

Remembering Vietnam - 43 Years Later

The Hour Glass Landing Zone

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4th of the 9th Battalion, MANCHU's

25th Infantry Division, United States Army

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25th Infantry Patch



Combat Infantry Badge



MANCHU Battalion Crest

Including excerpts from the Battalion Commander:

Colonel (Retired) John M. Henschman

Commander, 4th Battalion



INTRODUCTION

My writing or even talking about the Vietnam experience has been a long time coming. Being a member of the US Army Infantry and actively participating in a war was never in my plan for my life. It was something that just "happened". I also never thought I had what it took to be a combat soldier and that was the very last thing I ever wanted to do to fulfill my military obligation. However, through what I consider to be a series of unfortunate circumstances, that's exactly what happened to me in 1967.

Hopefully my story shows how someone can rise to the occasion of whatever they are faced with and accomplish things they never thought possible.

Surviving the war is only part of the battle. Some of the survival skills I learned have stuck with me. A heightened sense of awareness is always there and I'm always on the lookout for danger. Scars remain and learning to recognize and deal with them has become important to me.

In seeking some inner peace, more than forty years after my Vietnam experience, I met a Veterans Administration counselor, someone I learned to trust, who helped me re-visit that period, and taught me some techniques for dealing with it. He advised that writing it down or getting it out in some other form is a necessary part of the healing process.

Surviving the combat experience changes you forever. We Veterans react to tense situations a little differently than most others because we're been conditioned to be on constant alert for danger, and those of us who could do this best, were the ones most likely to survive. We become intense more quickly than many non-veterans. Most of the time this level of alertness isn't really necessary in a normal life and some of our friends see us as "over-reacting". So we need to work on convincing ourselves that we are "safe" and when that level of intensity starts to build, we need to teach ourselves to be more composed. However, after learning to develop a very quick reaction as a defense mechanism, it's not easy to change, even after forty years. Trust me on this one...I am still trying.

BACKGROUND

My childhood was a quite simple experience. I was the second oldest of 7 kids. We had a very loving (but quiet) Mother and a very strict Father. I was publicly shy, and a skinny little kid who always seemed to be sneezing and sickly. Our family lived 12 miles out of town on the very edge of the Big Sur Coast. We kids attended a local one-room school house for most of our early years, with a few years of Catholic school for the older ones at the Mission in Carmel.

I always suspected we might be poor economically but didn't know for sure until we were bussed into town and got to see how everyone else lived. However, we were certainly rich in strong family history, moral values and ideals. The importance of education was instilled in all of us as the best means of getting ahead and being successful. We were always good kids. Never in detention, no serious fighting, no cutting of classes, and everyone graduated from high school. After high school, I went on to college (still a skinny, 135 pound weakling) to pursue a degree in Civil Engineering.



At home in 1965 with Brothers Richard (center) and John (right)

After proudly graduating in the summer of 1966, I immediately went to work on several options for getting the "dreaded" military obligation out of the way so I could get on with the more affluent lifestyle I had dreamed about. I was really tired of being poor and wanted to start making some real money, get out of poverty, and pursue "the good life".

At the time, I was certainly aware of the ongoing conflict in Vietnam, but always thought of it as far away and someone else's problem. I never contemplated the possibility that I would be drafted and if so, that I would be assigned to the infantry. I looked into Officer Candidate School in the Navy as an engineer, but the application process dragged on and it didn't look very promising for eventual selection. After a few meetings and several letters to the local Draft Board, I was granted one short extension. However, after that, when none of the other viable options appeared to be working out, the Draft Board prevailed and I was inducted into the US Army on April 12th of 1967.

After the initial shock of being drafted wore off, it didn't seem quite so dreadful. It was only a 2 year obligation and I just wanted to get it out of the way as quickly and easily as possible. I still believed that there was some good news in that a college graduate and a skinny kid would never be someone they would pick for the infantry.

