

My Vietnam Experience

By: Richard Thomas

As I contemplate rewriting this experience, I am beginning to recognize in myself a lot of bitterness in addition to suppressed anger. I wonder if I can ever get rid of these thoughts that haunt me. I am bitter not only at the military, but also at myself for not avoiding my "duty."

I believe my Vietnam experience was conditioned by my experience with Special Forces in Laos in 1961.

I came away from Laos convinced that the U.S. military could not win a war in Southeast Asia. I did not want to go to Vietnam but I suppose I felt it was my unavoidable duty. In Vietnam, I was the sometimes battalion XO, operations officer, O2 Commander depending upon the situation. My worst experiences were as the operations officer.

Vietnam was divided into AO's (area of operations). AO's were assigned to US forces, or ARVN with us advisors and were contiguous. I lived on a fire base. A fire base is circular with a perimeter of foxholes designed to repel a ground attack from any direction. There were no showers or other conveniences. As I recall, the latrines were not enclosed. Hot noon and evening meals were trucked to the base. Each soldier carried with them 2 meals of C rations. The infantry soldier rotated through 3 duties, HI daylight patrols within the AO or other assigned areas. Without more than a few hours notice the battalion would be airlifted to the delta to set up multiple ambush sites. At another time we were inserted into the iron triangle on search and destroy sweeps. #2 guarding the base which included manning night listening posts about 100 yards out from the wire to prevent sneak night attacks. #3 night ambush patrols. I periodically accompanied night ambush patrols to make sure they were doing what they were supposed to do. I also wanted them to know that I know how miserable it was to stay awake all night in the rain when it was expected the N VA might move in bad weather. I do not recall any accidents resulting in wounds although everyone had loaded weapons, hand grenades, and claymore mines. Only once did a soldier go berserk or ambush and kill one or two of his companions. I am certain the letters to the next of kin said they died in enemy action defending their country. My job was to plan and implement daily operations 3 days into the future. This had to include coordination of artillery and mortars, helicopter PZ's and LZ's, gunships, air force strikes and adjacent AO's. The constant stress seemed to eliminate any feelings of compassion. For instance, a young second LT joined the battalion. He was helicoptered out to his platoon. The very next day he came back in a body bag. Too bad, move on, not what happened? A sniper was assigned to our battalion. I welcomed him and assigned him to a night ambush. On the first ambush he shot and killed the female mayor of a small village in our AO. She simply added to the body count. There was no concern, no nothing. I gave the sniper the order that he could not fire without positive identification. (At least I did this and he did not kill again.) I neglected to say I was also required to maintain 24 hour radio communication with brigade HQs and the battalion units in the fields and on ambush.

One experience stands out in my mind as the worst.

As I recall it was a clear hot day. I periodically took a whore's bath and shaved out of my helmet as usual. An ARVN unit in an adjacent AO had enemy contact and I had to go contact my US advisor counterpart. There was no helicopter or excel, I just had to go. I told my driver to get ready to go and make certain both radios were on the net. I probably ate some C's that morning. I put on my web gear, 45 cal. Pistol

and steel pot. I can't remember how we arranged fatigues. I don't remember if I had a rifle but my driver had one, we headed to find my counterpart. I don't remember seeing civilians, other vehicles, or birds or anything one might see if life were normal. You might think my driver and I were close. I don't recall his name or where he was from. We were both occupied, that day, with possible land mines in the dirt road, careful observation of vegetation ahead, and the oppressive heat. Too much was going on to allow friendly chat or friendly conversation. My driver was a very competent draftee. I am sure his major goal was to get home, just like everyone else's.

I must have seen some troops in the distance because we stopped and I got out and walked toward the ARVN. They were about 100 yards off through waist high brush, all of a sudden, with no warning, I was in front of 4 ARVN holding two civilians on the ground. One ARVN held a towel over the man's face. The other sat on his legs and poured water into the towel. The men on the ground convulsed. They were drowning. They were naked. Their chests were so extended it looked like their hearts would push out. I knew their wrists were tied behind their backs with wire.

The ARVN always used wire on their prisoners. My first thought was to pull out my .45 and order the ARVN to stop. All kinds of thoughts went through my head. There was no interrogation, just 4 ARVN torturing two civilians. It was condoned by the ARVN we supported. It was condoned by the US advisor, my counterpart. I knew these two men would die. They would be added to the "good" body count metric. I decided I could not be a part of this or witness any more. I did not want to hear the shots. I hurried back to the jeep and told my driver to take us to base. I heard the two shots.

I never mentioned the incident to anyone. There was no reason, no use. I just tried to forget it. We lost the war in Vietnam and it cost a lot in lives on all sides, US, ARVN, N VA and civilians. In my opinion it was a misguided catastrophe and we learned nothing.

(Reading this daily aloud to myself has not provoked any intense emotions like weeping or feeling like I am going to weep.)