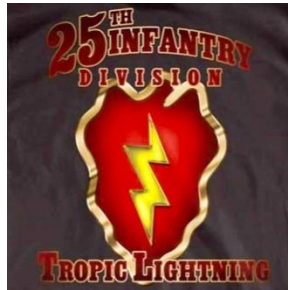


STORIES FROM THE REPLACEMENTS

Alpha Company 2/12 Infantry 25th Division

Vietnam

1967- 1968



Stories compiled by John Stone

Stories from the Replacements

Stories compiled by John Stone

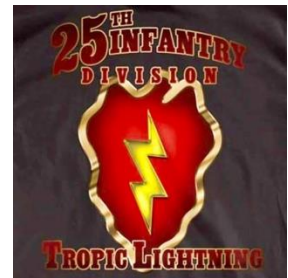


Most of the original men of A Company 2/12 were trained together as the 3rd Brigade of the 4th Infantry Division at Fort Lewis. They were transported by the troop ship, Nelson. M. Walker, and arrived in Vietnam on 14th of October 1966.

During the course of their tour, replacements were needed to take the place of both the casualties, as well as the soldiers who were transferred, or completed their year tour obligation.

Most of us “replacements” or “the new guys” that arrived at the Cu Chi 25th Replacement Detachment were trained throughout US locations, and randomly assigned where needed. We trickled into Alpha Company alone, or a few, or small groups at a time. Initially strangers, but would quickly change to a lifelong close bond that few other jobs can do.

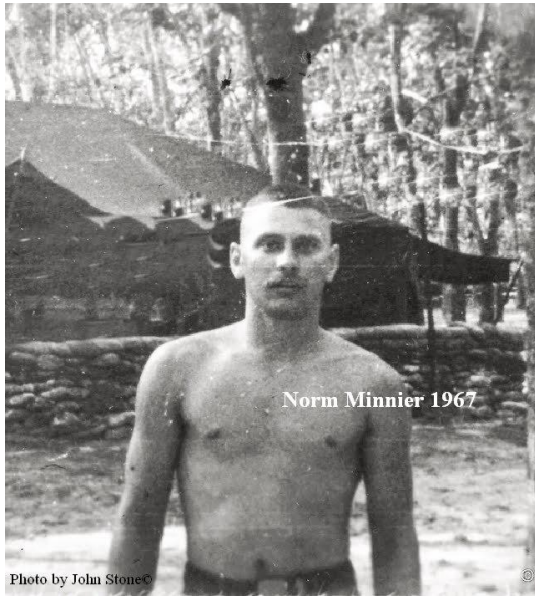
Arriving at Base Camp Rainier, we were told this was going to be our home for the next 365 days. It didn’t take long to find out this wasn’t true. After little over a week, we hardly ever saw the place. If we were there, it was only for a day or so, and sometimes, just a few hours or less.



August 29, 2018, is the date of my 50 year anniversary of the day I left Vietnam, but as most Nam Vets, Nam never left me. It would be safe to say that the memories most combat veterans brought home have been a regular part of each soldiers, and family’s daily life. Even those that never talked about it, maybe their silence, is the proof it transformed them in some way. Some recollections of what we did in Nam are vague, creating many unanswered questions of who, what, why, where and when. Other memories are just below the surface, only needing a cue to remind us of it. Music, movies, sounds, smells, environment, some activity can take you back. My wife kind of covers it in a few words. She says she has never been to Vietnam, but she goes there most every day. I gathered some stories from a few of the replacements to tell some of their experiences. As I read, and compared some parts of their story details, it left me wondering if some were writing about the same mission, from another position.

Sgt. Norman Minnier **Autobiography of Vietnam Experiences**

I am Norman Minnier. I was born and raised on a farm in a small-town, Sunbury, Pennsylvania. After high school graduation, I worked in my father’s business. Since the business was farm-related, my father could get a deferment from the draft. As I watched my friends going to the military, I asked my Dad not to apply for the deferment...I wanted to do my duty and serve my country. So, my name was added to the draft board list.



My high school sweetheart, Kathy, and I were engaged at the time and had been dating since she was in 9th grade. After she graduated in 1966, we talked about getting married. I wasn't real keen on the idea, because I knew I could be drafted at any time, and I didn't want to possibly make her a widow at such a young age. So, I kept checking the draft board to see where I stood in line. In late 1966, my draft board told me I was way down on the list and may not even be called. At that news, Kathy and I prepared for our wedding on April 30, 1967—I was 20 and she was 18 years old and we were married. After a 3-day honeymoon we returned home to our tiny apartment to find my draft notice in the mail. It said, "You will report to the induction center in 2 weeks to become a member of the U.S. Army." That was a very short 2 weeks of marriage.

I was surprised to see that a high school friend (Danny) was also on the same bus going to the induction center. Danny and I went to Basic Training and AIT together and also went together to Vietnam. My Basic Training was at Ft. Knox, Kentucky. After that, a small group of us were sent by train to Ft. Polk, Louisiana for jungle training. We were able to return home on leave for 30 days after AIT.

