

Memoirs Of A Grunt

by Duke Barrett

From The Recesses Of My Mind

It's been over forty years since I was drafted into the armed forces to go fight in the Vietnam War, so many of my memories are foggy, at best. Amazingly though, time hasn't stripped my memory of the main ingredients of those formative years and experiences, and before it does, I've decided to record what I'm able to remember, for my own entertainment, posterity, and if lucky, prosperity too. I'd also like to leave an account of my days as a young, dashing, adventurous paratrooper, for my kids and Grandkids, but not necessarily for my poor wife.

Take my wife, please. I kid! Sorry Henny. The poor woman's pretty well sick and tired of hearing of my experiences, and I can't say as I blame her. In fact, she's heard of my experiences so many times, she could write the damn book. I guess I do have a habit of repeating myself... Repeating myself. She did however know me when I was young and dashing.

I must admit I am not one of those guys who does not like to talk about what he did in the war. In fact, I'm proud of what I did. Besides, I like to talk about myself. Just ask my wife. I've never killed anybody out of hate, recklessness or just for the thrill of it, although it is a thrill. In fact, I didn't kill *all* that many people. I did take part in company size sweeps where we fired on enemy positions, assaulted hills and killed bad guys. How many did I personally kill? Beats me. I also took part in a number of ambushes in the reconnaissance platoon, killing a number of enemy soldiers. Kind of a drag, know what I'm saying?

War is Hell. Seriously, it is. I was fortunate to have served with a top notch, well-trained bunch of guys, and I believe we always took the moral high ground and I thank God we did. It makes for better sleeping. Life long friendships were forged in those days of our youth, and believe it or not, I wouldn't trade those experiences for any amount of money. Well maybe, I just might. It depends on the amount. I'd have to give it some serious thought, though.

Having recently talked about the war with a dear friend and fellow combatant, come to find out a whole bunch of what we did, and more importantly, what I did came as news to me. Selective memory, I guess. I've written about some of my experiences in Vietnam, in a novel, but it is a novel. What I'm now trying to do is to remember just exactly what the hell I did do over there, and of my life and death experiences, and how dealing with those experiences could possibly help lead to world peace. I kid! I'm far too violent to work for peace. Hell, I can't even find it at home, let alone in the world.

Chapter One

In the spring of 1965, rumor had it that the draft was going to get all of us no-accounts who roamed the streets, off of the streets of the factory town that I grew up in, Kenosha, Wisconsin. Well they weren't just whistling Dixie. The good old US of A went and got itself militarily involved in some God forsaken place in Southeast Asia, and needed bodies, young male bodies and I qualified. I received my "Greetings" (draft notice) letter from Uncle Sam in April of 1965 and was told to report at 6:00 am, June 17th, 1965 to the local draft board at the KYF building, also known as the Kenosha Youth Foundation, downtown Kenosha, Wisconsin. Being quite familiar with the location, I had no problem finding it. I was once a member of the Kenosha Golden Gloves boxing team in 1962 and 1964, and our training facilities were in the basement of the KYF building.

So, after a series of goodbye parties, hugs and kisses from my family and a thought to be romantic farewell from my fiancé, myself and a host of other conscripts who'd been rounded up off the streets of Kenosha, reluctantly reported to the KYF for the purpose of induction into the armed forces of the United States. In the early am of the seventeenth of June, 1965 we boarded a Milwaukee bound bus that would take us to the official Southern Wisconsin Induction Center for our physical, and if healthy, our formal induction ceremony. Well as luck would have it, I was fit as a horse, a small horse but nonetheless fit. They wanted me; they really, really wanted me.

Nothing terribly remarkable had yet happened that day, and before I knew it, I had been sworn in as a Private in the U.S. Army. Terrific! Shortly after the swearing in all volunteers and draftees were bussed to the train station in downtown Milwaukee where we caught a train that took us Southbound, to Louisville, Kentucky, twenty miles from our final destination of Fort Knox, Kentucky. Talk about whistling Dixie.

