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Vietnam War

As a 20-year-old student in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, I wasn't quite making the grade in 1969. The Vietnam War was in full swing, so I decided to enlist in the Army. My oldest brother had served with the Signal Corps in Vietnam and had just come home. He advised me to stay out of a grunt situation and avoid the infantry. I listened to his advice and signed up for a three-year tour of duty to qualify for a job in Quartermaster.

In January 1970, I was sent to Fort Polk, Louisiana, for basic training. It was known as Tiger Land and was a training center for the infantry. During boot camp, we did maneuvers in simulated Vietnamese villages. In my company, only two other men and I were not to be assigned to the infantry afterward.

Following boot camp, I was shipped to Fort Lee, Virginia, where I went through more training for service in Vietnam and attended two schools. I married Jane in May 1970 while I was there. Then I spent three months at the Atlanta Army Depot (a temporary duty station) awaiting a transfer to Vietnam. In late August or early September, I took a 30-day leave and was scheduled to go overseas in early October 1970. I took my wife home to Baton Rouge, and we found an apartment for her.

When I reported for duty at Oakland, California, the first week of October, I got lost in the shuffle for some weird reason. Maybe it was the Lord's intervention. It was two or three weeks later before they shipped me out. All the way over, I kept praying, "Lord, what am I getting into?" But I knew I had to make the best of things. I grew up in a large Southern Baptist church in Baton Rouge, so I had a good Christian foundation. I had been saved at the age of 14. That sustained me.

After a 17-hour flight, I landed in Bien Hoa, Vietnam, near Saigon. I'll always remember stepping off the plane that night, hearing the sounds and smelling the odor of gunfire. I spent a couple of nights in Bien Hoa and received orders to go to Danang in a northern, hilly area of the country. I spent the next year with the northern I-Corps. It wasn't bad duty.

Eventually, I ended up at an airbase in ChuLai, about 30 or 40 miles south of DaNang. The Ameri-Cal Infantry Division was based there. The base was located on the coastline, and it was my job to supply the Ameri-Cal Division. I thought that sounded pretty safe. Things rocked along fairly well for several months. As an E-5, I pulled guard duty once in a while at the towers watching the coastline. Occasionally, we'd get mortar fire but nothing terribly dangerous.

I was a section chief in the warehouse area supervising a few GI's and Vietnamese locals. The guys depended on me, and I tried to be a positive influence. When you're a Christian, people seem to expect more of you. Certain people in command think a Christian man will do well in a leadership position. I did the best I could. When they put sergeant's stripes on a man, it's not always the most desirable thing at times. But I think God put me there for a reason. One soldier I knew almost lost it mentally because he was under so much pressure. Several times, I tried to reassure him and talk to him, though he wasn't a Christian. He didn't feel like he knew God or that he could commit to Him, but he was grateful for my prayers on his behalf.

Sometime around April 1971, my world turned upside down. They decided to try one last little push on the Ho Chi Min Trail. Some people thought the war was winding down, so they wanted to cut a main supply route from North Vietnam. One day, a request came down from a battalion for a certain number of men in particular job classifications. Supply was one of those classifications because they were preparing for mass troop movement in the field. Another fellow from my unit and I were selected to go.

When I had to draw my weapons and combat gear before heading north to DaNang, I knew something was happening. We usually did not draw our weapons at camp unless there was a threat of some kind because other units normally protected us. That raised a red flag, but no one would tell us anything. In DaNang, we met up with people from all the different units and still didn't know anything.

Within two or three days, I joined a convoy and went from a fairly secure area through Quantri (next to the DMZ) and turned west dead into Kha San, a hot area. Marines in Kha San had been hit hard in 1968. Getting there was tough. We spent our nights on the ground after digging in and setting up perimeter infantry guards. When we finally made it to Kha San, we set up our base camp. I remember sitting down in elephant grass well over my head and being handed a machete and told to start chopping to clear helicopter pads. We were in a red zone in a mountainous area. Vietcong were everywhere. For protection at night, we basically dug holes in the ground and slept in them.