I was shipped to Basic Training in Fort Polk, Louisiana, which was bad news in itself, both from a mental and physical standpoint. Although, as the initial eight weeks of basic training was winding down, I was somewhat pleased that the end was in sight and I had been able to keep up and compete on a par with everyone else. I had survived Basic and thought that the combat style training would be over. However, the feeling was short lived. The bad news came back quickly... on the last day of basic training they announced everyone's next assignment. I learned, along with many of the others, that we were looking at 8 weeks of Advanced Infantry Training. More weapons training, lots of physical conditioning, obstacle courses, night training, lots of abuse and harassment thrown in for good measure, live-fire courses, grenade and small rocket training, emergency medical field procedures... all the obvious things needed to prepare soldiers for a combat assignment. Everybody in this group knew the front lines in Vietnam would be our next stop.

THE EARLY DAYS IN VIETNAM

Following an intense eight weeks of Advanced Infantry Training, I had a few very short weeks of leave with the family, and then was off to the war. Arriving in Viet Nam I had no idea of what to expect. After a few days in an orientation and assignment center, I was sent to the 4th of the 9th Infantry Battalion of the 25th Infantry Division in Chu Chi, Vietnam. Captain Al Baker greeted me personally on my first night with Bravo Company. He looked at my background and talked about trying to find a different assignment for me, perhaps helping with base camp infrastructure in an engineering unit. That never worked out and within a few days I joined the ongoing "Search and Destroy" field operation in an area just northwest of Chu Chi called Ho Bo Woods.



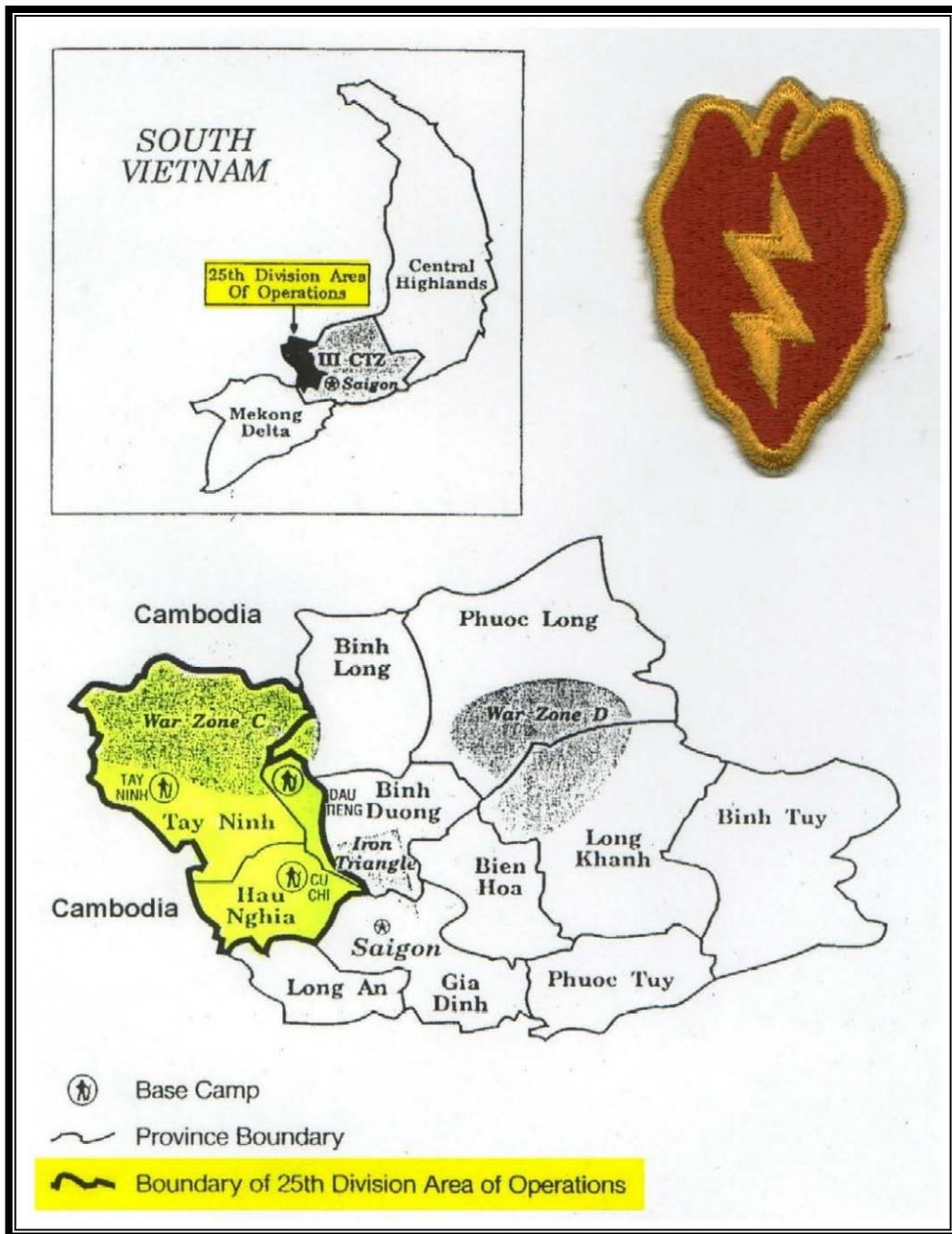
Incoming Choppers to a Landing Zone (LZ)

