the situation. Soon after, and it seemed like forever, we were told to move off the LZ and join up with 2nd platoon. Not long after, the eight of us started down the hill, the LZ was hit with a lot of firepower by our forces, artillery and cobra gunships. We did meet up with others including a scout dog, whose handler had been medevacked. When I radioed about the dog, the Battalion Commander said, "If he gives you any problems, shoot him." "Yikes", I thought, but he was no problem. We met with the rest of Alpha Company near Fire Base Veghel.

We were taken back to Firebases Bastogne for an awards ceremony for actions taken in the previous few days. We had to clean up, make sure we were clean shaven, and even had new boots given to us. The only problem, mine were about two sizes too small and were very uncomfortable.

My decorations were not a huge list, but I am quite proud to tell what I received. The one award I am most proud is the Combat Infantry Badge, which is for an infantry man who was in combat. I did receive the Bronze star with V for Valor, due to the hot LZ, that I was involved in. I also got a Bronze Star for meritorious service (for doing my job) and Air Medal (again for the hot LZ).

#### My time as Company Executive Officer

Shortly after the awards presentation on Bastogne I was informed by Captain "Z", Zimmerman that I would now be the Company Executive Officer and stationed at a place named Phu Bai. Oddly I felt mixed emotions about this, of course I was thrilled to get a "rear job" and become a "REMF" (Rear Echelon Mother Fucker) however, I was worried about "my guys" and who would be leading them in the "bush". By this time I had developed a certain amount of confidence in my ability as a platoon leader but, maybe more importantly I knew these young heroes - each ones strengths and weaknesses, what they could/would do out in the bush and little bit about their personal lives. I was seriously worried about how a "cherry" LT would take care of "my guys". OK, honestly, not worried enough to turn down the XO job but still worried.

Then, I met my replacement, LT Carl Oborski. A large young man, a West Point graduate (football player) who was planning a career in the army and was far from a "cherry". I felt "my guys" were in good hands. More news helped reduce my worry, SGT Wentworth had decided to go back to the field after having a rear job. The rear job did not fit with SGT Wentworth as he was a real combat soldier. He had mentored me from my first day as the platoon leader and had a love/hate with the members of the platoon. They hated the way he made them work hard and do things the right way but, loved him because they knew he was only doing what would keep them safe. I think this relationship shows in one of his nicknames - "Daddy".

I don't remember, in fact I don't think I knew then either, what my duties and responsibilities were as Company XO. I do remember I signed a lot of papers – I recall I liked to try to use a different signature each time and I did attend, along with the First Sergeant, a daily battalion briefing each afternoon.

Three events are clearly (ok maybe not as clear as I think) in my memory. First, on April 12, 1971 "Hard Luck Alpha" (a nickname that was proudly and sadly earned) was involved in a heavy fire fight after landing on another hot LZ. I was able to monitor the company radio channel and soon learned the several men were being medevaced. I went the hospital to meet these men who I knew where "my guys" from the third platoon. The first man I saw was John "Tex" Fair, a 6'7" machine gunner who had been with me since I started as platoon leader. The first thing he said was: "LT, Daddy's (SGT Wentworth) dead. The tears in this big, strong Texan's eyes were not from the pain of his own wounds but the sadness of losing SGT Wentworth. He then said: get this thing (a catheter) out of my dick. Wentworth was the only KIA that day but there were numerous wounded including LT Oborski. I learned much later that he spent 9 months in hospitals and his military career was over. One good thing did

happen as he later told me, he married one of his nurses and has had a good family.

Back in 1971 and still today I wonder would have happened if I had remained the Platoon Leader of the third platoon A2/501. Clearly, I have always been thankful that I wasn't there, one, because I would have no doubt been wounded and second I do wonder that as bad as things were for these great soldiers; they many have been much worse under my leadership. I had the honor of meeting Carl Oborski at an Alpha Co. reunion in 2014 and express my gratitude for all he did.

The second event I that I recall in my time as XO was Alpha Company being selected to guard an ammo dump in Da Nang. This was a month-long assignment and was a great break from being in the bush. The entire field portion of Alpha was taken to Da Nang and had actual hootches to stay in while not on guard duty. These hootches were right on the beach of the South China Sea so everyone was very happy. I believe everyone had to spend 24 hours on guard duty and then be off for 24 hours. The guard stations, mostly towers, were manned by a number of troops so they could still get sleep while on duty. As XO, I was not there all the time but, spent enough time there to see how enjoyable it was. There was on officer's mess that was as nice as many in the States. We checked off our food order on a menu and of course there was plenty of alcohol. Enlisted men were only allowed beer but that was quite plentiful. There were Marines in the area also and "Capt. Z" seemed to enjoy giving them a hard time. So, while we were not fighting NVA or Viet Cong we did have a few skirmishes with the Marine Corps.

