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Right out of college, I went into the service in 1959. Though I planned to be a football coach and teacher, I first had to fulfill a two-year ROTC commitment. Those two years stretched into twenty-six years. My first assignment was in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, at a missile site. But I also spent a lot of time at Fort Bliss — my home station since I worked in Air Defense Artillery. Then I went to Korea for an exciting year.

After Korea, I spent more time at Fort Bliss before going to Vietnam for a year and serving as a military advisor. My team (comprised of five or six other American infantrymen) lived on a compound with the Vietnamese Regional and Popular Forces. Though those South Vietnamese soldiers were a somewhat ragtag group, they were very dedicated. I made some good friends and lost some good friends. It was an interesting, busy and very fast year.

In Vietnam, the provinces are similar to states in America. The districts would compare to counties, with six to eight districts in each province. My province was the Din Tung Province just above the Mekong River's upper delta. If an area was considered to be "pacified" (under the control of the South Vietnamese), then our work was more political. We tried to teach them how to build schools, roads and other infrastructure. If it was "non-pacified," we worked on the military side of things. Well, things weren't too pacified in our area. Though we tried to work with the community, mostly we worked with the soldiers.

There were probably 700-800 Regional and Popular Force soldiers in my district. The advisors were located in one house in the middle of the compound, and a Vietnamese company lived there with us. We went on military operations with that company and five or six others. Each company always had to be accompanied by two Americans — a radio operator and an officer. The Americans had to take care of each other and be able to stay in contact with the provincial headquarters running the operation. If we needed close air support, we could talk to the people in the air. If we needed a Medivac helicopter, we could talk to the pilots. It was pretty tough to get an American Medivac pilot to land if he couldn't talk to someone who spoke

English well. That was probably our main function. We weren't there to tell the company commander that he should maneuver his company here or there. He had been there ten years and knew where every little rice paddy was.

Every district had an outpost — a small, fenced compound containing about 100 Regional and Popular Force soldiers to show a Vietnamese government presence in that village. During the day, the soldiers would leave the compound. At night, however, they stayed inside the fence. The Viet Cong ruled the night up to a point, though things finally got a little better. There was something mythical about them. The South Vietnamese soldiers seemed to think the VC could see better at night. They finally discovered that they could see just as well as the VC.

Our missions were to search for the Viet Cong because they were always there. Sometimes we engaged them in large numbers, sometimes in small numbers. Usually we would run into small units, but we never knew what to expect. In the Delta, there were jungles along the canal lines where we searched. Actually they found us more than we found them, and we always had to watch for the booby traps. One day, the South Vietnamese soldiers warned me about a trip line that I had a hard time seeing. The Viet Cong were clever and attached almost invisible fishing line to grenades that would blow your legs off if you hit the line. We just stepped over it and kept going. Many times, those traps indicated the enemy was near, and they soon would ambush us.

Tet in 1968 occurred during the middle of my tour. I spent 31 nights without sleeping. For those 31 nights, the Viet Cong were trying to come in to shake our hands. Those were probably the fastest 31 days and nights of my life. The enemy didn't show themselves during the day, but we knew they would be coming each night. Then we would stay so busy at night that the time flew. By daylight, we'd start thinking how nice it was that it was over for another day. Then daylight would end before we knew it, and they'd return.

Our house in the compound served as the hospital, so to speak; and they brought their wounded to us. The soldiers' families lived with them in the compound, so more than half of our patients were women and children we knew. Probably 100 to 150 kids were living in our compound, and that made it even harder. Without much protection against the mortar attacks, we were lucky that our house wasn't hit. Medivacs were not available at night.

Fortunately, I had two medics on my team during the Tet incident. We had all the bandages and medical gear, and the poor South Vietnamese forces had nothing. At least we could bandage a wound. One night we had 18 wounded soldiers lying on the cement floor of our three-bedroom house. Some of them didn't make it through the night. One Vietnamese lieutenant lost his wife and three children that same night. We knew him quite well and liked him, so that was tough.

If a South Vietnamese soldier died, his wife and children would leave the compound. Those soldiers were hardly paid anything, and their families didn't receive death benefits like the American armed forces provide. Of course, in the Delta of Vietnam, they could grow most of their food. Every time one of those soldiers was killed, I found myself asking if he was married and had a family. The Vietnamese company commander, a captain, knew that I worried about the families. Though I don't know whether or not he had always done it, I later had the impression that the captain was generally using single soldiers as point men — the ones on the front lines. That probably was not fair, but I think it happened. Though it was always bad to lose a soldier, losing one with a family was tougher.

Back in the States, after South Vietnam fell, I thought about the friends I had made there. In some cases, they had exposed themselves to danger in order to protect me. They were such good soldiers, and I had confidence in them. But I kept thinking, "Where are they now?" I would

like to go back to the same area to see if I possibly could find any of them, though I doubt I would succeed. Many of them had prices on their head, a favorite tactic of the Viet Cong. If a certain individual caused too much trouble, they would put a price on his head.