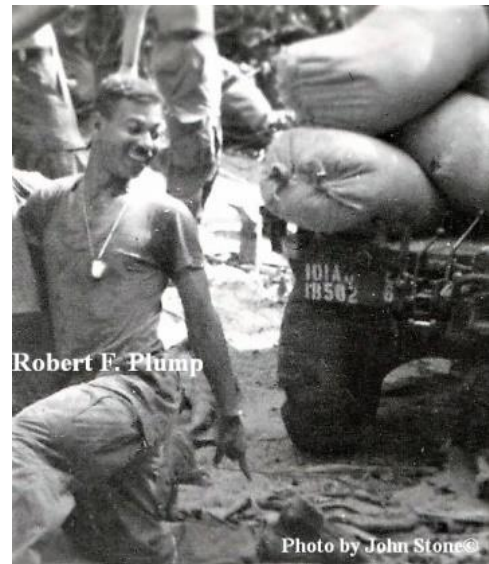
The middle of September, 1967, I boarded a small plane in a small airport, saying good-bye to my new wife and parents, and headed for the state of Washington. After more shots and processing, I boarded the largest plane I had ever seen for a trip to South Vietnam. We arrived in country around the middle of October, 1967. My first impression out of the plane was the oppressive heat that I had never experienced before. Following more processing and training, some of us were loaded onto a Huey chopper to be taken to our new unit which was somewhere in a rubber plantation. Danny and I were split up somehow, and he was assigned to the 2nd platoon and I went to the 3rd platoon of Alpha Company 2/12 of 25th Infantry. I know that the night before we arrived, our new unit was in a very heavy fire fight, and the stories that these guys were telling us "newbies" made us aware that this was a very serious and dangerous assignment we would be completing during this year. Danny and I didn't see much of each other after that. We had to make new friends and we did.

These new friends were, however, a lot more than friends. I learned very quickly that each of us had to depend on the other just for survival. I was surprised at how much walking we did in search and destroy missions looking for the enemy. Most of the time it didn't seem like we knew where Charlie was, but he knew where we were. Out in the jungle, it was easy to identify your enemy—the Viet Cong soldiers hunting you down and attacking at any time. But as we walked through villages, your enemy could be an innocent-looking woman or child who was determined to kill American soldiers. Sometimes an entire village was set up as Viet Cong sympathizers and not one person there could be trusted. Even when back at base camp, our

barber by day turned out to be a Viet Cong member who, as we found out later, fought against us as the enemy at night.

I heard tell that if you make it through your first month without being killed or wounded, you had a good chance of making it to the end. That wasn't true, because guys got killed or wounded at any time through your tour. I made it to November 21, 1967. That night another soldier Robert F. Plump, and I, were sent out on a listening post in front of our company's position. It's a scary place to be—just the two of us with a radio. Our job was to stay awake all night and warn our company C.P. if there is any enemy activity in our area. We were out there for quite a while, and everything seemed quiet. All of a sudden all Hell broke loose. We had incoming mortars all around us with shrapnel flying everywhere. We could hear the pieces flying by. I got hit with two pieces of shrapnel and Plumb was hit with one piece. While we were reporting that both of us were hit, about 25-30 yards to our left the VC were attacking that part of our perimeter. The trip flares and claymore mines were going off. We could see the VC charging our lines. There seemed to be an enormous amount of them. Finally our CP told Plumb and I to come back in. I often think that if that attack would have been 30 yards down in our direction, all those VC would have come right over top of Plumb and me.

After returning to our unit, they evacuated a chopper full of us who had been wounded. They first took us to Dau Tieng Dispensary, but they were full from all the actions this night, so they packed the more severely wounded back on the medivac chopper and took us to Cu Chi hospital. Danny had been hit two days earlier, and when I saw him, he was almost unrecognizable. He was with 2nd platoon and they were walking on a rice paddy dike and he was walking point and the VC set off a booby trap on him. He had been peppered with shrapnel all over his face, head, and chest. His head was twice the size it should have been and his eyes were swollen shut. When I saw him in the Cu Chi hospital he couldn't see me but he did recognize my voice. His wounds were so severe that he was sent to Japan, and then to the U.S. to recover. That was the last I saw him till we were both out of the Army and back home. At the hospital, doctors removed the shrapnel from my arm and shoulder. I was there over Thanksgiving holiday and enjoyed a traditional Thanksgiving dinner. I was receiving heavy doses of antibiotic every day for at least a week, but they couldn't get rid of my fever. Ex-rays were taken and they discovered they missed a piece of shrapnel. I went into surgery again to have more shrapnel removed. Then my fever broke, and they sewed me back up and sent me back to my unit. My shoulder was still very sore and I was unable to wear my harness. So I had to improvise and put everything on my pistol belt. Sometime in December, I was back in the field with my platoon.



I know we spent a lot of time in the field. Our usual meals were c-rations. I remember on one operation we were in the field for about 36 days. At that time in my life, I loved ice cream. I remember on my birthday we had hot chow for supper and who could possibly imagine...we had

ice cream for dessert. Well they called it ice cream, but it wasn't all that cold and pretty melted. But it didn't matter, it still tasted good.

