

Randy Schmidt
Army
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Randy Schmidt's Vietnam Experience

I was drafted. Definitely. Enlisting just wasn't the popular thing to do. A lot of people went into the National Guard or tried to get out of it one way or another. I didn't even have a choice. The Army chose me.

Our battalion was first stationed in Bien Tuey, and what we would do was go out in the field and work on certain sections of the road, or of an airport, or whatever they decided they wanted us to do. We moved around a lot.

My main job was every morning we'd do two miles of minesweeping. We'd look for hidden bombs and stuff in the middle of the road before everyone would start work. Every morning. We'd find some every now and then. Many of us were also trained in explosives. Depending on the type of bomb we had, some we'd have to de-fuse, and sometimes all we had to do to disarm it was to just stick something underneath the pin. We'd also have guys on the outside of us with weapons in case we caught a trip wire. Man, there were all kinds of things you had to watch out for: pits, pungy sticks, snakes hanging by their tails. The vegetation was just so thick, maybe twenty feet high. You just can't see past that. So that's what we did every day. It was kinda stressful. I smoked a lot of cigarettes.

Despite the stress, I never really had a combat injury. I may have had a few accidents, but never really combat injuries. All of us were really pretty lucky. 'Cept we had more people die from drug overdoses and by shooting each other. They'd just get

mad at each other. One time I saw this guy get shot by another guy in our unit. He just pulled out his rifle and shot him. It was kinda gettin' towards the end of the war and we had big problems with all the drugs and stuff.

. There were two separate types of people there. There were either the alcoholics or the kids with the drugs, but there weren't too many people in the center. I mean, it was really pretty heavy, it was all freely accessible. It was like going to the drugstore. If you wanted to get it you could get it.

I remember we had a first sergeant who was a drunk. Every night he'd get drunk. One time we had a couple rounds come in and so we had an air raid siren goin' off. That day I was walking along with a colonel, checking the different guard towers. This drunk guy decides he was gonna climb the tower so he could tell us something, but then the colonel startled him, sayin: "Aw, get up there son!" He got about three steps up, then fell back down and passed out. I thought that was great. He was what we called a 'lifer'. He had just been in the military for so long. It was funny.

Another time the Vietnamese had a camp about ours, the ARVN, which were the good guys, supposedly... and they had a pet elephant. It got loose one night and it came down to our camp and got into our jet fuel. The thing just went beserk and was running around. I thought that was strange.

Yeah, there were a lot of strange animals. I can't even describe some of these insects at night. There were mosquito nets but I remember the first time I saw one I wasn't there for more than a week. It was about this long, and it looked like a cross between a grasshopper and a giant ant. And it had big ole' jaws on it and it'd land on you and I just said... *oh man*.

And sometimes when we would have to sleep, we'd just dig a hole in the ground, 'cause we didn't have time to set up any camp. We were out in the middle of nowhere, and all we had was just some wire out there protecting us. Two guys would sleep to each hole and we'd have some guard duty every night. All you could do was just dig a six foot hole and just kinda put things under you so you could lay down. You'd see these things coming out of the dirt, and ...ughh.

Everything is big over there – whatever you see from here is twice the size. There were ants and all kinds of creatures. You don't know if they are poisonous or what they even are. Snakes of all kinds, and even scorpions. I hate scorpions. I am more scared of a scorpion than I am of a snake. Like I had one in my hair this one time. It was about that big. Man those things really sting. You learned that you always shook your clothes and dumped your boots out, you gotta make sure there is nothing in there. Well my friend didn't do that. He put on his shirt and we were walkin' to breakfast and all of a sudden he starts screamin' and yellin' and jumpin' around. I started laughing and I says, "what's the matter with you?" Then he says "I'm getting stung!" He pulls it off and it was a big one, it must have bitten him 'bout five or six times. That was funny to me... it wasn't funny to him. But he learned.

I guess I learned a lot too. The way the people lived over there... the garbage is dumped at the end of the town, thirty or forty feet high, right on the edge of the road. It was nothing to see someone urinate out the window of one of the restaurants they have. Sanitation, things they eat, the way they live. You couldn't even trust the children. A lot of times they would run in where ever you were and just try to put a grenade in. All the time, all the time you had to be cautious. So there was always this tension. Yeah they

said we were trying to do something good, but you couldn't help them. You had to trust your buddies.

When you look back on it, it was probably the only war that I can think about, except for maybe Korea, that the people didn't really want, or care about, or understand. The only thing they cared about was they wanted to end it. We felt like, "Well, we have to do this, so let's just do it and get out." We'd do the minimum, just one year of service. A lot of guys would run off and get married, or even shoot themselves in the foot, just to try to get out of it. But they didn't let you get off for much. There were a lot of guys there, especially from the South, that couldn't read, couldn't write, but they could pull a trigger. Now you can't even get into the military unless you graduate from high school. So, times have changed, probably for the better.

While I was there I probably matured about one hundred percent. Before I left I was always fightin' with my dad. My dad was in the Navy, so we'd used to write back and forth. Then I started to find out what he went through as I went through it myself. We became pretty close after that. That was probably the best thing that happened.