In Vietnam, I became very close to three individuals in particular. I knew of no Protestants among the Vietnamese, only Catholics (largely due to the French influence) and Buddhists. A priest in my province named Father Joe had attended Boston College and spoke perfect English. He was always there whenever we had a big meal and could eat more turkey than any guy I've ever seen. But I don't know what happened to him. Another fellow I thought a lot of was a Buddhist monk, a fine old gentleman. I ate lunch with him in his church several times and always was amazed at a meat dish he served since Buddhist monks do not eat meat. Later I found out it was a bean cake, though it tasted just like hamburger.

We could get mail about every week or 10 days. Sometimes I got five letters from my wife at one time. Of course, that was better than the mail service during World War II. I guess if you were in the right place in Vietnam, you could make phone calls… but not where I was. The majority of American soldiers in Vietnam had chaplains and the opportunity to attend services. But my remote team of seven men didn't have access to that. When I had a week off for R&R (Rest and Relaxation), I met my wife in Honolulu. That was very nice. The military flew me there free, and we stayed at a nice hotel for very little money. It was a good break, but it was hard going back. Initially, I hadn't known what to expect. After R&R, I knew exactly what was involved.

My advisory team had to buy our food wherever we could find it, but sometimes we could buy ice and condensed milk. While in Honolulu, I saw a crank-up ice cream freezer at Sears, bought it and shipped it back to Vietnam. When I landed in Saigon, they put me on a Caribou (mail plane) to return me to the province. As luck would have it, the package containing my ice cream freezer was on the same aircraft.

One of our sergeants, an excellent cook, said one day after I got back, "We're going to have some ice cream tonight." Soon we were cranking the ice cream freezer in our fenced backyard. Little kids kept lining up at the fence to ask our interpreter, a Vietnamese Sergeant, "What are these crazy Americans up to now?" When he told them we were making ice cream, they just laughed. Thirty minutes later, we opened up the machine and started dipping out the ice cream. Those kids' eyes grew huge. They had never seen an ice cream freezer and couldn't believe it. From then on, they were waiting around for leftovers every time we started to make ice cream. I left that freezer behind, so they may still be making ice cream with it.

A major while serving in Vietnam, I was married with three children. My family was living in Texas, and the separation was hard. But I was a career officer and had known that going in. As a matter of fact, I had volunteered to go to Vietnam. That may have been foolish, yet I felt it was my duty.

We didn't think about the lack of patriotism and war protests back in the States while we were in Vietnam. It bothered us, however, when we returned home and saw it. It still does. I lost friends there who were doing what they thought they could for their country. Those who made it back were treated like dogs upon their return. Jane Fonda was in her prime then, and I still don't watch any of her movies. Though I understand she has changed her outlook, she didn't do us many favors.

I can think of two or three times when the odds were against my making it back. Not too many days before leaving for home, an enemy soldier shot at me with an M-79 grenade launcher — U.S. equipment the Viet Cong had confiscated. A guy who knew what he was doing could put

a grenade in a 55-gallon drum at 200 yards; so targeted soldiers usually did not survive. When one is shot at you and lands just 30 yards short in a rice paddy, God has to be looking out for you. I remember that more than anything, but I also remember a few ambushes where bullets missed their mark. God must have decided it wasn't my time to go. I thought about it then, and I've thought about it many times since. Some of my friends were killed in freak accidents. Why them and not me? Only God knows.

After September 11, 2000, America experienced a burst of patriotism. It's still here, but I'm afraid that so many of our values have eroded that we may never have the same patriotism that we had during World War II. Boys then couldn't wait to be 17 so they could volunteer to serve their country. It's just a different world now.

Following my tour in Vietnam, I enjoyed three glorious years in Colorado Springs, Colorado. It was the only place I ever lived where I didn't need air conditioning. Then I went to Staff College at Fort Leavenworth. Next, my family and I spent three and a half years in Germany. We got to know the German people and really liked them. The U.S. government-sponsored schools were good, too.

When I returned from Germany, I spent a lot of time at Fort Bliss. About five years before I retired, I returned to Korea as a battalion commander. Finally, after spending a little more time at Fort Bliss, I retired in 1985.

I had spent a lot of time in the military with a friend who was a native of Tyler, Texas. Through him, we bought some land in Tyler and decided to retire there. We have absolutely no regrets. Today, I sit by that friend at Green Acres Baptist Church every Sunday. His name is Edward Bickerdike.

Growing up in Big Spring out in West Texas, I was a Christian by the time I was nine years old. I attended Vinson Baptist Church. The little church is still there but now has only about 27 members as compared to the 110 members when I was there. We lived on a farm, and that was the only church in the area. I suppose if it had been a Methodist church, I would have grown up in the Methodist church. My wife also has been a Baptist all her life.