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Vietnam War

I was commissioned out of Texas A&M University as an infantry officer and went into the service in November 1954. At that time, A&M was a military, all-male school. When I graduated as a Distinguished Military Student, I really wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life. Enlisting in the service afforded me the opportunity to at least take a three-year stint. For about eight years, I went to Infantry School, Ranger School and Airborne School. After serving three years in Germany primarily as an infantry unit commander, I returned to Fort Benning, Georgia, for more schooling. Following that, I spent a year learning the Persian language.

My next duty station was supposed to have been Iran, but in the Army's great knowledge and forethought, they instead sent me to the 101st Airborne Division to command a rifle company. One Sunday afternoon, they brought all the company commanders into the war room and showed us a map of Havana. We were prepared to go into Cuba, and my outfit was to take out one of the missile sites. The next day, Time Magazine came out with the same identical plan we had discussed for the invasion of Cuba.

During that time, I went with the 101st to Oxford, Mississippi. My unit, the 327th Airborne Infantry Group, had a master's degree at the University of Mississippi and was on campus helping James Meredith get his master's degree. One night we were guarding the entrances and exits to the campus when a riot almost took place. One of my lieutenants was with the Military Police, and he had arrested a student who was dressed like a military policeman. About 500 students had surrounded them protesting the arrest. I walked right into the middle of them and yelled to the M.P.'s, "Let that guy out of here!" That stopped the riot.

After I left the 101st, I received orders to go to Iran. Then they changed them and sent me to Vietnam in February 1963. At that time, about 20,000 Military Assistance Command advisers were there. I was assigned as an adviser to the 3rd Battalion, 33rd Vietnamese Infantry Regiment

and was to stay for one year. It was in the Delta area of Vietnam just south of the Mekong River next to the Cambodian border. An American lieutenant and I advised those people and lived and ate with them. I could speak Vietnamese pretty well. The job was very frustrating because they didn't take our advice. Primarily, we were up against the local guerilla forces.

Unfortunately, I became deathly ill with amoebic dysentery and hepatitis at the same time because I was eating Vietnamese food. I was evacuated to the Philippines for a couple of months and then sent back to Vietnam as an advisor training South Vietnamese guerilla soldiers. Basically, it still was guerilla warfare. Then three or four things took place. The North Vietnamese knocked down an H21 banana helicopter in the Delta in the Atbok incident. Next the NVA invaded the Gulf of Tonkin. In 1965, the First Cav Division went in. They moved into the IaDrang Valley and took on the NVA. A movie called "We Were Soldiers" was made about that action.

Five and a half years later in September 1968, I ran into a battalion commander I had advised at Fort Benning. His name was Captain Dai We Phot. I returned to Viet Nam in 1968. By then I was a lieutenant colonel, but he was still a captain. At the time, the Army had 500,000 people in Vietnam. What a change from the 20,000 soldiers there in 1963. I arrived seven months after the Tet Offensive. We were going against regulars and the NVA, and I was assigned to command a battalion for the 101st Airborne Division. That was what I had wanted to do. I had loved my duty at the 101st. As a young lieutenant, I had gone to jump school but didn't end up in a jump unit. When I was a captain, I commanded a rifle company for the 101st. Those guys weren't afraid of anything, and that's what I liked. I was, but they were not.

In 1968 and 1969, I had the privilege of commanding the 2nd Battalion, 506th Airborne Infantry Regiment — the battalion made famous by the movie "Band of Brothers". Though there was no direct relationship, we kept the unit heritage. During World War II, they had been known as E Company, 2nd Battalion, 506th Airborne Infantry Regiment. The battalion had been there about eight or nine months.

We had been in Vietnam about three years as a professional army. But I could see that we were changing from a professional army to a poorly trained, rebellious draftee army. No longer were we getting the cream of the crop in draftees. President Nixon had changed the draft rules so that if a man wasn't drafted the first time, he would never be drafted. Soldiers were being rotated into Viet Nam for one year and leaving. The men we were fighting, the regulars and the NVA, had no rotational policy.

Our tactics had changed completely. We were using helicopters, and they saved many lives by providing close air support and evacuation if wounded. If we called for a C130, one would spin over the area with a Gatling gun and drop 50-caliber machinegun bullets right on the target we specified. That sort of thing saved us.