We lived that way for three or four weeks. In the end, we were there for three months. My job was to supply the infantry divisions cutting trails to the Laos border. Those were dangerous times. I don't know how men who were not Christians made it. If they learned someone was a Christian, however, they sought him out when times got bad. That made two or three other guys and me feel accountable because we knew the soldiers relied on us. Only 19 at the time, I really didn't feel adequate. I had to depend on the Lord to help me get through the war, but also I had to be there to help the other men with prayers. Then a miracle occurred.

The supply area was positioned on a hill. On another hill beyond the airstrip in the valley was the ammo dump. Of course, we drew rocket and mortar fire day and night because the enemy wanted to wipe out our operation. Many nights, I found myself laying extremely close to

the ground. The Vietcong also frequently attacked our perimeter at night. Though it was an infantry unit's duty to protect that area, we had to assist them when things got bad.

One day, I was standing in the yard around noon basically directing men who were trying to move and stock supplies that had been delivered by a couple of choppers. I heard mortars coming in but didn't think they were very close, so we kept working. We wore flak jackets and helmets, so I thought we were safe. Then a mortar hit close by, and I told the guys that we better start paying attention. If the mortars came any closer, we would have to get into the bunker. Suddenly one hit extremely close to our position, and I froze. The guys started climbing off their equipment and heading for the bunker. I can't really explain it, but I remember feeling like something moved me one step over. Immediately, I heard a thud hit exactly where I had been frozen to the ground. I looked down and saw a piece of shrapnel as big as a bowling ball laying on the ground, smoking and hot. If it had been a rocket or mortar, I would have been a goner. Now I truly feel that a guardian angel saved me that day.

A North Vietnamese regiment was just across a ridge from us once. Evidently, it was a large regiment, because the American forces called in B-52s from Thailand for an air strike. They told us that at a certain time things were going to change and we needed to stay a good distance from that ridge. When the bombs hit, I heard what the Vietnamese called "rolling thunder". Clouds of smoke seemed to go on for miles, and the destruction was incredible. But we never saw the B-52s because they were flying at such high altitudes. It was good to know we could call on extra firepower when we needed it.

On another occasion, for two days two Russian tanks fired on us each morning at about seven o'clock. Afterward, they would retreat to the mountains and hide. On the third day, at 6:59 a.m., two phantom jets flew in the direction of the tanks. We never heard from the enemy tanks again. That was almost comical at the time.

Toward the end of our 90 days in that area, we received a tremendous amount of fire. My wife told me later that the news back home had reported that we were getting hit by 400-500 rounds a night. It was an extremely stressful and dangerous time. I lost a lot of friends and pieces of friends. After I came home, I asked God over and over again, "Why was I spared?" There were many times when I could have been killed, too.

When I got back to Chulai, I looked at things totally differently. If a little gunfire started, I didn't think anything about it, unlike the other guys who never had been out in the field. Other than those 90 days in the field, I had a pretty good year. Many times when an infantry soldier would come in for supplies, I would pray with him. I always tried to go to chapel on Sunday mornings, though there might be only three or four people there.

During my last four or five months in Chulai, I befriended a chaplain's assistant. The two of us used to go to an orphanage in the village on Saturdays. Though we had clearance from the MP's, it was pretty risky sometimes. The orphanage was full of kids, probably about 50 or more, ranging in age from infants to about five or six. The chaplain's assistant had been a gymnast at the University of Ohio, so he put on tumbling shows for the kids. They loved that. Basically, I just watched his back and passed out whatever candy or food we had been able to scrounge up that week. The children had nothing. They had been orphaned as a result of the war, and some of them were missing limbs. Though it was a sad sight, going there lifted us up and made us feel better about being over there. I enjoyed our visits there more than anything else I did in Vietnam.

