

Chuck Lewis  
U.S. Army  
1966 to 1969  
Interviewed by: Helen Cunningham

In 1966 I'd had Tintanitis, a ringing in my ears. I went down to the base to get tested and I didn't pass the hearing. The guy at the base went to close my chart, saying, "Well, the good news is you're not going to be drafted," but when he closed my folder, there was a big R on the front side. It was a nine by twelve inch folder and this R was a good eight by ten. A big, stamped, red R for resister. I was nineteen, and rather ambivalent about the draft, so I hadn't gotten around to registering. In my draft board, the punishment for not registering was that you were automatically drafted. The guy saw the R and said, "Oh, you, well, you have to go to the eighth floor." On the eighth floor they had a 105 Howitzer. They would the Howitzer and if you blinked, your hearing was good enough. Nobody, nobody flunked on the eighth floor. I passed the test and thirty days later I was on the bus.

When I was at Ranger school, we were out thirty miles from the main post at Fort Benning. We were out in the swamps, and there was nothing to do. I was a sergeant, so I could have gone to the officer's club and gone drinking every night, I could have gone to watch a movie, except I couldn't have walked the thirty miles to get to where the movies were. So, I just, read. I read everything. Even though I was an infantryman, I read about artillery and forward observation, how to sight a target, how to fire a mortar.

I spent almost two years with the army in the United States, and there was too little time left to be sent to Vietnam. But it was right then, during Tet, February of 1968, and we were

losing five hundred guys a week. I'd been teaching small-unit tactics at the army's ranger school and I just had this sense that, wait a minute, if these tactics work, how come we're losing five hundred guys a week? I thought they should work, that I had to send better men. So, I told The Army to send me to training school and I'd volunteer for a tour. And it was easy, easy. I'd been an instructor at The Army's commander school. I knew this stuff.

We would typically get called sometime during the night. This was when I had a line platoon; I was a field sergeant in the infantry. I'd look at the map, get all the troops together and draw the right location in the dirt. The guys knew I'd always have the helicopters lined up exactly the way we were supposed to assault. Everybody would exit port door of the helicopters, line up, take twelve steps, get down on one knee, and then we'd be on line, ready to attack. When we'd get into the jungle, it was a lot harder. Sometimes you'd attack this village, and the enemy'd have firing positions, they'd have foxholes. They'd be firing and have you pinned down, having to call in an air strike. I'd tell the guys to get ready and as soon as the artillery hit, we'd jump in there, and they'd be gone. You'd think, 'how'd they disappear? They were firing at me five seconds ago, how'd they disappear so fast?' What they did was just stick their rifle down in that spider hole, get out, and they're lookin' like a farmer.

One thing I'd do, to tell the South Vietnamese from the guerrillas, I'd look at your hands. Soldiers aren't like everybody. We have one callus, right here, on the trigger finger. Farmers, they've got hands just like me, calluses everywhere.

We'd ask people who was the president of South Vietnam. Most people, in South Vietnam, said it was Ho Chi Minh. The Americans used to hand out these leaflets, safe conduct

passes, called Chu Ho Li. If you

wanted to surrender you could hold it up and say, 'Chu Hoi.' The side that faced them had a picture of the president of South Vietnam and a little message. So the only people who knew who the president of South Vietnam really was, the people who had a safe conduct pass in their pocket because they might need it one day, were probably North Vietnamese. To the rest of the people, Ho Chi Minh was like Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and James Madison all rolled into one. Ho Chi Minh wrote the declaration of independence, he wrote the constitution, he was the first president. He was famous, even in South Vietnam. Most of the people who were farmers did not care whether the government was in Saigon or Hanoi. The farmers' sentiment was, basically, 'would you quit tromping around in my rice paddy, conducting your war games where I'm trying to grow my family's food.'

The great thing about walking around at night was nobody else was supposed to be up. There was a curfew, and so anybody who was up was North Vietnamese. I remember walking the route one time, and in the afternoon there had been two pieces of bamboo fallen across the trail, but at night there were three. I had to stop, walk the trail, circle around back, and guess what? The enemy had set an ambush in that spot, and the third piece of bamboo was to warn all the people in the village not to walk that trail. I liked walking around at night, but most of my guys didn't. There was a theory, even among the sergeants, that Charles owned the night, that he was not to be messed with. I came and told them to rethink that. I said, "I'm the Landlord. I own this place. Everybody here is my tenant, and I'm gonna go out at night, God-bless." The fact was, in the morning, Charles wasn't there to attack us. I'd already gotten him in the night.