Ho Bo Woods was an old abandoned rubber plantation that had been previously sprayed with the defoliant, Agent Orange, and was now growing back to jungle. The going was tough, and although it was a flat landscape, you couldn't see very far in any direction except up.

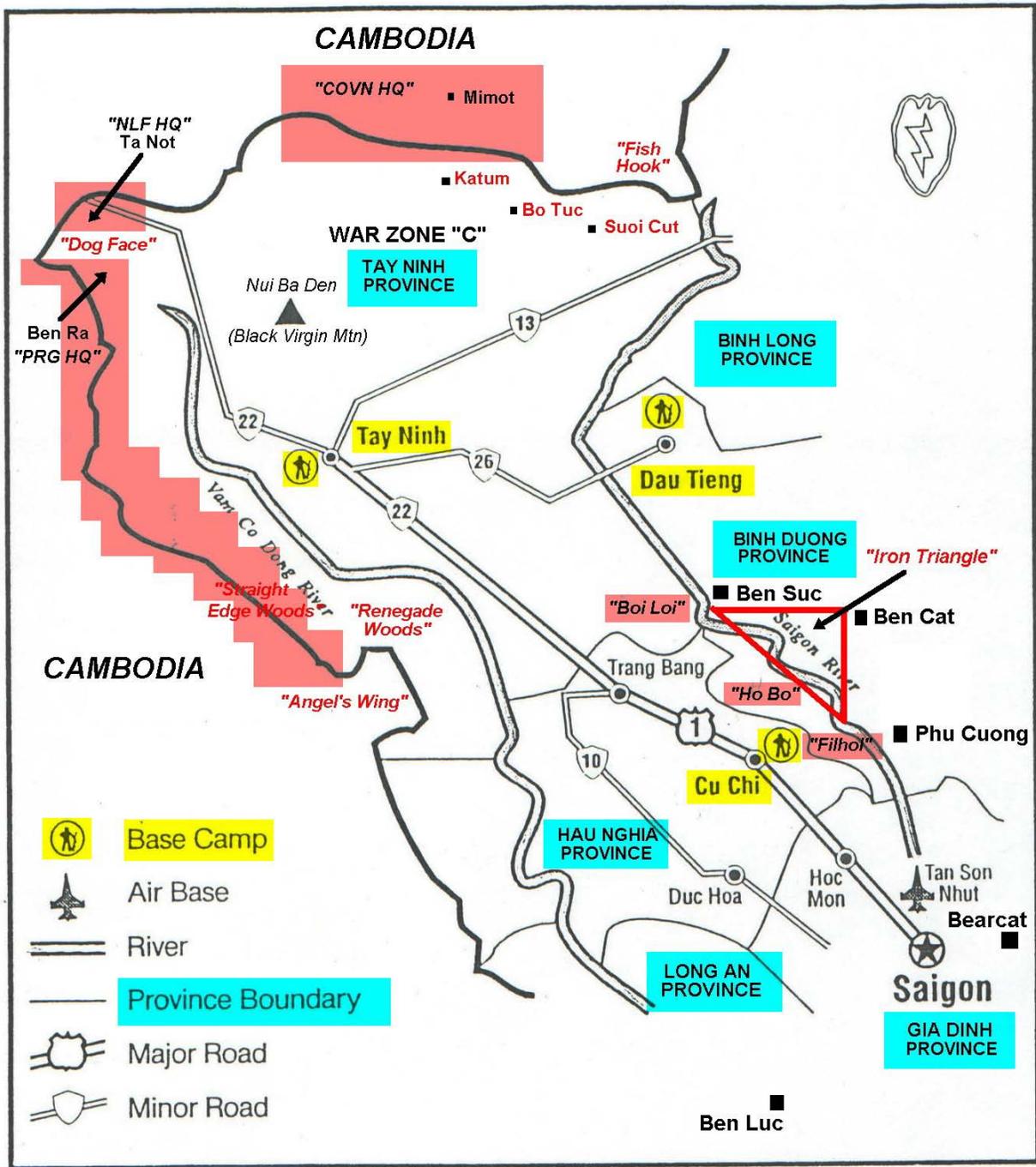
It's hard for me to remember exactly how I felt as I was air lifted in that day and dropped off in the jungle to join that ongoing operation. At the time everything seemed unreal and so very different from anything I had ever known or seen in my life. I'm sure I was in an emotional state of shock. I still couldn't believe this was happening to a shy, skinny kid, a college graduate, who was now in full combat gear.