When my year was up, I boarded a plane in Cameron Bay and flew back to Fort Lewis, Washington. It was a good feeling to get on that plane and come home with no major scratches or wounds. For the next year and a half, I was assigned to Fort Hood, Texas. After my three-year

tour of duty was complete, I was discharged.

My wife and I always have gone to church no matter where we were living, even more so after I returned from Vietnam. I'm just proud to still be here. I thank God or my guardian angel for that one incident and probably several more. Nothing I did saved me that day. I think God was strengthening me or letting me know he was there. People have asked me if I was scared in Vietnam or how I got through it. Of course, it was by the grace of God. But when you are only 19 or 20 years old, you believe you can conquer the world and never think about dying. God gave me the peace of mind to make it through. I'm proud to say that I didn't veer off from my faith during that time. I stayed pretty true to the course for God. Now I am committed to doing His work. I think I owe Him that much.

It was tough being separated from my wife after only about five months of marriage. I give her credit for being a stronger Christian than I was at the time. Jane and her family were in church every time the doors opened. My family went to church but not with the same intensity. Jane and her parents were praying for me. My parents and my brothers also were praying. It really stressed my mother because she had two sons go to Vietnam. I prayed for them to be strong, too. I wrote a letter to her just about every night, and she wrote to me all the time. Sometimes she got letters that I had written on box tops. When I was on guard duty, I would write on whatever I could find.

I remember so many people that I served with in Vietnam, and I still keep up with one in Kentucky. We went through a lot of hardship together, and I saw a lot of guys break down from the stress and pressures. Drugs and alcohol were a serious problem there, and some of the men leaned toward them as a crutch. I tried to help others by sharing my faith and knowledge of Christianity. I think that helped me, too. Most men call upon God at one time or another. A lot of them would tell me, "I don't know how to pray." I tried to help them learn. Some of them may have been experiencing battlefield salvations, though. After they returned to more peaceful situations, it didn't appear to really change their lives. So I don't know if it stuck or not. Of course, there also were men who claimed there was no God in Vietnam and were as hard as coal.

The saddest thing I saw in Vietnam were the body bags we had to put our men in at camp because they had overdosed on drugs or alcohol. They were men I knew who had buckled under the pressure. I don't know what the government claimed happened to those men, whether or not their deaths were considered a result of war or what. We used to pray during chapel services for those men and their families.

There is no doubt that I am a patriot. During the Vietnam War, some people fled to Canada to escape military service. Protestors were big at the time, too. Patriotism really means something to me, though. My father did not serve in World War II only because he was in charge of an Exxon refinery that was producing fuel for the war effort. My brother had been among the first American troops to go to Vietnam. It hurts me to see someone deface the American flag. No matter how hard we had been hit at different times in Vietnam, it always helped to see our flag and know that it was the symbol of the greatest military force on earth. It inspired us and made us proud.

To this day, I love patriotic celebrations. They still bring tears and memories. Though I don't linger on my war experiences, I can never forget them. I would serve again if called upon, and I don't understand people who don't feel that way in this country. I thank God that this country was founded on Christian values. I think that American spirit still lives. After the events of September 11, 2001, we saw how people in this country rallied together. If it comes down to it, I believe the young men and women of today would step up and do what they have to do.

Freedom doesn't come free. When it was my time to serve, I felt it was my duty. My heroes are the veterans of World War I and World War II and Korean War, who served much longer than I did and in much worse conditions.

When I visited the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D. C., and saw the wall, it was a powerful experience. There are something like 57,000 names of men and women on that wall. As you stand in front of it, you think about all the families that lost loved ones. It made me wonder why my name wasn't on that wall. I thought about my uncles who were lost in World War II and wondered why some people make it and others do not.

I look at people differently now than I did before the war, and I try to enjoy life. The more years that pass, the more my war experiences mean to me. It was a part of my life, and I'm sure it changed me to an extent. It definitely made me grow up. Looking back, I know the Lord got me through all the challenges I faced. Now I try to show my appreciation by working for Him.