When I got to Vietnam, I came to the 101st Division because their platoon leader, the platoon sergeant, had been killed. I went out on the first night, out on a night patrol, and we got hit, so I called in the artillery. I remember, the next morning when we got up, my radio operator came up to me and said, " You know, half the guys think you're crazy, and half the guys think you know magic." I thought about it for a while. The crazy part was just going out at night. Charles owned the night. Here's the magic part: the reason their other lieutenant had been killed was they were hit, at night, and when he went to call the artillery he turned on the flashlight. When I called the artillery for the first time, I didn't turn on the flashlight. I just called it. And so most of the privates, what they knew was, he gets on the radio, stuff starts coming down out of the sky, and it lands right there. See, you know San Tzu? He wrote the book "The Art of War." San Tzu says, 'know your enemy and know yourself, and after a thousand battles you need never fear the result.' So I'd go out in the day and think, 'If I were the enemy, where would I attack me? I'm gonna go walkin' this trail twelve hours from now, at night. If they get me out here, see me out here in the nighttime, where would they want to set up a position during the day?' So I would call the arty, that afternoon, and tell him where I wanted the artillery to be. I'd do this because I read the book on forward observation. There's a guy in the rear, with a big table-sized piece of plastic and a map, and the typical person says, "I'm here, and I'm lookin' in this direction, and I want you to fire the artillery, right there." The guy then figures out the angle and the distance for the gun and the trajectory of the shells and all that, and you can make a mistake, because you're working with grease pencil and you're tryin' to work quick. But I called him twelve hours ago. He'd had all afternoon, to plot that stuff.

My guys, my sergeants came up to me and they hassled me, they wanted to suggest that

I was trying to make myself look good, that I had set it up, that I had told the enemy where I was going to be so I could plot the artillery in the right place. When I was promoted to the platoon, they'd gone over the men in the division who'd been there for about nine months. There was some resentment about this coming from the world, coming from back in the states, when here were these guys who felt they'd worked their way up through the ranks. I told them, "Look, if you guys are better than me, you ought to be the commander." I stuck a piece of bamboo in the rice paddy, and said, "All you have to do is shoot it down." I remember, another sergeant, Sergeant Compton, reached for his rifle and I said, "No, no, privates are rifleman. You're supposed to shoot it down with artillery." He fired a couple rounds, and he got the bamboo to lean. When it was my turn I called the first shot, with the same adjustments, but I made one change. I asked for a three-second-delay fuse. Now, most people don't know it, Sergeant Compton didn't, because it's so quick you can't tell. If you don't tell the artillery what to shoot, they will shoot an area blitz, a proximity blitz. The shell comes down and it doesn't actually hit the ground, it detonates two meters up, about head high. The three-second-delay fuse is used mostly for enemy bunkers, but this was a rice paddy. I wasn't even close, but the delayed fuse caused a ripple factor. I missed the bamboo by about a meter, the splash went up and came down, and three seconds later it was like a depth charge going off. It blew over the whole paddy. Compton came up to me and said, "Well, that's a fucking trick." I told him, "You're right. But I know the trick, and that's why I'm platoon leader. Get back to your squadron."

I actually at one time had some prisoners, turned them over to a South Vietnamese unit,

got about one hundred yards away, and heard firing. I went running back and they'd assassinated one of my prisoners. And there was a Lieutenant, an American advisor with them. I asked him why he didn't stop it. "Well, it's their country, it's their unit," he said. I told him, "This is my prisoner. If you don't stop one more, I'll have you court-martialed. Now, I got this many prisoners. I'm gonna get their I.D. cards, and when we get back to the base there'd better be these same prisoners. All alive." You don't shoot prisoners. Once a man's been captured he's no longer a soldier. He's equal to a civilian, and shooting him is no better than murder.

We got a call once from headquarters that I should come to a certain location with a heavy squadron, a squad with artillery, that they had this prisoner who was going to show them a weapons cache. I got there and in flies this helicopter, with colonels and majors and this one, weak little prisoner. Then two more helicopters fly in with TV cameras. This was gonna be the six o'clock news. They walked around, and the prisoner pointed at things, but then a major came up to me and said, "The weapons really aren't here. There are three villages in a sort of horseshoe arrangement out near the China Sea. We don't know which of them has the weapons cache, but the plan is that you're gonna take this reinforced squad, land in the middle, and see where you draw fire." I asked the major how long it had taken him to come up with that plan. He knew what I was saying, that it was a stupid idea, but he said, "don't worry, you can have artillery, and then we'll bring in reinforcements."