I had no real idea of what our mission was and had to rely totally on the leadership within the Company for what we were doing (or better yet, trying to do). No one took the time to explain the long range plan of what we were trying to accomplish. I was at the lowest level of the command chain and my job was to

do as I was told. There wasn't a lot of compassion expressed. We knew if we were wounded or killed, they would do their best to at least haul us out and we would quickly be replaced as the local draft boards continued to do their job.



*Provinces in the Saigon Area
25th Division's Area of Operations*



Map Showing the 25th Infantry Division's Brigade Base Camps at Cu Chi, Tay Ninh and Dau Tieng

In the early days of the Search and Destroy field operations, firefights were infrequent and casualties were light, but it was still tough duty. We wore the



same clothes day after day, slept on the ground with all our clothes and boots on, rotated night watch (usually hour on, two hours off), and ate most of our meals cold, out of a small cardboard box (C-Rations). The weather was tropical, 70 to 90 degrees, and humid. At the time, we wore flak jackets and we were constantly soaked in sweat. The weather was about the same during the Monsoon season; just add in a couple of heavy rains during the day and then some more at night. I arrived in-Country in September 1967, the start of the dryer season.

My initial assignment was as the ammo bearer for the platoon machine gunner. However, that didn't last long as he was "short" and went home safely within a month or so. I was immediately "promoted" to his job.

If there was any good news during this initial period in-country, it was that combat encounters were infrequent and I had a chance to adjust and learn how to react during the sporadic fire fights that we did encounter. No one ever knows what to expect or how they will react when first fired upon with live bullets. There is the classic "Fight or Flight" issue and you don't know for sure what you might do. I saw others do both while I was there.

The first firefight I remember was an ambush that we walked into and I was amazed at how quickly my adrenalin kicked in and how anxious I was to fight back. However, I was a ways back in the formation from the initial contact point and had to sit tight for a while, which I remember as being extremely difficult. Nobody likes being shot at and then having to lay there wondering what's going on and what we might be called on to do next. I had been in-country less than a month by now and wondered if this was going to be how it all would end for me.

Eventually we were called to the front and I remember having to step over one of our wounded troops along the way. I only took a quick look.. he was lying on his back and he really didn't look very good, but I think he was still alive. I don't know what eventually happened to him. This particular encounter ended up being just a small skirmish. Once in position we responded with massive firepower and the enemy disappeared. I don't think we claimed any enemy bodycount for that run in.