Our brigade was attached to the 25th Infantry Division at Cu Chi just outside Saigon about ten miles from the Iron Triangle and not too far from the Michelin Rubber Plantation. It was a hotbed of communism. If a man wanted a firefight, he only had to step outside. Each battalion was given a fire support base with an artillery battery (six 105 artillery tubes). We would establish a fire support base outside of Cu Chi, put a couple of rifle companies there to guard the battery, and send the other two rifle companies out into the boonies on patrol.

I was in an area near TranBang when I went up against the commander of the famous Cu Chi Battalion. One of my rifle company had been walking through the woods, jungles and rice fields, and I was with them. One afternoon I received a message from my operations officer that they had located someone in the village. They sent a helicopter to pick me up. The operations

officer, some of my field artillery guys and I circled the village. The artillery guys could put an artillery tube 105 round right in someone's hip pocket while zigzagging over a target at 70-80 miles per hour in a helicopter. As we flew over the village, people were running for their lives. I'll never forget the question. *Should we bring artillery fire on them?* I said, "No. Not on your bottom dollar." They might have been the enemy but there were too many civilians there. I praise God that I didn't do that.

We landed the rifle company at the edge of the jungle near the village in a hot LZ. They were taking rifle fire and RPG fire. So we start bringing in the entire battalion. I left one company at the fire support base and brought in my other three rifles companies plus two more they attached to me. By that night, the Cu Chi commander and his men were surrounded. All that afternoon and into the night he was probing the area. At three o'clock the next morning, he busted through one of the rifle companies the 187th Battalion had loaned to me. When he broke through, he didn't take any prisoners. Instead, he shot them all on the spot and got away.

About a week later, the 187th Battalion put in a fire support base out in the middle of nowhere. When I went there one afternoon, I thought, *These guys aren't going to survive.* Sure enough, the Cu Chi Battalion hit them that night. We were within fire support range, so we provided artillery fire all night. Then the VC sent a small force to try to interrupt us with mortar fire, but it didn't stop us. The Cu Chi Battalion did not beat the guys from the 187th, however. They had taken on a defensive position that was well prepared. Later on we picked up some of those guys and looked at their wallets to identify them. I ran into a Cherokee County Judge several years ago who had served as a lieutenant in that same battle.

The Cu Chi commander was the same person who had been digging tunnels underneath us. Before this encounter, I had run into him at a battle about half a mile from our fire support base. After the battle, we went down into a bunker and found two enemy soldiers blown to bits. Though I didn't realize it at the time, they were tunneling under the entire 25th Division. They were the famous tunnel rats.

Three or four months later, our battalion moved north close to the DMZ. We didn't find as many guys there, but our responsibility was the Ashau Valley. After I left the division, they went into the Aushau Valley. That was the location of the famous Hamburger Hill action.

After my first tour of duty in Vietnam, I took R&R (Rest & Recuperation Leave) in Hong Kong when I was released from the hospital in the Philippines. Then I flew to San Francisco and caught a redeye flight to Dallas Love Field. About 100 miles out of Dallas, they cut the jet engines and we began to glide in. I was so glad to see the lights of Dallas. And there stood my mother, my father and my wife Thelma Ruth. I was so happy to see them. Following my second tour in Vietnam, I took R&R in Hawaii and met Thelma Ruth and our two boys there. Oh, I was so glad to see them. I was very tired, but we had a great time.

I really loved being in the service and did very well, so I decided to become a professional soldier. I hope I was a good one. I wanted my family and God would be proud of me. During my military career, I served all over the world including two tours in Vietnam.

God has been good to me. He has given me the opportunity to minister to the Friendship Sunday School Class. We love each other and study the word. I try to be faithful to teaching the word. God has been extremely faithful to me. Not because of anything I've done but because of what he has done through his son. I appreciate and love God.

Of all the training I had, nothing could prepare me for actual combat. It's chaotic. Experience helps a lot, but the problem was everyone was being rotated in and out. We were only commanding battalions for six months at a time. That's been changed now. I believe the

lessons we learned in Vietnam were applied well during the Gulf War.

My heart sank the night we attacked Baghdad, but I'm thankful that we stood up to that. We have a great country, and I've seen a resurgence of patriotism. I think we have a crackerjack Army now, though I'm concerned it is not quite large enough, especially if we had to fight a two-front war. I can't imagine the equipment available today compared to what we had in Vietnam, though we had the best in the world at the time. I'm also proud of the stand our country has taken in the War on Terrorism. We've drawn a line in the sand.