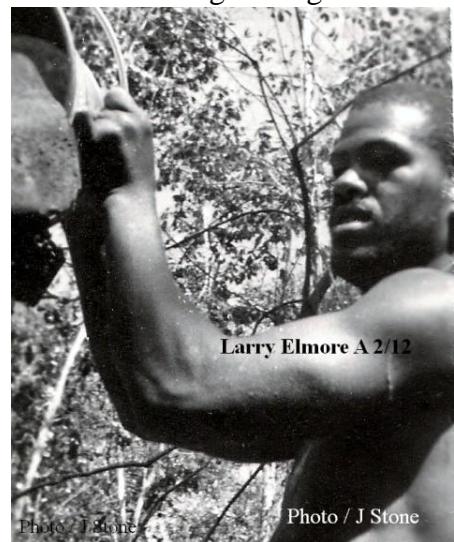
The next big event was the beginning of February, 1968. The VC decided to give us a surprise during the TET Offensive. Again, extreme fighting broke out all over and all around us, and it was relentless for weeks. This was a time of constant, extreme battles in which we lost many men. During the TET campaign, at one time we were in the field for 56 days without a shower or change of clothes or any outside contact.

From our base camp at Dau Tieng, on most days, we could see the Black Virgin Mountain very clearly in the distant. On top of the mountain there was a very strategic and important radio communications center for the U.S. We patrolled the low ground around the mountain, and also the very top. But the VC had the rest of the mountain. We heard that they had the whole mountain spider-webbed with tunnels. One morning our company was hastily assembled and we were being sent to the chopper pads at Dau Tieng to be flown out. We were told that the unit on top of the mountain had been overrun the night before, and we were going in to clean out any VC left and secure the area. When we arrived on top of the mountain, we encountered a horrible sight of many dead and wounded soldiers. There were many GI bodies lying alongside the chopper pad waiting to be evacuated out on the choppers we came in on. We secured the area with little resistance and spent a few weeks guarding the complex until we were replaced.



On March 26, 1968, our company was on a search and destroy mission; about mid-day when we stopped for lunch. Larry Elmore and I were sent out for listening post duty. We walked quite a way in front of our unit and found a small trail. We decided to set up next to it. We faced each other so we could see both directions of the trail. We just started opening our c-rations when I heard Larry whisper that he saw VC coming down the trail. We sat still till he thought they were close enough, and he gave me a signal. We both went for our M-16 rifles, but before we could get a shot at them they disappeared. We radioed back and told them what just happened and we were to stay there till the rest of the unit would come out to meet us. After it seemed

Photo / J Stone



like a very long time, they finally got there. Our company commander decided we would spread out and walk through the rubber trees to find the VC unit. Not long after we started, we took on heavy mortar fire from the VC from wherever they were. The mortars would hit the top or mid-section of the rubber trees and exploded. Again we had shrapnel flying everywhere. After what seemed a long time, they quit mortaring us and that's when word came from one soldier to another that Larry was killed with mortar fire. It hit me hard because just a few hours ago, we were on LP together and thank-goodness he was very observant. If he hadn't been, I would have been killed. I now wear a memorial bracelet to remind me daily of this event and of Larry's life.

We were in the field at a fire base during the monsoon season. We were all soaking wet and I got severely ill one night with fever and vomiting. It was decided that I needed to be medievacuated out to a hospital. They took me to Tan Son Nhut Hospital and discovered that I had an extreme case of parasitic worms. I was treated for 2-3 days before they would release me to go back to my unit in the field. When I went to supply to get a uniform and clothes to leave, the clerk gave me back my clothes just as I had come in with them—soaking wet uniform, smelly, and wet socks and boots. When I asked for dry clothes, he said, "These are yours and that is all we can give you." So, I put them on and somehow found a way to return to my unit.

While on Huey helicopters going on a Search & Destroy Mission, the LZ we were supposed to go to was occupied by the VC. They diverted us to a different LZ that was not cleared for the choppers. They couldn't land on the ground. So as they were hovering above the tree tops, we were ordered to jump out. After some discussion with someone, the pilots told us we had to jump because they had to leave. At this time I was an ammo-bearer. I was carrying two cans of M60 machine ammo along with my other equipment. We jumped from the choppers at tree-top height, and when I hit the ground, I could not get up. Both my feet and ankles were severely injured. I had to be carried by another GI to an area where they cut some trees down so the Dust Off helicopter could pick up a bunch of us who were injured in that jump. I was flown to Dau Tieng base camp where they worked on my feet & ankles. Once they removed both of my boots, my ankles ballooned to 3 times their size, and after x-rays, discovered my left foot was fractured, and it caused trauma to my feet and back. Shortly after that, I was trying to get to the aid station for treatment. As I could not walk, I was crawling there on my hands and knees. An officer in a jeep stopped and asked what I was doing. He then loaded me into his vehicle and took me to the aid station where I received crutches. At the Dau Tieng aid station, I had treatments for several weeks until they could get the swelling and soreness down to where I could put on boots and walk again.

