

John Stone's Early 2017 Alpha Reunion

In March of 2017, my wife, Brooke, and I were invited to a Birthday party of an Army friend of mine. His name is Al Politano. I was Al's drill instructor at Fort Ord California in 1969. After Al's training was completed, so was my Army obligation. I was heading home and Al was heading to Vietnam. Coincidentally, Al's First Base Camp was Dau Tieng.

Al, and his wife, Barbara, live in San Dimas California. While visiting, I made plans to go see two Alpha guys I haven't seen in about 50 years. Richard Smith, who is an Alpha Association member, and Peter Rech, who was found by Facebook, as someone I may know.



The first guy I visited was Richard Smith. He is also known as Smitty! I put Richard's address into the GPS, and my friend Al, and his wife, Barbara, drove us to Pasadena for a surprise visit. We parked just around the corner from this sprawling apartment complex and went to see if we could locate

him.

I didn't have an apartment number so we went looking for an apartment directory. My friend went one way and I went the other. I got around the corner and I got a phone call from my friend Al. He said "John, I got someone here that wants to talk to you. I said hello a few times and the phone went dead. I ran back to the front of the complex and found Al was standing next to Richard.





I asked Al, “How did you find him so fast?” Al said, “I’ve been an FBI agent ever- since Nam. I can find anybody!” Well it turns out that Richard, by chance, was coming out from his apartment to get his mail, and Al asks, “Are you Richard Smith?” “Yes I am.” “Stoney is looking for you!”

After our greeting and a good hug, Richard invited all of us into his beautiful apartment to catch up on about 50 years. We talked about many of the guys on the company roster, and checked photos, and shared some stories. It was as if we continued a conversation that we had started in Vietnam. Our reunion visit was amazing! Even had a laugh about us both wearing similar socks!

Where’s that Officer!!!

Richard told us about an incident that happened while he was a Specialist 4 as a radio telephone operator or RTO for one of Alpha’s Platoon leading officers.

During one field mission, there was a VC base camp that had air strikes on it for a few days. The battalion called in a mechanized unit for assistance, to set up a sweeping force at the edge of the bombing run, but they also wanted an infantry unit in there too. That unit was Alpha Company.

Around late in the afternoon the mech unit was scheduled to meet Alpha Company here and the following morning we were going to sweep through the bombing area together.

Smitty’s field Promotion

While Alpha Company continued to set up their part of the perimeter, the platoon leader threw his fatigue shirt, to Richard, that had the camouflage Lieutenant bars on it, and the officer says, “Go over to the northern side of the perimeter. That’s where you’ll meet the mech unit, and see if you can get a case of beer. ”So Richard was not one to refuse an order, or a beer, and says, “Fine” and puts on the shirt! Then the



lieutenant says, “Here, take my helmet too!” So Richard puts on the lieutenant’s helmet and heads over to the other side of the perimeter to get some beer.

As the newly “field promoted Lieutenant Smith” was getting close to the north side of the perimeter, he heard someone yell, “FIRE IN THE HOLE!” A few seconds later this huge blast goes off! What they were doing; there were dud artillery shells in this area, and the engineers were slapping C-4 plastic explosive on them and detonating them. Well during this explosion, all shells went off except one, which went straight up in the air and was spinning and flipping and then came straight back down. No one wanted to go over there to slap more C-4 on it just in case it blew. So just at that time, the tracks were coming in. Richard is standing there waiting to ask someone for the beer, and this engineer comes up to Richard and says, “What do we do SIR?” Just then, an APC comes pulling up and stops. Richard looked at the APC and turns to the engineer and says, “Why don’t you just hit it with the 50!”

So the engineer goes over to the gunner on the APC and asks, “Can you hit that dud shell over there with your 50?” The gunner aims and fires his gun and hits the shell creating one heck of an explosion!

The next thing Richard hears is everyone on the perimeter is now yelling, “MORTARS.... MORTARS... MORTARS!” all while running for cover! Now there was a problem! Nobody had yelled, “FIRE IN THE HOLE!”

By this time, the last thing on Richard’s mind was the beer, and he figured it was time for him to LEAVE! Richard quickly makes it back to his command post group and returns the officer’s shirt and helmet!

Sometime later Richard notices some officers heading toward Alpha’s section of the perimeter. Along with the officers are the engineer and the gunner that was on the APC. This group was checking each perimeter position for that damn OFFICER who told them to shoot the shell with the 50. Richard’s platoon leader tells him, “GET LOST!”

Now this is where our “ESCAPE AND EVASION” training course is going to pay off. Richard said he stayed ahead of the search group by constantly moving and swinging around to another position. When I was talking to Richard, I asked him, “Do you remember who the officer was?” “ It may have been one of three, but he said he couldn’t remember. Who knows? Maybe we’ll find out now.

HERE’S A NOTE FROM Richard: Before Vietnam I worked in healthcare as a Central Supply Tech at a hospital in the San Fernando Valley. After I got out of the service I joined the LAPD, and was a patrolman for 3 years. Then I was contacted by my former hospital administrator, who by that time was a corporate director with Catholic Healthcare West, better known as CHW. He offered me the position of Executive Director of Materials

Management, which oversaw the supply needs for 48 hospitals. The rest is history. I worked in the corporate office for 30 years. My wife Laurie still works for CHW where we met. She is the executive assistant to the president/CEO. My son John is a homicide detective for the LAPD and has been with them for OVER 25 years.

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Peter Rech visit and Story

On Wednesday, February, 8th, 2017, the name Peter Rech popped up on my Facebook, and it said it may be someone I might know. I checked his page and Facebook was right! Peter Rech arrived in Alpha about the same time as I did. In the early months of 1968 he disappeared just like many of the others. We've been in contact ever since and I made plans to call Peter after I got to California.



