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Marine Corp

1968-1970

Interviewed By: Amy Hylton

“Quit Talkin’ and Start Knockin’”

I don't believe in luck. I don't guess I ever have. I believe everybody makes their own. The decisions you make are the ones that drive your luck or fate or whatever you want to call it. Going to Vietnam was one of my decisions.

My first day there we were on a commercial airliner flying in, and they had the air conditioning on. Maybe they had it on for the sake that they knew that was the last air conditioning we'd feel for awhile. When they opened that door to the aircraft, there in Danang it was just such phenomenal heat. It was like a blast furnace. We landed some time in the mid-afternoon and immediately we were drenched with sweat. I couldn't fathom how hot it was. All I knew was that it was hotter than anything I'd experienced growing up in Texas, that's for sure.

That first night they put us in little aluminum barracks or some metal barracks of some kind. Some mortars fell on the runway and we were really scared and curious as to what that was. Everybody wanted to get up and see what it was. Pretty soon it didn't take long for us to learn that the best thing to do was to stay down. After a day or so of processing at Danang they sent us off to our units. They made sure we were in country and that we were issued specific gear we needed. Then we went out to the First tank battalion at Freedom Hill on Hill 34. We checked in out there. And then after a couple of days of processing a helicopter flew us to Phu Bai. Then we were trucked over to base

camp. I joined my unit, the first anti-tank battalion, a nicely armored little vehicle, and a couple of days later the battle for Tet broke out and I was on a convoy up to Hue City.

It was an eye opener. Hue was a beautiful city at one time and it probably is now. We went up on a convoy to help relieve some of the people or at least be in support and ended up fighting our way through the city. We got up to the MACV compound and it ended up just being thirty-eight days of severe, bad street fighting door to door, building to building, gutter to gutter, yard to yard. It was part of the fight for the treasury building. They owned the upper floors and we owned the lower floors, so they had no out. They just fought with all they had. There was no way out for them. Just thirty-eight days of probably some of the fiercest and bloodiest fighting during the Vietnam War. It's a month I'll always remember.

But then, after a while, the routine was all the same. You get your gear and you go in the field. I guess it sounds kind of odd but sometimes it's best to be in the field. You've got a better chance of running into the enemy and you've got a better chance of meeting your maker that day so to speak, but things are different between being in the battalion area and being in the field. There's too much bullshit to have to put up with in the battalion area. A lot of us would just as soon be in the bush. Then a few days in the bush and you suddenly want to go back to the rear area. In the rear area you have to put up with too much bull, so then you want to go back to the field again.

Stress was there all the time. You are over there to do a job for the government, whether you believe in what the causes are or not. You are there doing your job because it's what you were asked to do. Sure there's a lot of stress. You're over there trying to survive. You're trying to do your best to try to help your platoonmates to survive-to get

them home. When I became the platoon leader I ended up with there was a lot of stress. Just to keep them going and to keep yourself going while not just going absolutely crazy. You're trying to survive and help them survive but you've got every radical in the country out there getting the best weapon he can get his hands on, hiding behind any leaf, bush or box he can get his butt behind doing his damn'dest to kill you. So sure the stress level is up. But you learn to live with it at a certain level and then it becomes hours and hours of absolute dull boredom interrupted by extreme intense minutes of the ultimate adrenaline rushes and then it would go back to ultimate boredom again. But the stress level never leaves. The stress is never gone.

There were things I did to try to survive each day. I told myself you can't worry about yesterday, you've got to worry about today. I'll take yesterday's mistakes and lessons learned and put them with what I need today; I made it a solemn promise to myself that I would put every bit of my life's energy, every bit of my life's force, into surviving today. The hell with tomorrow, tomorrow may not be here. But if I can put together every bit of all my senses, all of my experience, all of my lessons learned and make myself survive today and be the best that I can be today, I can get through the day. If I get up the next morning, then I'll worry about tomorrow. I can worry about tomorrow then, but I can't worry about yesterday, yesterday is gone. And my comrades that died yesterday are gone. I can't drag them with me. You've just got to move on.

You make these good friends but you can't get close to them. You can't get close to people that you know could be gone. I left six guys behind that I know of. I got six names off the wall. You can't afford to make good close friends because you can't let that loss affect you. So you can't get that close. However, the friendship and camaraderie

among the marines and navy and sailors and army guys in Vietnam, the love that they shared was stronger than anything. It's not the same kind of love a man and a wife have. It's different because no one can understand it unless they've been there. And the guys that have served there will never find it again. It's not the same; it's a different kind of bonding. But you can't get close to them. You can't get close to them when you have to hold on to one of them and see that light fade out of their eyes. And never see them again. You just can't get close to them.

The first time I came back from Vietnam I couldn't buy myself a beer. I wasn't old enough to drink. I came home for thirty days leave to re-up for another year and I had a lot of beer bought for me during that time. A lot of steak dinners during those thirty days. I went back to Vietnam a second time and things had changed. Now instead of doing a good job, I'm a baby killer. I'm a fascist. I'm no good. I'm a bum for having done what I did, especially for having served two tours. Everybody knows how we got spit on. Nobody cared for us. The government didn't want to support us. The people were definitely not behind us. The families were different. And so I went back, I went back to Vietnam and I knew I was going back. I'm going, "Wait a second, something's wrong here, something's changed. Have I changed that much?" Since then I realized that I hadn't changed, they changed. Sure I changed my outlook, going to a war zone changes everybody's outlook, but their perception of me changed. After the end of two years nobody really wanted to know me. I couldn't get a job, so I asked the marine corp to send me back for a third time. You know If the job that you did was so unpopular that no one wanted to know you and no one wanted to hire you, you'd want to go back to doing the only job that you know how to do. That was to go back to Vietnam. I got good at

that job. I got comfortable with it even though the stress level was there and I could die at any moment. I wanted to go back to doing the only thing that I knew how to do.

In general I think war is a bad thing. It's not healthy for people, but it's a necessity. There comes a time when you've just got to quit talkin' and start knockin'. The cost of our freedom is the blood we've spilled. We're not the world's police department but someone has to protect people's human rights.

And whatever people think of the war in Vietnam, I think I had just cause for going. I'm proud of the fact that I went. I thought I was doing something for some people who were oppressed. At the time, and even today, I still believe in our cause in Vietnam.