Third, was when Cpt "Z" was going on R&R and I would go back to the bush to be the acting company commander. This week-long stint was for the most part uneventful and in fact I do not remember much about this time. However, there is on incident that definitely stands out as unforgettable. One night well after we were settled into our night defensive perimeter, artillery rounds began flying overhead and not at a safe height. We could also hear the rounds being fired in the distance. It was clear to myself and our excellent artillery forward observer LT. Ray Houghton, that these were being fired from our (U.S.) artillery; probably 105mm or 155mm howitzers. Ray and I both began call to our respective contact to "CHECK FIRE". The first response we got was: "no one is firing in your area." As tree tops and small shrapnel feel on our heads we persisted in our check fire call. After what seemed like an extremely long time, the firing finally stopped and still no one would admit that it was "friendly fire". As soon as it became day light there were helicopters flying overhead and lots of radio conversation about where we were during the night. Since we had not had a chance to move we replied right here and popped smoke to identify our location. Ray was an excellent map reader and we both had no doubt that we were exactly where we said we were. Finally, those in command of the artillery agreed that we were where we said.... Nothing more was said about the incident, but it was clear we were right.

There is a page in the addendum area showing what the Alpha Company, 2/501<sup>st</sup>, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division had as awards and decorations during Vietnam as a whole. These are from the total time the Company was embedded in the country.

The 101st Airborne Division began its redeployment from Vietnam in November 1971. The Division turned over Camp Evans, LZ Sally and Camp Eagle to ARVN units, withdrawing to Phu Bai, and finally to Da Nang to close-out of Vietnam. The Screaming Eagles were the last US Army division to leave the

combat zone in South Vietnam. Finally, a single color-bearing battalion-sized element departed Da Nang by plane for Ft. Campbell, Kentucky, in March, 1972.

#### COMING HOME

When it was time for me to DROS (date return from overseas) and for me time to end my active duty in the Army, there was lots of paper work to be done. Now, I had signed a lot of this paper work for others to leave but, I was unsure who should sign mine. The company commander was out the field so I was the only officer in the company area. Wanting to leave with the least amount of hassle as possible, I decide to just sign everything myself - well not exactly; I signed our CO's name, LT Peeples to most of it. I recall that through all of my out processing I was concerned that something would be said about my paper work. Nothing happened, and I board "Flying Tiger Airlines" for the trip back to the World.

The flight was uneventful with stops in Japan and Alaska and the final stop in Seattle WA. Since I had just returned from Vietnam and was also being discharged from active duty, I was given the option of a full physical exam (which would take several days and delay my journey home) or pee in a cup and go! Some choice I thought and said: "give me the cup"

I got a flight to Pittsburgh with no doubt a stop or two and was on my way. I flew military standby, so I was still in uniform and from stories I had heard and still hear today, I expected to encounter some protestors. To my pleasant surprise no protestors approached me and in fact I was pretty much ignored; at least until my mother ran across the tarmac to greet me. I WAS HOME!!

My home life went back to much the way it was before Vietnam. I lived at home with my parents, got unemployment, began to look for a career and hung with a

few friends. There was very little talk about Vietnam. That career thing did not come as easily as expected. My thoughts were, I was a college graduate, was a decorated veteran and had led men in situations that were hard to imagine. I found out I was so correct these situations could not be understood and were not helpful to a career. Certainly, my lack of resume writing and interviewing skills did not help my career search. Finally, in 1972 I began my career in retail management. I still rarely talked about Vietnam even after I was married in 1974.

My wife, Vickie, always had a sympathetic ear and was willing to listen to me talk about Vietnam, but just like others who had not been there I knew she did not fully understand. It was always in the back of my mind that I would like to meet and talk to the men I had served with in Vietnam, however, I had no idea about how to contact any of them. I was pretty much resigned to the fact that I would never see or talk to any of them. This all changed one Saturday morning in 1990. I was getting ready for work when the phone rang. As we did back then I answer it and heard: "LT THIS IS TEX". Since I had not been called LT since 1971 and I knew no one called Tex, I immediately knew it was John "Tex" Fair, my 6'7" machine gunner. He and several others were planning a reunion for July, YES, I WOULD BE THERE.