Within a short time I came to realize my life had changed, and not for the better. Chaperoned by MP's, (military police) we weren't afforded many liberties, and as a free spirit I found this aspect troubling. Passing through the cities of Chicago, Illinois and Indianapolis, Indiana, it became apparent that we'd only be afforded a passing glance of what the cities offered its visitors, from our assigned seating arrangements. It had also become apparent that we weren't visitors who were passing through, but instead, cargo. That's right, just United States Military cargo, in assigned seating, passing through. Apparently the possibility of conscripts going AWOL (absent without leave) was a concern for those in charge. The MP's kept a tight leash on us.

At approximately 9:00 pm that evening, our group of soldiers to be, arrived at the train station in Louisville, Kentucky, where we were met by a few surly NCOs (non-commissioned officers) from the Fort Knox training center, our destination. An astute observer, hell, even a moron could tell immediately that these guys weren't all that friendly. The welcoming staff of non-coms unsmilingly guided us toward awaiting Greyhound busses for transfer to Fort Knox. In the late pm of the seventeenth, we finally arrived at our destination, the infamous army basic training center. Yippee! Up to that point, all in all, things had proven to be a bit unpleasant, but uneventful.

It was at the moment of arrival at Fort Knox, that our lives, the newly arrived, were changed forever. Not to be left to wonder, we were greeted by a handful of informative but snarling, screaming DI's (drill instructors) who excitedly fell into character the moment the busses arrived. The DI's paced back and forth, like hungry lions in a cage, in wait at the bus stop, so all on board could see. Anxious as any thespian whoever longed for a curtain rise, these anxious DI's couldn't wait to perform their tough guy, tough love role and cherished every moment of their performance. I'd like to say the same, but can't.

Once we disembarked our more than comfortable mode of transportation, the Greyhound, unaware it was to be our last comfortable moment for some time, the DI's started to scream at the top of their lungs. Abusing their vocal cords to the point of hoarseness, bulging veins in their necks testified to the damage being done by expanding thrice their normal size. The Smokey the Bear type DI hats adorned by the cadre were tilted for the intimidation effect to a point where the brims balanced on their noses.

Intimidation ruled. Proverbial chickens with their heads cut off came to mind as green recruits tripped and stumbled, try as they may to obey the command of the screaming heads, to make a straight-line formation. The voluminous, vocally enhanced cadre bestowed thought to be humorous names upon the new recruits, like "fuck-up," "shit-head," "shit for brains," "lard-ass," "maggot" and "faggot," to name a few of the not so clever monikers used by the intimidators. It became clear as a bell to those with half a brain, why these guys were in the military and not writing for the "Tonight Show."

With order attained and tripping brought to an acceptable level, we marched off to supply, where we were issued brand new army threads, also known as fatigues. No

military themed wardrobe would've been complete without matching hats, socks, underwear and boots, and to top off this smart new ensemble, a matching duffle bag to put the shit in. Clothed to the teeth, we were then marched off to our new housing facilities, also known as barracks, where we were assigned sleeping quarters. In the Vietnam-era, army barracks were state of the art facilities, nineteenth century state of the art, that is. Long, narrow, yellow wooden firetraps with two lines of double bunk beds covered by extremely thin mattresses.

It was now a little after midnight, in fact, it was now June 18th. Thinking to myself, wow, what a long day a long day! Time sure does fly. Funky and unappealing as the sleeping arrangements were, they looked awfully good to a weary bunch of conscripts and volunteers. Following a little more harassment from the cadre, we were finally allowed to get some much-needed sleep. Around 12:30 am on the eighteenth, we put those weary bodies to bed. No sooner did my head hit the pillow and I was out like a light. Bad analogy. It couldn't have been but 3:15 am, less than three hours since I laid my weary but fit army body down, only to be rudely awakened by a blinking, unshaded 100-watt light bulb directly over my head. That, coupled with the annoyingly loud voice of one of our DI's, screaming for us to, "rise and shine, ladies," caused me to think, oh-my-God!