I met up with Peter Rech for Lunch at Ruby's Restaurant on the Huntington Pier. The first story Peter told me in the year 2001, his daughter was in college at the University of Pennsylvania, and she signs up for a semester at sea, on a ship for 3 months. Pete is at work one day and receives a message from his daughter. The fax from her ship reads: **THEY'RE PULLING IN TO HO CHI MIHN CITY! STOP! WILL YOU MEET ME IN SAIGON? STOP!** He looks at the telegram and he said, "NO WAY!" am I going back to



Nam! So he goes home and tells his wife, "There is absolutely no way I'm going back to Vietnam. Peter thought about it a couple of days and decided to do it.

When Peter arrived in Saigon he found the city had grown up. He stayed at the REX hotel which was very nice. Peter said it was really nice to see and visit with his daughter. He figured as long as he was there, he would take a tour.

He had gone to the "War Remnants Museum", which was originally called the "Chinese and American Crimes Museum". He also took another tour! He paid a driver 10 dollars to take him to small village up north. The name of the Village was Dau Tieng. His driver's car was a 4 speed Mazda but it only had two working gears, so

the trip took all day! His envision of Vietnam was leveled dust, but when he got there he realized that trees grow. Dau Tieng was still used as a military base and still had a perimeter around it, but it was much greener.

While Peter was in serving in Alpha A2/12, he went on sick call one day. They sent him to the 3rd Field Hospital in Saigon, where he had an ear operation and eventually ended up with a profile. No field duty and avoid dust and loud noises as much as possible which at times an impossible task.

Peter's Chauffeur Job

While Peter was in base Camp 1st Sergeant Garcia, kept Peter busy doing basecamp jobs. One day he tells Peter "Go and escort the Commanding officer of the PX; Captain "so & so". "That's your job for the day."

So he heads over to the PX, which is just down the road from our 3rd platoon hooch. He goes into the PX and locates the officer. They walk outside and Peter follows him over to the Captain's jeep and gets in, and drives him all over the base camp. From one area of the base camp to the next, they checked on incoming supplies, reorders, deliveries, making sure what and where everything was supposed to go. It took all day and finally Peter drops the captain off at his final destination. As the Officer exits the jeep, Peter asks the captain, "Where should I park the jeep Sir?" The Captain Says, "Why don't you just take it over to the motor pool and drop it off there."

So Peter heads to the Motor Pool area and pulls into the compound and parks. He yells to the sergeant, "I'm dropping off the captain's Jeep! Is it okay if I park it here?"

The motor pool guy walks over and looks at the Jeep and then at Peter and tells him, "We've been looking for this Jeep all day!" "This jeep was stolen at the PX early this morning!"

It was at that moment Peter realized it wasn't the Captain's Jeep that they climbed into that morning. They BOTH had unknowingly climbed into somebody else's jeep that was just parked at the PX!

POOP DUTY

Another Job Garcia put Peter on was the "SWAT" team. That's "Sanitation Worker Attack Team". That is also known as "latrine duty" or poop duty. Now this sounds a little gross, but burning the poop is actually a pretty good job.



The Alpha outhouse was located in a shady area about half way between the orderly room and the bunker line. It was a small wood building with high walls and a slanted roof. At the top of the walls it had a screen for air circulation but usually useless. Inside there was a flat board with holes and hinged seat covers for the 3 occupants.

At the rear base of this narrow shack were trap doors that you would lift up and use a steel hook to pull and remove the metal drums which contained the poop. These steel drums were made from 55 gallon drums which were cut in half. It was always best to check the building for occupants before yanking out any of the drums, and always best to have two sets of drums, one set for use while the other set is being burned clean.

After dragging out the drums, the next step would be to pour diesel fuel into the drums and light it on fire and burn the poop until it was all burned up. A pre-made mixture of 1 quart (1 liter) of gasoline to 4 quarts (4 liters) of diesel oil is effective, but must be used with caution. If the contents are not rendered dry and odorless by one burning, they should be burned again. Any remaining ash should be buried. He mentioned this gets kind of gross, so if you got this far reading the story, you might as well continue.

Peter said he eventually got to be a perfectionist at this job, but in order to do this job right, you had to stir it up after you poured in the fuel, or it wouldn't burn properly. If you didn't stir this concoction up, it would end up like a poop soufflé, and leave a crust on the top, and you would have to start over.

All Army jobs have instructions and many have instructional steps "by the numbers" but sometimes people make up their own. Someone had told Peter if you pour in a lot of diesel fuel, you can go back to your hooch and take a 3 hour nap! Pete said, "Okay!" He got to the job and pulled out the drum of poop. He took the can of fuel and poured the whole five gallon can into the drum, and mixed it up good and lit it and went back to sleep!

He didn't tell me how long he slept, but on the way back to the job, all he saw was black smoke. He got closer and found 3 rubber trees on fire and the flames were reaching up maybe 50 feet. All the leaves were flaming, like a punk torch! The company's ammo storage bunker wasn't too far away. As he was watching it burn, he's thinking Oh no, I'm going to jail.

We'll he got the blaze under control and got away with it. A short time later Peter's orders came in and he was transferred to Head Quarters Command at Cu Chi. Even though no place was really safe, he figured it may have saved his life, as a lesser risk.

I had an extraordinary visit with Richard, and Peter. Thanks to Al, Barbara and their two boys, Matt and Ben, for making this possible. I found out that I could have surprised two other Alpha guys. On my next trip maybe I can surprise "Doc" John Collins, and Richard Evans who live close by as well.