Later that year our company was on another search and destroy mission. This time we were walking through a lot of rice paddies going to a wooded area. We were walking single file and I was the very last person in line. We weren't far from the wooded area when I saw a reed move in a funny direction. I went over to it and saw someone in the water on the other end of the reed. I pulled the reed up and up came a VC. He was a young man, but not a teenager. He had on him a brand new AK47 with some packing grease still on it yet, a knife, and a NVA Flag. My guess is he was waiting until we all passed by him, and he would come out of the water and shoot as many of us as he could. After I had him, I yelled to the guys in front of me, and they came to help guard him. The whole column stopped and our CO came back to see what we had. He radioed the situation to Battalion and they sent a chopper for the prisoner. Our CO left me and 2

other GI's go along to guard the VC. I know the ride for the VC had to be scary, because he was blindfolded and riding in the chopper with the doors open. We delivered him to Battalion CP. That was the last I saw the AK47, but they did let me keep his knife and flag.

As time passed, we were getting short on guys. After I became squad leader, at one point, my squad consisted of 4 soldiers including myself. We still performed all squad duties including going on ambushes at night. One night we were sent out a couple of clicks to set up an ambush. When we arrived at our location we were off a small road in some fairly tall elephant grass. That night we had a Starlight Scope and we passed it to each other checking different directions. Remember, there were only 4 of us. Sometime after midnight, one of the guys using the Starlight Scope saw activity coming down the road toward us. It was a very large group of VC. Right before they got to us, they turned off the road and we lost them in the elephant grass. Because of their numbers vs. ours, needless to say we didn't spring the ambush that night. The next morning before going back to our firebase, we looked to see where the VC left the road. There was this huge path where they trampled the grass flat to the ground. We estimated a couple of hundred in that VC group.

Kathy sent me a letter every day. Sometimes I got a bunch at a time. Also from time to time she sent packages of food from home and pictures. (Many of these had to be destroyed so that the enemy could not get their hands on personal items to use against us.) Whenever we had some quiet time, which wasn't often, I would find a secluded spot under some bushes, read letters and write to her and my parents. There by myself, my mind could go home as I would write to her and think of our wonderful times together. Kathy saved every letter I wrote and almost 50 years later, they are safely kept in a special box as a most prized possession.

Right before the end of my tour I accompanied Dan Hollister to Tan Son Nhut Air Base to have some paper work completed. While there we found an Air Force NCO Club. Wow! What chow! I remember they had large steaks and their coleslaw was excellent. We ate there a couple of nights before we returned to our unit. Not long after that we were able to leave on that big Freedom Bird for home.



I travelled that long flight back to the state of California alone. From there I flew clear across the U.S. to our small airport in Harrisburg, PA, alone in the middle of the night. No flags waving, no people there to welcome me home—but, at least there were no people spitting in my face and shouting bad things--just me.

I didn't let my family know, and I wasn't even sure when I was coming. I was just happy to be getting home.

My home was an hour away from the airport, so I got a taxi to drive me. At 2:00 in the morning, I walked into the house and shouted up the stairs, “Does anyone live here yet?” Kathy flew down the stairs into my arms! That was my special homecoming.

The memories of war will always haunt the combat soldier. But knowing that it was for the cause of our freedom is worthy of honor. Below is a poem that describes my thoughts and dreams as a Vietnam Combat Veteran:



THE SOLDIER DREAM

By Peter M. Anderson, W3 Coy, 1969-70

I dreamed the soldier dream last night; it came to me so clear
I dreamed I saw my old platoon; they seemed to me so near

I dreamed I heard again the sounds that only soldiers understand
And I dreamed I smelt the jungle smells of that far distant land

And in the dream I felt the heat, and the heavy monsoon rain
And I felt again comfort of the ground, in the places I have laid

I dreamed I saw the blood red stain of the hard red laterite soil
I saw again the thick jungle slopes, through which we had to toil

And the dead and jumbled trees caused by Agent Orange sprays
Devastating to the jungle and the effects will last us all our days

I dreamed I heard the insects, mainly the mosquito's angry scream
And I saw my legs festooned with leeches, after crossing any stream

I dreamed I felt again the familiar feel, of rifle, web and pack
And I felt again my shoulders pain and the weight upon my back

I dreamed of being out of water, and the terrible, burning thirst
I felt of all the deprivations, the lack of water is the worst

I dreamed of the itch of Tinea that stretched from toes to waist
And I dreamed of taking Paludrine and its bitter awful taste

I heard again the rifle shots, and saw machine guns tracer lines
I heard again the crash of shells, and the blast of Claymore mines

I dreamed I smelt the cordite and the strong iron smell of blood
And I dreamed of finding bodies and the wounded in the mud

I dreamed of our wounded soldiers, dusted off to waiting aid
And I dreamed of other soldiers and the sacrifices they had made

I dreamed of empty hours, doing sentry in a gun pit in the sun
I dreamed of fear filled sentry nights, in that pit behind the gun