The humor was killing me. Well, that and the fact that I'd only slept about two hours and forty-five minutes. It wasn't the longest day of my life, but the shortest night of my life. Come to think of it, I guess you could say it was the first of many to come of the "longest" days and "shortest" nights of my life.

Oh What A Night

(A Room With a View)

Bong Son, Vietnam-1966

At approximately 3 or 4 p.m., our squad, the reconnaissance platoons second squad of the 8th cavalry, 1st airborne brigade, left our firebase position and headed down a steep, heavily forested hillside to set up an ambush / listening- post in late September somewhere north of Bong Son, South Vietnam. The mission? Hell, it beats me. To kill bad guys I guess. All in a days work. As a Specialist Fourth Class I wasn't privy to much information. I did however know one thing for sure. It was dead on monsoon season and we'd be sleeping out in the rain again.

The platoon had been temporarily assigned to a secure location, secure for a recon platoon that is. High on a big-ass hill, many miles north of scenic downtown Bong Son, the platoon provided perimeter security for an artillery battery. The high elevation perch that the artillery battery was set up on brought us even closer to an unforgiving sun, mitigated only by the rain ponchos that covered our dug in positions. However the poncho covers provided not one mitigating factor in regard to the abundance of mosquitoes and high humidity.

Making sure we didn't get too comfortable in our new digs, battalion hierarchy found something useful for us to do. Conduct another patrol. Wow, how'd they come up with that idea? It must have been at least twenty-four hours since our last patrol. They

definitely had an imagination deficit, or so it seemed. I guess it must have been put away in a lock box somewhere. Battalion would order up a patrol, we'd obey.

Redundancy and boredom were an ever-present problem because at times it seemed like all you did was follow the guy in front of you, who followed the guy in front of him, who was following orders from somebody who told him what to do. To stay sharp we had to fight off the cobwebs that tried to form in our mind. Aw, to daydream.

Sergeant Frank Bishop was the patrol leader that late afternoon, and I can't for the life of me remember whom besides him and I were on that patrol. I do know that we were no more than squad strength in numbers, eight of us I think, as we descended down the steep hillside cutting and slicing our way into an even denser triple canopied covered valley.

We stopped to take a break at dusk. It seemed to turn from dusk to dark in a matter of seconds in the belly of the beast, the deep dark jungle. We'd stopped alongside, not on, but alongside a trail, a rather wide, big-ass trail, to take a much-needed break. A good recon team almost never took the trail. Besides, that'd be too damn easy and too damn dangerous. We walked off of the damn things. Kept us alive.

At that point Sergeant Bishop checked his map to find out where the hell we were and then confirmed our position by radio with battalion. Hungry as hell, we broke out the c-rats (c-rations) and sat down in a tight circle perimeter on an already wet jungle turf, for supper.

With our P-38s, (can openers) in hand, the feast was on. The menu consisted of ham and lima beans, Ham and eggs chopped, chipped beef and other culinary specialties. These mouth-savoring entrees were only to be followed up with a small can of warm

fruit. That and a canteen full of warm iodine tablet tasting water made one wonder what more could life possibly offer?

Stomachs filled, it was back to business. Apparently we'd reached our objective; a well-used trail, a possible corridor for enemy troops. The mission, to watch and listen for enemy movement and if possible, kill 'em. Just as I thought. Great!

We set up fields of fire by clearing fire lanes of dense foliage, set up claymore mines to our immediate front and then settled into two man positions for another comfy evening. You couldn't beat these accommodations with a stick. Hidden in a well-concealed location only yards up and off of the trail, we followed strict noise discipline. Faces painted and dressed to the teeth in the latest camouflage look, we blended right into the terrain. Quiet as the surrounding greenery and ready for some shuteye, we followed the standard sleep and guard duty schedule of two hours on, two hours off, per individual.

Battalion, we've got a problem. The problem, our sleeping arrangements. See, we were on a steep, slick embankment not terribly conducive for a good nights sleep. Oh well, who's complaining? Gotta make the best of it. Seriously doubt battalion would've cared any damn way.

