

Name: Ernest Paul
Branch of Service: Army, 4th Infantry Division
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Interviewed By: Holly Vranicar

Perception
(The memories of Ernest Paul)

The weather in Vietnam was something else, which fit in a way with how beautiful the country was. Sure, it was dusty as hell, but still beautiful. I remember that there was this red, cake-like dust that covered everything. The PCs, or personnel carriers, I drove kicked up a lot of it, and I loved when it would finally rain and clean everything off. The dust clung to the trees and to us, and the rain was always refreshing at first.

Even though I was from California, I'd never been to a place with so much moisture in the air, where you'd get up in the morning and be soaked from all the dew. We'd make giant fires each morning just to dry ourselves off. Sure, I had a blanket, but that was really a nylon poncho liner. It kept water off all right sometimes, but you'd always have to dry it in the morning, along with some of your clothes.

It also rained like crazy during the monsoon season, with the thickest rain I'd ever seen. You might think it strange to describe water like that, but I swear that's what the rain was like over there. Like someone was just repeatedly dropping a giant bucket over your head.

There was this one time where we'd been sent off to pick up these exhausted troops and get them out to their destination when it was raining like that. We made it to their position all right, despite all the mud and muck, and got them on board.

Now the funny thing about PCs, or APCs for that matter, is that you ride on top of them. We'd go around and pick up exhausted units and the guys would put all their gear inside the PC and then sit up top. This was so if you were attacked with RPGs you wouldn't be caught inside and hit by the shrapnel. RPGs, in case you didn't know, are rocket powered grenades. When they hit the PC, they blast a small hole through the armor and then spray the inside with shrapnel. The VC and the NVA seemed to have an abundance of these weapons, as I ran into them dozens of times. It also doesn't help that the PC is this giant vehicle that's noisy as hell, so everyone for miles can hear you coming. It wasn't exactly a good stealth vehicle.

So we went into the jungle after picking up these guys and just drove for at least a day or more, with no stopping. It had taken a while to get the unit's position as well, so I'd gone at least two days without sleep. Needless to say I was really

relieved when we finally stopped and made a fire camp in the middle of this jungle.

Now a fire camp naturally is different from a regular camp. To make one what you do is find a lot of this one bush similar to manzanita and then get all the PCs together and drive over it in a giant circle. You smash it down that way, and you keep going around and around until you're satisfied. Then you set the PCs in a circle as a perimeter and string up lots of barbed wire for protection. You also want about fifty feet between you and the surrounding jungle, almost like a moat.

So anyway, it's raining sheets while we're doing this, and when I finally get a chance for some sleep, I just passed out. In the middle of the night I was awoken by some mortar fire, as the unit we'd picked up was shelling something. No one came and got me or told me to do anything, so I went back to sleep. Kind of strange, to be able to sleep through it, but I was exhausted. The next morning was interesting though, because it had finally stopped raining and we found spent rounds outside the perimeter of our camp. Apparently we'd been attacked during the night, but it had been raining so hard that none of the bullets had reached us and none of my unit had been awake to realize what was happening. Pretty crazy, huh?

Now that I think back on it, I realize how I would've hated to be one of the VC that night. Could you imagine it? You're a VC and you get wind of this unit on your borders, so you go and dig up your weapons, in the pouring rain nonetheless, and then go off to challenge these invaders. All that work just to get out to us and then to go unnoticed by your enemy_ man, how would that make you feel? I mean, they'd been fighting the French for years and now suddenly they have to deal with us, and we ignored them. We just flat out ignored them.

I never thought much about that event then, but in the years afterwards, it really struck me how horribly we treated everyone in Vietnam. Hell, we didn't even respect the South Vietnamese, who were supposed to be our allies. How can you be expected to win something when not only are you rotating out your troops before they can be effective, but you're rude to everyone not American?

There really was this institutionalized racism we all were taught and I didn't think for once that it might've been the wrong thing to do. I was just a kid, after all, so I went with what everyone else was doing. Looking back I realize how ignorant we were. We had no clear goal, no nothing, and all of our troubles came from our decision to let France reestablish their colony in Vietnam. If we'd overcome our arrogance about the whole issue, then maybe... maybe it would've turned out differently or even not have happened. But who can say for sure? My wish is that we've learned from our experience and now know enough not to repeat ourselves.