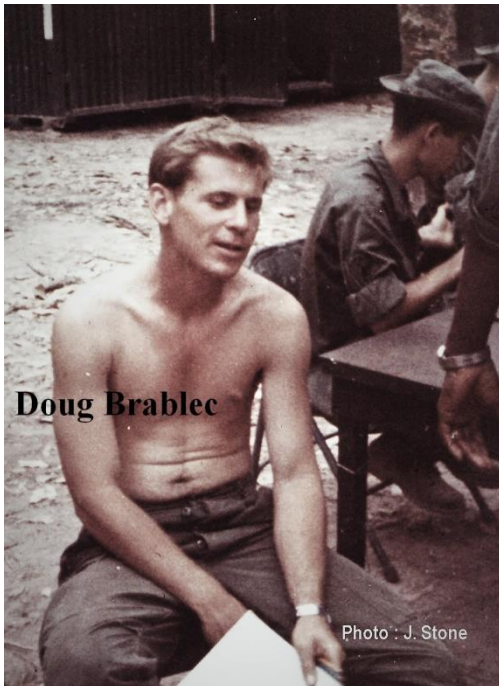
I dreamed of all these things, and it was if it were but only yesterday
As I slept that restless sleep that twists the sheets in which I lay

I awoke to find that the world was as I'd left it, when I went to bed
The soldier dream was real for me to see, but now only in my head

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Doug Brablec Story

The year was 1967 and I was happily piloting the “Shuttle” out of Boston with Eastern Airlines. Little did I know what adventures my draft board back home was dreaming up for me. The words of William Shakespeare “beware the Ides of March” suddenly became very prophetic with the notice that I was to report for induction on March 14.



Doug Brablec

Photo : J. Stone

Uncle Sam was very gracious in arranging transportation to Fort Knox, Kentucky. Under the gentle tutelage of a number of kind sergeants, I was taught a set of skills that would prove to be very useful throughout my life: disassemble and reassemble an M1 rifle, several ways to kill someone, how not to kill myself with a hand grenade, etc. During this learning experience, there were several interviews with various officers on how nice it would be if I would sign up for Warrant Officer Training and flight school, i.e. helicopters. Never mind that I was already a trained and licensed pilot, I would still have to go through flight school and I would only have to extend for 3 more years after school, which was approximately 9 months. There was no way I was going to sign up for almost 4 years and face two tours in a lovely tropical paradise, but I was not about to tell them that since sitting in an interview or taking some simple test was a whole lot

better than KP.

Graduation day came and once again Uncle Sam was gracious enough to arrange transportation to another one of his lovely vacation destinations, this time Fort Polk, Louisiana. We all knew what the next destination would be since they had all these neat little villages with vegetation

roofs and such. And of course once again saw me getting the interview for Warrant Officer. Still better than KP.

August of '67, "Uncle Sam", arranged for TWA to whisk me away to a place called Viet Nam. Spent a few days at somewhere called Cu Chi then off to my new home for the rest of the year, Dau Tieng and Alpha Company. Was only there for a couple days when I was tagged to go on night patrol. I suggested that might not be a good idea and when asked why I squatted down and right on cue both knees fired off like a couple 22 caliber rifles. That was the end of night patrol for me, but those knees remind me every day of the favor they did. Soon after that, the company commander called me in and explained that the supply sergeant was due to rotate, there was no replacement, and did I think I could handle the job. Not being too impressed with the military to this point, I said sure, and so it was that for the remainder of my stay in paradise. I would fight the bureaucracy known as battalion supply in an attempt to make the lives of my fellow infantrymen just a little bit more bearable.

In August of '68, I said goodbye to that lovely place and made my way back to the States, and spent the last few months of my service at Fort Riley, Kansas. After that it was back to Eastern Airlines until it went out of business, and then to United Airlines until I retired in 2004. Many times I wondered what happened to my friends I had worked with in Nam but never knew. Then in 2013, I came home one day and our daughter said I had a call from a guy named Jerry Peterson asking if I had been in Viet Nam. I could hardly believe that he had found me and immediately called him back. He explained that the guys for A/2/12 had formed an organization, that they were getting together once each year, and that I should come to the next reunion. I was hesitant, since although I had not faced the dangers of the "field," I had seen enough of the horrors and had packed up too many personal belongings for shipment home. But Jerry gently pressed and in time talked me into attending. For that I will always be grateful, since those reunions have answered many questions about "what happened to," and brought back many good memories to balance the bad.

In closing, I would like to add that my wife, Virginia, whom I married in 1999, has attended the reunions with me and has learned so much about what we did and why it is so difficult for many of us to talk about much of what we saw.

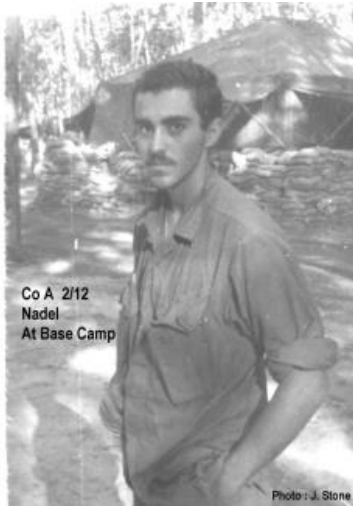
MORTARS AT NIGHT

Sgt. David Todd

One day we were on a typical sweep in the jungle. We moved into what I believe was the Michelin rubber plantation. We arrived at our area of operation (AO) at about fifteen hundred hours (three PM). It was very unusual to arrive that early in an area and have plenty of time to set up a perimeter and to dig a really good foxhole.



With the perimeter all set, a Chinook came in and brought supplies which included a hot meal and something I thought I would never see in the field; chainsaws. We used the chainsaws to cut down some rubber trees to fortify the foxholes. Every foxhole had two large logs on each side.