We came in to the middle of these three villages and we got fire from the end. Now, we were about a thousand meters from this village, and the maximum effective range of an AK 47 is

about 480 meters. A thousand meters, that's not a very effective shot. But the enemy was there, and the helicopters started to say they were taking hits. What they meant by that was, they're reporting back to their headquarters that they need to come back, if they can make it, and get checked out. What that meant for me was, you're not coming back. You're here, and not only are you here, they're not pulling you out. And the artillery wouldn't fire, because this village was listed as a friendly village. So, it was getting dark. And there was gonna be no reinforcements. But the thing that saved us, in that battle, was we had a grenadier, EJ Johnson. EJ, If you got near to a little bit of a battle, EJ went AWOL. I remember the first time I asked for a head count and one guy was gone. I thought, 'I've lost one guy, already? Somebody got killed, already?' But it was EJ, "guarding the landing zone." Guarding the landing zone. In the middle of a battle. So, EJ was running along. He would always run about three steps behind you, because even though he was comin' along on this battle he didn't want you to get the idea he was enthusiastic. Now, EJ had a vest that hung down to about mid-thigh, and the first time I saw it I thought it was kind of unmilitary, but I could see the utility. He had seventy-two pockets, and there were seventy-two grenade shells. There was this house in front of us with major fire, but the machine gunner couldn't hit it, it was too far away. I said, "EJ, hit that house." He swung the grenade launcher up in the air, swung it up there, and we heard the "thunk!" when he fired it. A grenade launcher loads like a shot gun, so he popped open the breach and threw out the shell, reached into one of his pockets, popped in a new one, snapped it closed, and was watchin' that shell come down and hit that

roof, the one I wanted. I never saw it happen before or since, but when the shell hit this roof, the roof went concave. It deformed, and then popped back into position, but when it popped back into position, it popped out, making a two-foot by eight-foot hole in the middle. I said, "EJ, hit that hole." He'd already fired the second shot. Now, EJ's grenade launcher didn't have any sights. EJ, with no sights, on the run, just swingin' the weapon up from his leg, brought three successive rounds through this two-foot by eight-foot hole and completely neutralized this house. And obviously it had been where the commander was. We got him, and everybody just melted away. EJ never got promoted. Every time the promotion would come out the personnel had already crossed his name off, because he was always getting court-martialed. He'd go around the area in his unmilitary uniform, or somebody would say something to him and he'd say fuck off. He wasn't a good soldier, but he was a good grenadier. I asked him once how he'd gotten so good, how he could fire that weapon with no sights, and he said, "Practice." That was all I needed to know.

There were people after The War on Iraq who said we ought to have a parade for Vietnam veterans, but it's too late. It's way too late. When president Ford granted the amnesty, that was only gonna help people like Bush who didn't serve, people who dodged the draft or went to Canada. It was never gonna help people who did serve, people like EJ Johnson, who got out with a dishonorable discharge.

War is an element of foreign policy, and the American can government can make a mistake in foreign policy, just like it can make a mistake in anything. The idea to drill in The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is a

stupid idea, but it's debated and hopefully the cooler heads in congress will prevail. Well, you'd think that the same would be true in war, except that we've gotten away from '1941, The Day of Infamy' kind of speeches. We've gotten away from leaders like Roosevelt. It seems to be that now we slide to convenient forms of war, to back-door resolutions like the Gulf of Tonkin. I thought it was stupid. I really thought it was stupid at that point. It was clear to me before I ever set foot in the bush that not only were we not going to win this war, we didn't deserve to win. But, the fact is, I'm a soldier, and if Congress says this is the war we're fighting, and my Commander in Chief tells me I gotta go, then, I do.

So, what was it like when I got back? It was just a lot of guys who hadn't served making assumptions, stereotypical assumptions about those who did. There were people who believed automatically that if you went to Vietnam it was because you wanted to, that you were a war-monger just like Johnson and Nixon. There were no atrocities in my unit, why would I want it? I didn't lose any battles. Of course I didn't win the war, but when I came back, I was shocked, you know? Nobody understood.