

“Citizen Soldier Goes to War”

John Shoemaker

It was 1968 and I was a senior at UMass-Amherst during the height of the Vietnam War.

One day, in my dorm room, I heard an explosion. I looked out the window to find a student had jumped from the 20 floor and landed on the concrete patio. It was gruesome.

Such were the times of anti-war demonstrations, suicides, kids running to Canada to avoid the draft, and turmoil on the news every day including assassinations, riots, and political upheaval. Soldiers killed in Vietnam were running over 500 a week, thousands more injured.

I was the contrarian. I decided to join the Army for two reasons: 1) did I have the metal to handle combat, and 2) be a leader to save American lives against the enemy. My father wanted me to go Navy as he did during WW II. He was not happy.

I did not care about politics, just concerned about being a good leader.

After college, two incredible years followed when I enlisted for Officer Candidate School, completed basic and advanced infantry training, completed airborne school to be a paratrooper, got married to my wife, Paula, survived OCS, became a training officer at Fort Benning, and we had a son three months before I left for jungle school training in the Panama Canal Zone and then off to Vietnam in March 1970.

Shortly after arriving in Chu Lai, in the northern sector of South Vietnam, a Huey helicopter took me west to Hill 251. As a new Lieutenant, I was assigned to the third platoon of Bravo Company in the 196th Infantry Brigade on a patrol going out the next morning. I was supposed to listen, learn, observe, and get my sense for operations.

The next morning, I found myself in line with 23 soldiers slogging through rice paddies near farmers working plows pulled by enormous water buffalo. The whole scene was mind-blowing. I wasn't watching Walter Cronkite on television back in college; this was the real thing.

It was hot, I was sweating profusely with my heavy rucksack, weapons, M-16, and such. As I looked down at the nasty, brown water filled with leeches, other creatures, and excrement, “BAM!” The explosion blasted me off my feet and backward. As I lifted my head above the waterline gasping for air, I could hear people screaming. I checked myself, scared that I may have lost something. I was fine, but the two soldiers next in line in front of me, including the “experienced” Lieutenant who was in-country for just three months, were severely wounded.

As I watched the Medivac leave with the wounded, a 19-year-old sergeant came to me and said, “OK, what do we do now, Lieutenant?”

And so, my baptism by fire began. I wondered how in the world I could survive a year of this.

The months that followed included small unit clashes, snipers, and more booby traps. The heat and humidity were like summer in the Florida Everglades while hiking in the mud of rice paddies or the jungles or mountains. Huey's would fly us – combat assaults – into different landing zones or LZ's always looking to engage the enemy. At no time could you let your guard down. Your next step could be your last.

For several months, we would always overwhelm the enemy when we made “contact” with few losses except to booby traps. The enemy losses were staggering.

Then it happened again. We were the last platoon to join the company perimeter when my machine gunner, standing just 30 feet from me, decided to jump in an old foxhole.

The world blew up.

After a two-week stay in Chu Lai hospital and Hawk Hill for minor wounds, I rejoined my platoon as Lieutenants were in short supply. I was now an experienced veteran. The new mission this time was to re-take the old Special Forces Kham Duc airstrip near the Laotian Border that was overrun during the 1968 Mini-Tet Offensive when up to 5,000 enemies surrounded 160 US and South Vietnamese forces at the dirt airstrip, with a river on one side and mountains around it. General Westmoreland had given the order to evacuate after reviewing it with President Nixon. Many did not make it and we came to retrieve their remains.

We were now going up against regular North Vietnamese troops – not Viet Cong. It was serious business as they were better armed and trained, but we prevailed even as the NVA were hitting us from all sides. We conducted patrols, crossed rough terrain, conducted night ambushes, and recovered many weapons. My platoon also discovered one segment of the Ho Chi Minh trail on which it would be the only time we would be ambushed. Many acts of valor are seared in my memory along with the faces of those who did not make it.

After a couple of months of more combat with the enemy in the jungles and areas surrounding the airstrip, we were finally pulled out. Huge, lumbering Chinook helicopters took us to LZ Judy. My platoon was on the second last Chinook to land and we scrambled up the hill to our positions to defend an artillery battery and headquarters on top. The last Chinook holding 30 soldiers arrived five minutes later almost before we could clear the pad. Just then, the enemy opened fire and the Chinook crashed killing all on board except one and another died on the ground. It was devastating to watch it within a few yards and feel helpless. It was one of the worst air disasters of the war.

For me, it was another close call. I would have several of those close calls and wondered when my luck would end.

After seven months as a Platoon Leader, I was promoted to be the Battalion Headquarters Company Commander on Hawk Hill, a large firebase southwest of Danang. Aside from support for the line rifle companies, I was in charge of the bunker line surrounding the firebase that included several artillery batteries, operations centers, helicopter pads, munitions, aid stations, and more. Fortunately, we only took rocket attacks occasionally but most importantly, we had no ground attacks.

After my time was up, I turned down becoming Captain to return to civilian life. I had continuing duty in the Army Reserves for a year and then started night school to get my MBA from Suffolk University in Boston. I joined Xerox Corporation in 1971 as they were hiring officers coming out of the military. That sponsored a career in high technology sales, marketing, and customer service for system solutions.

My wife was also in sales management for cosmetics at Neiman Marcus and later as a real estate broker in MA. Our daughter was a sales executive for the Boston Red Sox, married an executive in broadcasting, and has three of our grandchildren living in Miami Shores. Our son is a career senior executive in high-tech start-ups and lives in Middleton, MA, with two other grandchildren.

I retired full-time five years ago to Highland Beach after being a snowbird for 10 years. I am also serving my third term as a Director on the Highland Beach Club Condominium Community Board. We love the location of Highland Beach, the ocean, the gorgeous landscape, security, and access to the airports for travel.

Soon I realized I could offer my services as an elected Town official. I was surprised that even though I had no prior government experience, I won with the support from key town residents. I take the role of

Commissioner seriously to ensure the health, safety, and sensible improvement of government services for all residents in our little slice of “paradise”.

I realize that this Town Council is entrusted with your welfare at stake. We have already made important decisions and more will follow that will affect the town for many years to come.

We are committed to safeguarding our paradise.

This is our future. This is our commitment.

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Service in Vietnam with Bravo Company, 2nd Battalion, 1st Infantry, 196th Infantry Brigade, Americal Division.

Pictures ATTACHED