Then we put smaller logs across the top and we filled sand bags to cover the roof. We even had time to put out claymores and trip flares. During the whole year that I was in the field, I can't ever remember having that much time to prepare a one night perimeter as well as we did that night.

There were three guys at our foxhole location; Rafael Nadel, Tom Stoltz, and me. When it got dark we started our guard duty. Nadel was new in country so I decided to put him on the first guard. My M-16 was leaning up against a tree right behind the foxhole but reachable. Stoltz and I were lying down on a poncho liner behind the foxhole.

Nadel was on guard for about an hour when he came back to me and said that he had seen someone walking toward the perimeter. He said that the person he saw was off to the right and walked up toward the perimeter and then walked back away. I thought because Nadel was new, he might be a little paranoid and seeing shadows in the rubber trees. There also was a listening post (LP) real close to where he thought he had seen someone. So I went and informed the platoon CP that was located close behind us, and then went back and sat up with Nadel for about thirty minutes. He and I looked out thru the rubber trees trying to spot anything that moved. After thirty minutes of nothing, I went to lie back down on my poncho. Even though it was quiet, I was not able to sleep.

All of a sudden I heard a sound so familiar THUMP! THUMP! THUMP! I thought "that sounds like mortars coming out of a tube!" The next instant I heard my thought echoing from the platoon CP, "INCOMING!"..... I grabbed Stoltz and yelled at Nadel, "GO GET IN THE FOXHOLE!" The first round hit close to the guys on the LP. At least one man was injured. The next round hit a few inches on the outside main log of our foxhole. The main log was moved over about three feet, and the bags came crashing down on top of us. Just then the trip flares went off in front of the foxhole to the left of us. I heard another explosion, which is probably the only thing I could have still heard at that moment; it was the guys in the next foxhole blowing their claymore. I heard these Vietnamese voices and screaming and a machine gun going off from the next foxhole. Instant panic set in as my first thought was a human wave attack. I still had the claymore detonator in my hand but until I saw something move or a trip flare went off in front of me I wasn't going to blow it.

There was an ambush patrol out and they were immediately called in. We were warned that they would be coming in just in front of us, but actually came just where the claymore was blown. The rest of the night passed very slowly.



In the morning there were eight VC bodies lying in the area where the trip flares were placed. There was a cross road close to where we were that night and VC bodies were hung from rubber trees at that cross road. I'm sure their plan was to throw grenades into foxholes while we were hanging low trying to avoid the mortars. They knew how many mortars there would be, but we didn't, and of course the VC that Nadel had seen walking up toward the perimeter, was probably measuring the distance.

The Colonel flew in with a Stars and Stripes photographer and took a picture of our foxhole. I tried to get a copy of all the Stars and Stripes newspaper but never saw the picture. I'm thinking with the noise the chainsaws made and the unusual preparations available to us, maybe Charlie was setup. Oh...yeah... When I saw my M-16, it was still leaning against the tree and all the plastic was full of holes like Swiss cheese.

Later that morning we went to a nearby village. We observed that in two of the hooch's there was a picture on a table of a man and there was a candle burning just in front of it. I'm sure these men died the night before. I had thought if they would have just left us alone these guys would be still alive. What a shame that good people on both sides had to die. We should never go to war if we don't do everything in our power to win.

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A FEW CLOSE CALLS

John Stone

Empty Chamber

I had just recently arrived at Alpha and had my first known close call on Sept. 6, 1967. We "new guys" just came into the basecamp perimeter after zeroing in our newly issued M-16's. As a safety measure they had us line up in formation to clear of any remaining rounds in our weapons. The Sergeant [very likely Larry May] told us to "Remove your magazines and pull the charging handle to the rear, to eject any chambered rounds." "Now bolts forward and pull the trigger" "CLICK" ..."CLICK""CLICK" "BANG!"



Someone directly behind "Slick" and myself, cleared his weapon by firing a chambered round directly between our heads. Slick (Saul McNeal) turned to me and yelled, "Man, we just got here and they're trying to kill us before we get out of base camp!" That was my first lesson that base camp could be just as deadly as any place in Nam.

Incoming Hand Grenades!

It was September 1967. After a long day of patrolling through all types of environment we reached our lager site, or night defensive position. Four of us were given our foxhole perimeter assignment but even as a new guy, I didn't like the location at all. About 10 meters in front of our fox hole was us was dense foliage with trees. Not much of a buffer zone here. Clear visibility towards the right wasn't much better, but didn't make much difference. By the time we dug our foxhole and the guys made a tent with their 2 ponchos, it was dark. Very dark!