This was the start of the "Alpha Avengers of Vietnam Association", a group that has meet every two years since 1990. Reconnecting with guys I served with and meeting those who went before and after me has been a life changing experience. The friendships I have made are unlike any others – we have a

bond that I believe no one else has. As I said we meet every two years however there are many mini-reunions in between. These "Brothers" have helped me understand how Vietnam changed me and enabled me to live a normal life.

It was only with the help of many people that I have been able to write this story that has been bouncing around in my head for almost 50 years. Thanks to Dennis Betts for his many hours of listening and editing my words. Thanks to Joan Solar for proof reading and making my words all little easier to understand.

I, of course thank all veterans for you service and sacrifice to this great nation. A special thanks to Vietnam Veterans for all that you have been through and continue to got through.

I am most thankful for all who served with Alpha Company 2/501 inf. 101st ABN Division. Whether you served before me, after me or were in Vietnam with me, you each have touch my life. Some of you actually kept me alive in 1970-1971. I am grateful and humbled that you have welcomed me into the Alpha Avenger Association and that you call me "Brother". I love each of you.

Please visit for More Information <http://www.alphaavengers.org>

**And/or**

**[2nd BDE, 101st Airborne Vietnam History](#)**

The following Awards were earned by the 2nd/501st during the Vietnam War.



Presidential Unit Citation - 10-21 May 69



Meritorious Unit Citation



RVN Gallantry Cross w/Palm - 19 Apr-15 Aug 68, 15 Aug 68-14 May 69; 1 Mar-9 Oct 71; 18 Apr-31 Aug 71 and 6-19 Sep 71



RVN Civil Actions Honor Medal, FC—18 Mar 68–2 May 70, Less Company C



Company C, Valorous Unit Award—17 Apr–7 May 69



RVN Campaign Medal

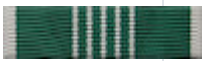


Presidential Unit Citation



RVN Unit Citation (Note: I would like to get a better image of this ribbon!)

Individual awards, but not all inclusive, are listed below.



Army Commendation Medal



Distinguished Service Cross



Defense Distinguished Service Medal



Silver Star



Bronze Star



Army Congressional Medal of Honor



Purple Heart



Meritorious Service Medal



Vietnam Wound Medal



Vietnam Gallantry Cross



Army Service Ribbon





## Vietnam Service Medal

### Vietnam Military Terms

3-1-19

The below listed words with definitions are those that are in Paul's Story of Vietnam. There are websites that will show these and other words that were in use during this period of time and in the military in the past. It is easy to take for granted these words, when you were in the U.S. armed forces of any branch, but especially when in the Army or Marines, where many such words were common place.

Air Medal	The Air Medal is awarded to any person who, while serving in any capacity in or with the armed forces of the United States, shall have distinguished himself by meritorious achievement while participating in aerial flight.
Air Support	Bombs, rockets or other fire from airplanes or helicopters
Ambush	a surprise attack by people lying in wait in a concealed position.
Artillery	Long range weapons firing projectiles in support of the troops on the ground... size 105mm, 155mm and 8in.
Bird (types)	any aircraft, but usually refers to helicopters
Booby Trap	An explosive charge hidden in a harmless object, which explodes on contact
Bronze Star	U.S. military decoration awarded for heroic or meritorious service
Bush	Infantry term for the field
C-4	plastic, putty textured explosive carried by infantry soldiers. It burns like sterno when lit and was used to heat C-rations in the field.
CA	Combat Assault. Used to describe troopers being flown into an LZ
Check Fire	A command to stop or hold up firing at a precise location
CIB	combat infantry badge. And Army award for being under enemy fire in a combat zone, worn on both fatigues and dress uniforms.
Cherry	Slang term for an inexperienced replacement soldier; a virgin
Claymore	an antipersonnel mine carried by the infantry which, when detonated, propelled small steel cubes in a 60-degree fan-shaped pattern to a maximum distance of 100 meters
Cobra	an AH-1G attack helicopter. Also known as a gunship, armed with rockets and machine guns.