Our Battalion was called the Manchui's and consisted of four companies, Alpha, Bravo, Charlie and Delta. We were Bravo, 2nd Platoon and I was in the 3rd Squad. I learned to like and trust most of those in my group. Bravo Company always seemed to be better prepared and in general took fewer casualties than did Alpha, Charlie and Delta. This could have been just luck, but I really believe our Company Commander, Captain Baker, was a key factor. I grew to like and trust him even more as time went on. As a side note, Captain Baker survived Vietnam (wounded twice) and continued with a very distinguished career in the Army. He retired out as a Colonel and I corresponded with him in 2010 hoping to see him at our last Battalion reunion. He replied that he remembered me, but sadly for me, he passed away before I got a chance to thank him for his leadership at a very tough time in my life. His death was hard to take. I really wanted to see him again, in person.

After a few months of being on the front line, we had a relatively quiet Christmas period at Katum (up in the Fish Hook area). While there was a cease fire over Christmas, not everyone on the other side got the word. As a result we took a few mortar rounds during that time and had a few casualties, but no intense fire fights.

By now, I had been on "the line" for almost 3 months. I wasn't the same kid as before. For better or worse, I was now a well-seasoned soldier. For my height and weight I had the stamina and intensity to hold up with the best of those in our Company. I was probably at least 20 pounds tougher. I could patrol the jungle all day, stay up all night on watch if necessary, and go out again the next day on another patrol. Sleep was precious (even though it was on the ground) and we learned to catch up whenever we could. It got to where I could catch 7 or 8 minutes of sleep within a 10 minute break. My M-60 was now my best friend and I could handle that 30 pound machine gun with ease.

I was also fully aware that this was a real war and that no one was going to rescue me and send me home. I now knew I needed to pull all my skills and strengths together and develop an intense sense of awareness of what was going on around me if I was going to make it through. It had finally sunk in that this was going to be a very long tour.



Sgt. Smith and Cpl. Uzarski at Katum

BATTLE AT SOUI CUT (Fire Support Base BURT)

Beginning in January of '68 and running through March, we experienced some of the most intense combat of my time in Vietnam. That was a particularly brutal time in both the intensity of firefights and the number of casualties within our Company and for the Battalion as a whole. The "Tet Offensive" in the Saigon area occurred during this time period.

On the night of January 1st 1968, a regiment of NVA's (North Vietnamese Army) attacked and partially over-ran the nearby Fire Support Base at Soui Cut. That attack started at 2300 hours (just before midnight). Things immediately became very intense for the Manchu's.

Background (Col. John Henschman)

"The Third Brigade's main base was Dau Tieng. Like our Brigade, they had a forward base at Soui Cut, called FSB (Fire Support Base), Burt. They had occupied this position for just a few days. Like us, they were astride a major road and trail network leading to Saigon.

On the night of January 1, a reinforced regiment of NVA (North Vietnamese Army) attacked and did severe damage to the 2nd Battalion, 22nd Infantry.

The MANCHUs were ordered to immediately leave Katum and relieve the 2/22 Infantry."



Chinook Cargo Helicopter



Sikorsky Sky-Crane Helicopter

As FSB BURT was under siege that night, we were awakened and ordered in to support. We quickly gathered our gear, weapons, ammo and whatever food we had and were at the Katum landing strip around 3 AM and ready to board Choppers to be airlifted in. The plan (as I understood it) was to drop us into FSB Burt in the dark and help drive back the enemy. This sounded crazy at the time but even more so as I think about it today. The only thing that saved us from landing there in the dark was an accident at our pick up zone, where one Chopper landed right on top of another and created such a fiery mess that it was after daybreak before they cleaned it up and got us airlifted out.

The fighting was over at FSB Burt by the time we finally loaded up and took the short flight there. My memory is that we came in on Chinook's carrying everything on our backs. After we off loaded, those who had survived the previous night's battle took the return flights out.

"I flew down there at once to meet with the Brigade CO, Colonel Daemes. The position occupied by the 2/22, and other areas, were just a mess. Our battalion did better than that in a couple of hours each day.