I was on watch. It had stopped raining and the area came alive with sounds. About 0200 hours, I heard movement which sounded like it was coming from the wooded section in front of our position. I told the guys what I heard and they hey told me I was just hearing things. The rain dripping from the trees, and an occasional rotten tree branch and twigs falling was easily mistaken for people walking around. Maybe they were right, but I was hearing more activity around the perimeter. A few minutes later I heard a nearby explosion. I'm thinking I'm not the only one hearing something. I got in the foxhole and grabbed a grenade off my gear. I listened and definitely heard activity. I told the guys in the tent, "Stay down low, I'm going to throw a grenade." The reply from the tent was, "Why don't you wait until I come on guard and I'll throw some with you!" I ignored the humor or sarcasm. I continued to hear noises and threw the grenade. I threw it low into the wood line, hoping it wouldn't bounce off something and come back. I ducked down and "KABOOM!" I rose up to look and heard the 'bloop' sound of a M79 and got down. It exploded at a close distance. I'm listening again and suddenly something hit the ground on my right! By the time I finished yelling, "GRENADE! ...it went BOOM! The guys in the tent told me "Stop throwing all those grenades!" After I told them, "I'm not!"....It didn't take them long to get their asses out of the tent and join me in the fox hole. As one of the guys pulled his belt into the foxhole, here comes another grenade close to our right. BOOM!

After more incoming hand grenades, we were all afraid to move. One of the guys no longer wanted to stay at that position, so I dropped him off at the next position on our left, and continue on to tell our squad leader what was happening. On my second trip back to our position, I discovered 2nd platoon had a foxhole positioned close behind us. The problem was they were facing almost towards us, tossing their grenades well past their field of fire and into our area. They were shocked there was another position on the perimeter corner. The rest of the night was still noisy but had no more in-coming grenades. In the morning, I checked into the wood line and found nothing. Not even where the hand grenades exploded. Our ponchos were a different story. From inside the tent, numerous spots of daylight were showing through both poncho halves.

Some Known Closer Calls

It occurred during the surprise ambush of October 25, 1967. It was a close call during the ambush and bombardment of RPG's and incoming and outgoing small arms gun fire. During this battle our company loses were 5 killed and some 20 wounded. At some period of the firefight, this close call got even closer as I began to hear unfamiliar noises overhead after the artillery and or bombing began.

The first noise was a humming sound. Maybe better described as a combination of humming and buzzing. I asked the Sergeant, "Is that sound shrapnel?" -- "Yeah!" I figured pieces that hum are round pieces that spin while going through the air. The pitch of the hum changed to a lower frequency as it flies by, like the sound of an automobile horn that changes to a lower frequency due to the "Doppler" effect" as it drives by you. Well this wasn't any car horn! This new sound was pretty scary, deadly, and getting louder! Like a 5 pound bumble bee doing a "flyby" closely above our heads. They were bringing those air strikes in really close. Quickly a new sound was added to all that crap that was randomly traveling by us already. This new noise sounded like, swish, swish, swish, swish, but swishing much faster than you can say each of the words swish in sequence!

The amount of incoming shrapnel was increasing. getting louder of humming and swishing and getting unmistakably closer. I hugged the ground as some more pieces hit the ground and rolled towards us. Suddenly this one-inch wide, 8 inch long jagged piece of grey and silvery shiny metal stuck in the ground a foot away from my right hand. These were the big long pieces making the swish sounds. I reached over about to pull it up and I couldn't believe its temperature! IT WAS HOT! I was surprised how heavy and dense the metal is. I had intentions of including "show and tell" photos of this shrapnel but gave up looking for them, so it remains just "tell" for now. The shrapnel stopped and replaced by darkness and incoming annoying mosquitoes. I took my empty bandolier and wrapped it around my face. It was another very long night.

Another known closer call

The following account is edited excerpts from my "Thunder Road Mission", which can be found in its entirety with photos on the Alpha Association website. This close call happened on December 26, 1967. We had spent quite a few days pulling road clearing and security on LTL14. Every day someone involved was either injured or killed. This day was no different. It went badly soon after we got out of camp. I was just a few men behind Sammy Buffington when an IED exploded, and killed him.



As we proceeded we were notified there was going to be a delay in our rendezvous with the mechanized units that were headed our way. The VC blew up another bridge and it had to be fixed before they could continue. When we met up with the mechanized unit, the engineers continued to work on the bridge, and Alpha Company reformed and headed back down the road towards base camp.

The CP group consisted of Captain Merle, and me, and three RTO's, Carl Swon, Melvin [Harvey] Houk, and John Barfield for Artillery. We were walking and talking, and the Captain asked us, "How old is your ammo?" I replied, "My brass isn't green yet, but it's been a while since I fired it". It was decided that our company was going to recon, or shoot to the outer flanks as the tanks and tracks came down the center of the road between the moving files.

We were about half way back to camp when we got the word the tanks, trucks, apc's, jeeps and whatever were coming. As the lead vehicles caught up to us, the Command Post Group located a spot to begin our recon fire and we moved down past the shoulder of the road into the foliage on the right side of the road. Barney, Swon, and Houk were on my left. Captain Merle was standing to my immediate right. I believe Ray Palacio, RTO for Lt. Harris, was further down on the Captain's right. The Captain was going to give the signal for the company to commence firing by firing the first shot. My 16 was on semi (single shot) and I was looking down to my right for the first flash from the Captain's barrel. He fired off the first shot and I pulled my trigger.