C-Rations	combat rations. Canned meals for use in the field. Each usually consisted of a can of some basic course, a can of fruit, a packet of some type of dessert, a packet of powdered coca, a small pack of cigarettes, and two pieces of chewing gum.
DDP	Day Defensive Position
DEROS	date of expected return from overseas. The day all American soldiers in Vietnam were waiting for.
Donut Dollie	Female Red Cross Worker who handed out donuts
Firebase	temporary artillery encampment used for fire support of forward ground operations
Flares	Illumination projectile; hand fired, or shot from artillery, mortars or from the air
FNG	Fucking New Guy or any new man in a platoon
Grenade	Explosive device, usually thrown after pulling a pin to activate it
Grenade Launcher	A specific weapon to send a grenade through the air
Hootch	a hut or simple dwelling, either military or civilian. Also spelled hootch.
Howitzer	a short cannon used to fire shells at medium velocity and with relatively high trajectories
Hot LZ	a landing zone under enemy fire
I Corps	the northernmost military region in South Vietnam
LAW	a shoulder-fired, 66-millimeter rocket, similar in effect to a 3.5-inch rocket, except that the launcher is made of Fiberglass, and is disposable after one shot
LZ	landing zone. Usually a small clearing secured temporarily for the landing of resupply helicopters. Some become more permanent and eventually become base camps.
Mad Minute	a weapons free-fire practice and test session
Machine Gun	A weapon with a high rater of firepower, usually fed from a belt of amunition
M.A.S.H.	Mobile Army Surgical Hospital unit
Medic	Trooper that had some medical training experience for helping to take care of wounds, or men in the platoon having any medical problems
M-16	the standard U.S. military rifle used in Vietnam from 1966 on. Successor to the M-14.
NDP	A Night Defensive Position usually set up for an overnight stay in the bush
NVA	A member of the North Vietnamese Army
NCO	An enlisted noncommissioned officer
Platoon Leader	The commissioned officer in charge of a platoon

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Platoon Sgt.	A top ranked enlisted Sergeant having responsibilities as the enlisted sergeant in charge
Point Man	Lead soldier in a unit, cutting a path through dense vegetation who is exposed to the dangers of tripping booby traps or being first in contact with the enemy
REMF	Rear Echelon Mother Fucker or viewed as one who is serving in the rear by front line troops
RTO	Radio Telephone Operator who carried the PRC-25 radio in a platoon or company
Ruck Sack	Back Pack issued and carried by infantry in Vietnam
R&R	Rest and Recreation taken during a one-year duty tour in Vietnam or vacation from duties in the bush, which was enjoyed in various places other than Vietnam
SERTS	Screaming Eagle Replacement Training School in the U. S. Army
Slack Man	The second man on a patrol, directly behind the Point Man
Smoke	A grenade or projectile that explodes with colored smoke to identify areas on the ground where troops are located, for landing areas of birds with troops, or other signaling purposes
Squad Leader	Usually a sergeant that commands a squad made up of two teams of four men, having various duties in the squad.
Stand Down	Period of rest and refitting in which all operational activity, except for security, is stopped
Viet Cong	Communist forces fighting the South Vietnamese Government
XO	The Executive Officer or second in command of a company
1 <sup>st</sup> Cav	The First Cavalry Division of the U.S. Army, which pioneered Air Mobile activities in Vietnam where troops were moved into battlefield positions by helicopters

The poem that follows, "All in a Day" was written by members of the third platoon, Alpha Co. 2/501<sup>st</sup> inf 101abn div. in 1971. At that time "The Stars and Stripes" were printing various poems submitted by my soldiers and we hoped to have ours published. I don't think it ever was and for sure it is not great poetry. As a group those of us in the infantry rarely talked about the political aspects of the war. Even if it was never said we were NOT fight for God, country, mom or apple pie but, we were fighting for the guy next to us – our "Brother". Today, 48 years later the line: "you wonder if the people back home really think it's right". Some of the same thoughts I have to this day.

## **ALL IN A DAY**

The days and nights are lonely

And the time goes ever slow

You live from day to day

Just wondering where you'll go.

You think about the home lands

As you lie awake at night

Wondering if the people back home

Really think it's right.

As the sun comes above the horizon

You're up and ready to go

No one knows the feeling

Everyone has his own.

When the word is given to move

The tensions begin to grow

The thought crosses every mind again

Just wondering where we'll go.

As you move along

Your faith is pure and strong

But yet there is the question

Will your faith lead you wrong?

As you stop for chow  
You think of home cooked food  
Then your thoughts are shattered  
As the order is given to move.

Again, you move along  
The sun beats down its rays  
A burst of AK is fired  
Immediately you begin to pray.

As you return the fire  
You think of your job and what you're to do  
Knowing that if you don't get him  
Then he will get you.

After the fight is over  
And you have calmed down  
You search out the area  
To see if any more are around.

At the closing of the day  
Your mind is filled with thoughts  
Of the day's activities  
And what that they have brought.

Do the people really care

Or is it all in vain

Or are we just another link

In their life long chain.

