

Ray R. Savorn

Army

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By Theo. Roffe

I volunteered for the service and I volunteered for Vietnam too. Where I grew up, in Pittsburgh area, that's just what you did. It's real strong ethnic population there, a lot of Korean War veterans, a lot of World War II veterans. I would have been exempt because I had a civilian teaching credential, but I just thought it was the thing to do – that if people were going to talk about it in the future that I at least wanted to have experienced it.

I enlisted as a private and I was sent to Ft. Benning, Georgia for OCS (which is Officers Candidate School for the infantry), then I went through ranger school, and from there I was sent to Ft. Holabird, Maryland for intelligence training. And then, because of my background in French (about five or six years of French), they sent me to the French Language School in Washington DC. It was a 6 month class: 5 days a week, 6 hours a day. But after three months, they pulled me out and sent me to Vietnam. I got there in November of '65 – just when the US Troops started to get there.

If you're asking for personal, first reaction feelings, it's kind of amazing, you're talking to people who all look alike, who understood each other and sixteen hours later, you're getting off an airplane, you look around and see all those foreigners and realize – it's you, you're the foreigner. My plane got off in Tan Son Nhut and somebody from my company picked me up from the airport. It took me all of probably ten minutes riding

down one of the main roads in Saigon to realize that if the Viet Cong wanted to zap me, or you, or anybody else that was at the occasion – you're dead. Nothing would stop 'em, because you couldn't hide, you didn't blend in. The United States no longer existed and I knew some people who just started counting the days: three hundred sixty-five, three hundred sixty-four, three hundred sixty-three...but my philosophy was just to live in the here and now; do the best you can and tomorrow will take care of itself.

I started out in Saigon. At that time, the war wasn't there, there were only thirty-five thousand troops but when I left thirteen months later, there were four hundred thirty-five thousand. So when I was there it was still just a little skirmish – so to speak. And Saigon sent me up to Nha Trang which was the headquarters for counterintelligence for outfit. About six months after I was already in country that the army came over – the official army came over – and that's how I ended up being with the 115th MI Battalion. Earlier I was with MACV, Military Assistance Command Vietnam, and we were advisors. And then Nha Trang sent me over to Ban Me Thuot. Ban Me Thuot was the first little village to be overrun when the US troops were first pulled out in '75. It was up in the highlands about thirty clicks away from the Cambodian border. I was with Special Forces, running counterintelligence operations and collecting intelligence information about the Viet Cong. And then I would disseminate it back into Nha Trang or back into Saigon for calling in air strikes or maybe pinpointing certain areas that US forces wanted to run some counterintelligence operations in. I had to work through the local Vietnamese because obviously I couldn't do it myself, I was an American. And I found myself working with the Special Forces and the CIA because they were doing the same thing.

By direct orders I was not to be in any hot fire areas because everything I carried was civilian documentation. If I would have been captured I could have been shot as a spy. My documentation said I was a GS-12, which is an American civilian working for the military. But I flew missions with the Special Forces and went into their raid teams to try and collect the information on the ground. Being 25 or 26, I just wanted to do something that was exciting – and it was exciting, getting shot at. You do what you do and you worry about the results later when you look back and say well, it was kind of dumb at the time.

For two months when I was up country in Ban Me Thuot, we didn't get any mail because we were pretty much isolated. If we wanted anything we had to make deals, quite often with the Air Force. We would have Viet Cong flags made up and kill some chickens and put blood on it and everything since the Air Force had no direct access of any war souvenirs. Whenever they'd fly in we'd make some kind of agreement: well we'll give you some flags here, or some captured VC weapons if you bring us a couple cases of beer, a couple palates of beer, or some palates of food, or whatever we needed. And the older I got the more I realized that's just the way the Army would function; if you didn't have something, you would trade.

I was in Ban Me Thuot, receiving orders from Saigon or Nha Trang, for seven months and at that time I was the longest in-country of anybody around. Then the army came in and they were all green horns, so to speak, so they called me to Saigon to set up an intelligence unit there, to run the intelligence gathering unit, to turn around and tell individuals out in the country what to do. We had a colonel come in from artillery. Up until that time everybody in headquarters was civilian and everybody was in civilian

clothing. Well, this new colonel, who was not an intelligence or counterintelligence individual, says, “You’re all going to be in uniform. This is the way we do it in artillery, this is how you’re going to do it in the intelligence field” Well, here we were all talking to people in Saigon we had been dealing with for months in civilian clothes and all of a sudden you had to put your rank on – that really upset a lot of people. If you were handling agents and collecting intelligence from the Vietnamese, pretty soon they were going to see, well hell, you’re just a soldier. We lost a lot of confidence when we had to do it that way. But it was the colonel running the operation, in other words, we didn’t have our own people in charge and that just set us back a tremendous amount of work and effort. It made us likely targets too.

I had five of my people hand-grenaded in a jeep, because to get to work you had to go through real narrow streets and there were just people everywhere. We had tried to teach everyone, if you see someone throw something, just duck, don’t wait. Sure enough, a little boy, about six or seven years old, had a chicom grenade wrapped up in a piece of newspaper and he threw in the jeep. The young guys, who were relatively new in-country, didn’t get out of that vehicle fast enough. Three of them were med-evacuated to Japan because their wounds were so serious and the other two were treated there in Saigon. Just because we were in uniform, we had never had trouble before – as long as we were in civilian clothes. They just figured that we were civilians working for the military and so we weren’t targeted. But if you wore a uniform you were automatically targeted.

At that time, volunteering was like six months and then you’d go back home. But being a bachelor and having, literally, a good time, I had nothing to go back to. I enjoyed

doing what I was doing. They were some real dynamic years; the male comradery was tremendous, the bonding was tremendous. When I was in college, I played sports, I was in a fraternity, and it was just bonding, hanging out with a bunch of people. And Vietnam was the same thing. Special Forces troops were exceptionally close and I spent a lot of time with them. And when I was called into Saigon, I spent time with five or six guys there. It was just a bunch of people that you really enjoyed; common interests, a common goal, and you could relate to each other. It was something that made things bearable. So I just kept extending: a month, two months, a month, two months, and finally they said I needed to go back.

What we did in here was to run investigations. For example, if you were going to go into the service, we would run background investigations, because everybody in the service has to have some kind of security clearance. We'd go out to where guys worked and many times we'd go out to the schools talk to counselors. That's what I was doing here for about six months but I wanted to get back in the Army I knew. I wrote three letters back to Washington DC, back to my branch telling them that I would like to go back to Vietnam. And because I was a senior captain at that time, I was set to go to the career course. They said I had combat command time overseas so now I needed what's called CONUS (Continental Command Unit, United States); that I needed to be in charge of troops here. Then, they said, then I could go back. I just wanted to go back now, I had trouble here; this is when the protests really started in '67, when things really started getting kinda brutal. I said, either you send me back or I'm getting the hell out. And they said, it's not going to happen.

The first five or six years I was back here, Fourth of July, I had trouble. When fireworks would go off or something, I'd jump three feet in the air. And I would go into parties or go someplace and I always got in a corner; something at my back and I could see everything in front of me. There were just things you learn to pick up over there that I applied here. It took me about six or seven years to get devietnamized.

I remember one of the hardest things I had to do as a teacher was to teach about Vietnam. People would start asking questions and then I would ask them one question: Can you picture living in fear of your life twenty-four seven? Well, nine out of ten times would say no, and I'd say, then it's really hard for me to tell you about Vietnam because that's just about what it was.