Instantly I heard a deafening noise. I turned around and in the darkness directly behind me; I was looking at the iridescent blue flashing muzzle of a fifty-caliber machine gun from the track on the road—firing 550 rounds per minute directly at us. In a fraction of a second, everyone was diving for the ground—

I dropped flat on the ground and melted into the earth below me. I pulled my elbows in close at my sides and tried like hell to make myself as small of a target as possible. My feet were toward the track. Maybe half way through the firing, I drew my feet and legs closer together and pressed my thumbs of my clenched fists tighter to each side of my jaw. There is no doubt I was bracing myself for a hit, but got even smaller as I shrugged my shoulders upward even tighter and driving my body and face deeper into the ground. The muzzle of that fifty couldn't have been much more than twenty feet away from us and at that range, it was not only deafening, but the compression on my eardrums was brutally painful. I could feel the pounding percussion of the air that surrounded me and may have been what I felt pushing me down.

The firing had stopped. In the gloom behind Captain Merle, I saw a beam of light. Someone, possibly Sgt. Negron, was coming at a very fast pace and the beam from his flashlight was bouncing and darting left and right with every advancing step. As the light got near, both the Captain and I followed the beam of light as it aimed past us. What I saw at the end of the light beam would be a permanent "visual flashback" for the rest of my life.

I could faintly make out Barfield, and Swon, but immediately focused on Houk, who was obliquely positioned farther right and facing the Captain and me. He was sitting with his legs straight toward us and slightly leaning back on his radio that was resting against some type of foliage or tree. His head was facing toward his right and I heard him making a gurgling noise. Just as the flashlight beam hit Harvey's face, he abruptly rotated his head to his left, most likely to avoid the brightness—Harvey turned his head so fast, the momentum forced his jaw to swing around and it seemed to disappear somewhere past his left shoulder. The instant his head suddenly stopped turning, I heard "Ugh!" All that remained attached to his cheekbones were

dangling threads of raw flesh—everything else down to his neck appeared to be gone! I was looking at his open esophagus or throat and all I saw was red.

In the shadows behind us, some voice asked us, “Are you okay?” I said, “I’m okay... Then I heard the Captain casually say, “Yeah, I’ve been hit. I stepped to help him and he turned toward me, while leaning on his cane and said, “John, don’t tell Harvey how bad he is.” I said, “Yes Sir”, but my exact un-said opinion was—I think he knows.” He turned and walked toward the pickup chopper, and that was the last time I saw him. Barfield and I were the only two guys in the CP group and in that area that wasn’t hit. Saul McNeal, on the other side of the road took a round to his leg. I never saw him again either. Carl Swon took a big hit too and put on the chopper as well as Palacio. Sad to add... both John Barfield and Ray Palacio would be killed on February 9, 1968.

My fatigues did not have holes in them when we left camp. Can’t get much closer than that and I still had about two hundred and thirty five days to go. We found out one thing in combat. There is no such thing as friendly fire. It’s not!

I cannot complete this section without ending on a few better notes. Many months later in 68 I heard in basecamp that Houk was okay. Then in 2004, I received an email from Wayne Clark, sent by Andy Farris to Pete Cullen: The email stated that the Battalion Doctor [Maybe Dr. Rhodes], wrote that the RTO, named Melvin Houk who had his jaw shot off by a .50 caliber, said it was the worst injury of any man he ever saw who lived. Melvin Houk lived in Michigan until he was killed in an automobile accident in 1989. Melvin’s son Steve and grandson Austin had attended one of our reunions.

The date was July 12, 2006. I was on my terrace typing a story and an email came in. It was from Saul McNeal. I almost went into shock. I emailed him right back and was in touch for a while, and then it stopped. He lived in Chicago and had his own business. I wrote some more times and no replies. Then on Dec 25, 2006 the phone rang! I said Hello, and this deep voice said, “John Stone.” After 39 years I still recognized his voice. “Slick is that you?” ”Yeah, sure enough!” We talked and I finally found out that he didn’t lose his leg on Thunder Road. Well it was good to find out he had a good life after Nam. I tried to keep in touch but the emails were non-deliverable.

On Halloween evening Sunday, October 31, 2010, I received a phone call. Without giving me his name, the voice on the phone said “John, do you remember these words?”... “Just tag along with the Captain, you’ll be just fine.” It had been over forty-three years since that voice first said those words to me, and I immediately knew who it was. I instantly replied, “Carl Swon!” Man! I was thinking it don’t get much better than that, but it did. Carl has been attending the reunions ever since 2012, and we’re in touch every day!

One more close call

Yep! It was just another usual day in the jungle — until I took a photo of Moses Harper. Moses Harper, a member of the machine gun crew, was walking right behind me. He already was wounded twice, so I thought I'd get a picture of him. I took my little camera out of my top pocket. I turned around and stood off the left side of the path waiting for Moe to get a little closer. He took a few more steps toward me as I brought the camera's viewfinder up to my right eye. I had just enough time to focus my eye as Moe walked into the viewfinder. Holding it steady with both hands, I closed my left eye. When he was in the square, I pushed the button.

Just as I snapped Moe's photo, suddenly something in the far left side of the camera's viewfinder caught my attention. For a fraction of a second, I thought I had seen someone—a figure—someone barely visible—lurking in the foliage. My heart started to pound.

I thought I knew what it was but just wasn't sure. I told them, but no one believed me. Not until I got the photo developed.

There he was! An NVA soldier standing about 35 feet away and all I had in my hands was my camera, and I lived to tell the story. You can read it on the Alpha Website.