Lying back on the wet ground, we swatted away mosquitoes and stared up at the pitch-black tripled canopied jungle ceiling as we awaited our prey. Couldn't see a Goddamned thing. It wasn't a room with a view. It couldn't possibly have been any darker. We were all like really uncomfortable and longed to be sleeping in the comforts of that dug in foxhole back on the mountain's top. You know that saying, "you don't know what you got until its gone?" Well, funny how true it is. A little sun, no matter how

hot, sounded pretty good. Lord only knows what was crawling around us. Compared to where we were, the firebase seemed like a Holiday Inn.

Just when you thought things couldn't possibly get any worse, they did. Fuckin' rain, and lots of it. After all, it was monsoon season and Mother Nature didn't disappoint. All of a sudden the thought of lying on your back on the wet ground, on a steep embankment, sounded pretty damn good. See, that was before the rain started. It rained so damned hard it became impossible to lie down without feeling you were being waterboarded. To make things worse, we started to involuntarily slide down the hillside, and literally dug in our heels to stop our forward motion over the claymore mines that we'd so carefully positioned and onto the trail that was our charge.

Everyone grabbed onto available vines and branches and hoped to God that no one would accidentally set off one of the mines we'd just set up to kill the bad guys. Try as we may, it became more than an effort to keep from being washed down the embankment onto said trail. The mission, not unlike us recondos, was in peril. Darker than the ace of spades and with no idea of how long the rain would continue to fall at its current intensity, things couldn't have went more swimmingly, ha-ha, The only thing we could do was hold on, onto anything.

Just as we'd earlier longed for the opportunity to sleep on the wet ground on the steep embankment, we suddenly longed for the challenge of not being swept away by the rain onto the trail below. The reason for the spike in current nostalgia? The trail, that big-ass trail we fought so hard not to be swept onto, had taken on a new life. Real life, that is. Life in the form of troops, wet enemy troops, like maybe hundreds of live, wet enemy troops.

Outnumbered approximately a hundred to one, our options became limited. We held on for dear life and selfishly prayed for our own survival as an enemy battalion, if not regiment passed by, only a few feet from our sixteen wet feet. I prayed to God that we didn't have a hero amongst us who felt it his patriotic duty to "open-up," on the enemy. He or She apparently answered my prayers. Not a shot was fired in anger, or fear for that matter. Hell, the weapons were so waterlogged they probably wouldn't have fired any damn way.

In the dead of night, the only thing we feared was fear itself. Well, fear and the hundreds of passing disgruntled enemy soldiers. The only thing we could see were the moving vines and branches pushed aside by the heavily armed, water logged alien beings to our *immediate* front. The fact that we were damn near on top of them, or possibly right under their feet, damn near speed bumps, proved to me beyond a doubt that they were about as anxious to confront us, as we were they. Misery loves company.

For more than an hour, possibly two, or what seemed like an eternity, the enemy passed by, all the time unaware of our existence. I am certain that we, the recon team, invented "stealth" that soggy evening. The sound of the pouring rain fortunately drowned (no pun intended) out any sounds one with normal hearing would've been able to hear. To insure our well being we turned off our radio, clamped our mouths shut so as not to hear our teeth chatter and prayed our hearts wouldn't rip right out of our new fashionable but yet functional tropical jungle fatigue shirts.

Mercifully, dawn arrived right on time. In what could very well have been the longest night of our lives, mine for certain; proof of the existence of a large enemy force had been left behind. The trail was covered with hundreds of footprints, discarded

wrappers, cigarette butts, human waste and trampled foliage, bearing witness to what we almost saw.

Relived and happy to be alive, we turned on our PRC-25 radio and called in our sit-rep (situation report). Oh, and by the way, our painted faces were damn near lily white by early morn. Aw, you just can't beat a good shower. They're really refreshing. No what I'm saying?

Following a thorough recon of the immediate area, we again broke for a meal and a smoke. Those that did smoke lit up to settle frayed nerves. After consuming more tasty c-rats and warm water, we took a new look at our even newer lease on life. We then climbed back up to the mountaintop to the Holiday Inn where one could see life from rooms with a view, for a well-deserved rest.