As the lead elements of the MANCHUs got there, we began to get things organized. By late evening, we were all in, and as Bill and I walked around, we could see immediately that our guys were a whole hell of a lot better soldiers than those that had been there before. "

After landing at FSB Burt there was a quick muster and we were each assigned sections of the perimeter to reinforce and defend. Saying the place was a mess was putting it mildly. There was smoke, destruction and dead bodies laying randomly everywhere you looked, mostly North Vietnamese Army regulars, but some American as well. The official count was 355 NVA killed, 21 US casualties and 152 US wounded.

In the words of Captain Baker, "It was the artillery that finally stopped the attack. They lowered the 8-inch guns and fired directly into the trees that were not cleared around the perimeter. These bursts broke up the attack. It may have caused a few US casualties, but had they not done so, all would have been lost in my opinion".

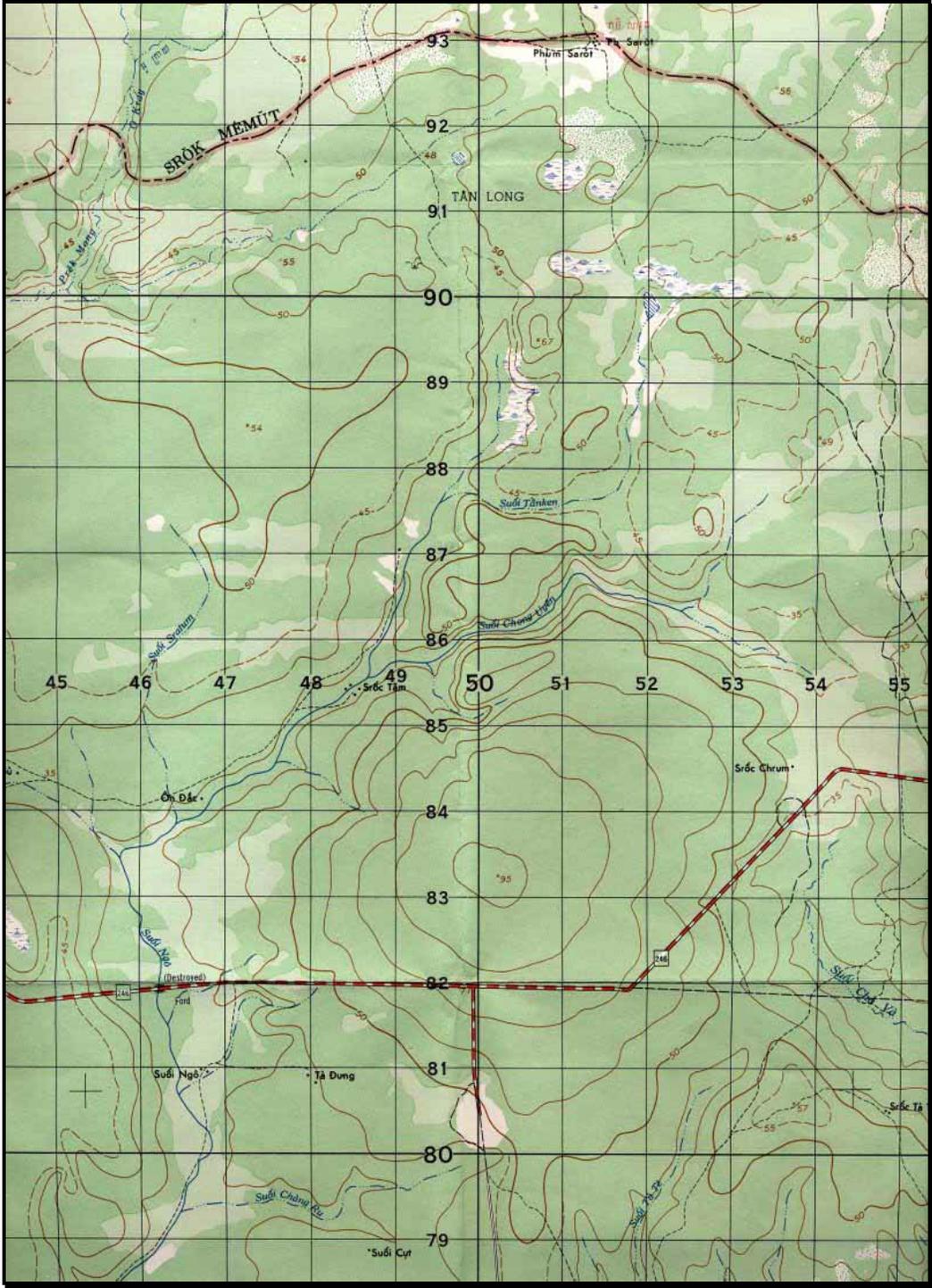
The moviemaker, Oliver Stone was a member of the 2nd/22nd at this time and claims he based a battle in the movie, Platoon, on this particular incident at FSB Burt.