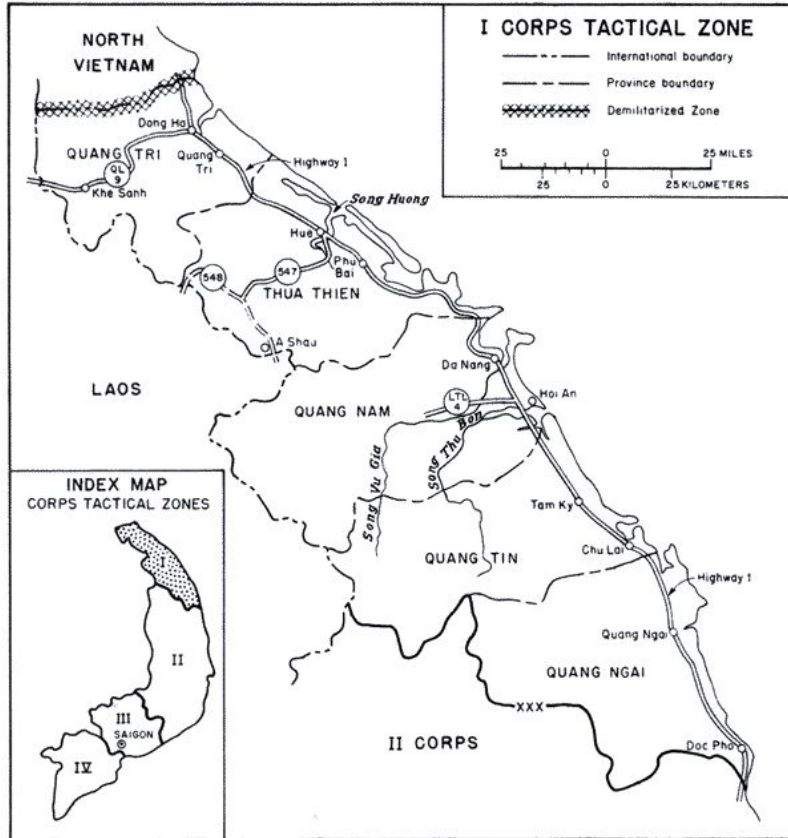
But as the day is closing

And you sit up for the night

Again, you wonder if the people back home

Really think it's right.

3rd Platoon, A Company 2/501st Battalion, 101st Airborne



The I Corps region of Vietnam where the Alpha Avengers operated



Not a good map but does show the fire bases and Phu Bai locations



Setting up for the night



Two great members of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon



Rear of Pilot and his friend





Resupply



Shaving in the field



Me on the move for the day followed by my RTO



Relaxing on Firebase Bastogne



Firebase Brick – Demo on how VC get through our wire



View from Firebase Tomahawk



Firebase Tomahawk



I am in the distance - - - just finishing peeing



Me on Firebase Tomahawk when I was XO



Great soldiers partying

## ONE MORE THING

Thanks to each of you who have taken some of your valuable time to read "My Story". Writing this story and having people listen to it or read it has been a continuation of my healing. If anyone would like to discuss my experiences in Vietnam or Vietnam in general please contact me, I'll buy the coffee, beer or even lunch. Everything I wrote is factual; at least as factual as my old memory allows. My one disappointment in "My Story" is my inability to convey the misery that infantry men had to endure during the Vietnam War. I personally did not encounter the horrors of war that many did; however, it was certainly not a vacation as "My Story" may make it sound. We were in constant fear of ambushes, booby traps, rocket and mortar attacks. Travelling through the jungle was not a walk in the park. We had to cut our way through thick vegetation which made progress slow. Some grass and thorns were so sharp they would easily cut through our clothing and skin causing serious infections. All this while carrying everything we needed for up to five days. Some days were so hot, and water was at a premium and other days were so wet and almost cold. We, at times,

had to travel through streams and rice paddies that had us waist deep. Some nights we would be shivering under our poncho liners trying to stay warm and dry. The terrain was far from level, the hills so steep and slippery we needed to use a rope so as not to fall down faster than we went up. At times we had the same clothes on for weeks at a time so, keeping clean was impossible and, of course, this did not help the risk of infection.

We all had to deal with these physical problems but, maybe the mental stress was even a greater concern. As a leader, I worried constantly about many things: where we were and where we had to be, the physical and mental condition of the men I was leading, was I handling each man's problems fairly and correctly, how would I lead during the next fire fight and even what was happening back home. The men of my platoon had great mental stress as well: does "LT" know what he is doing, why am I always on point, will this boil ever get better, why haven't I gotten a letter from my wife/girlfriend, does the FNG (fucking new guy) have any clue and why do I have to teach him. This list could go on as each person had their own stress.

Yes, I am so proud to have served with the men of Alpha 2/501 101<sup>st</sup> Abn. Div. and it is my honor to be called "LT" by some of the best men in the world.

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