Once we got to our assigned positions on the perimeter, some of us went to work reinforcing the skimpy foxholes and started clearing a line of sight to the positions on both sides. These positions were very weak defensively and it was easy to see why the Base had been overrun at this location.

Some of our people were assigned the ugly job of clean up. Fortunately not me... this was really tough duty. They started by picking up all the dead American Soldiers and loaded the bodies onto one of the outgoing Chinooks. The cleanup of dead enemy came later that day and there were a lot of them. I remember finding even more bodies days later. There were so many dead enemy bodies that a small bulldozer was air-lifted in on a Sikorski Sky-Crane Chopper to dig a big pit for a mass grave.

Our first night at this Base was a long one, to say the least. The woods and jungle were very thick in our part of the perimeter (this was also the area where the NVA had targeted their attack the night before). We had barely cleared a line of sight to the foxholes on either side of us, much less any defensive area out in front of us before it got dark. I remember it being an extremely dark night and everybody listened intently for anything that moved. Staying awake for watch wasn't a problem that night. I'm sure most of us didn't get much sleep. Fortunately, there was not another attempt to overrun the Base.

The next couple days involved more clean-up, more clearing of defensive space around and in front of the perimeter and some short sweeps outside the "secure" area. Each day we ventured out a little further toward the Hour Glass area and the Cambodian border.



FSB Burt (lower center around coordinate 80.5) and the Hour Glass (top center just rt. of coordinate 89)

BATTLE OF THE HOUR GLASS

Battle of the Hour Glass: January 3-4: (Col. Henschman)

“Usual stuff... short sweeps into the immediate area. Some contact. Colonel Daemes wanted us to S&D (*Search and destroy*) out farther. He assigned an area for January 5 that was just 1 Kilometer from the Cambodian Border. Because of its hour-glass shape, that is what we came to call it. “

When Col. Henschman says we took “some contact”, he means we took occasional fire and a few casualties but no intense firefights. However, we were very cautious since we all knew the enemy had to have a substantial force remaining somewhere in the area. We also knew they had a safe haven just across the border in Cambodia, which was very close, but politically, that area was off limits to us.

On our search and destroy sweep outside the perimeter on January 4th we were in the vicinity of the Hour Glass and knew the enemy was close. I don't remember many of the details, but thought it was decided that we would not attempt to engage since it was late in the day. We were in heavy jungle and on foot, fighting on their turf and in the dark would have been a nightmare.

That evening back at FSB Burt, we got word that we'd be going back to the Hour Glass the next morning on an Air-Mobile assault. The plan appeared to be to move in quickly with a large force, lots of firepower and catch the enemy by surprise.

The "Hour Glass" Landing Zone - January 5:

“It must be said that this was the most difficult and frustrating day I spent in Vietnam in terms of commanding an "operation". It was a deadly day for many-way too many. It is so firmly planted in my memory; I can visualize almost every detail and recall vividly some, of the words spoken.

Company A and D were sent off into another AO to do a sweep, and to be extracted in the late afternoon. It was Company C's turn to remain in position in FSB BURT. Company B was to go into the Hour-Glass using the lift ships initially used by Company A.”



Huey Chopper



My usual view from Inside

On the morning of the 5th, we finished our C-Ration breakfast, gathered all our gear, weapons and extra ammo, and made our way to the Chopper pick up zone by around 0800. According to some other accounts we were loaded up on the Choppers by 0845 and headed for the southern half of the Hour Glass LZ. It was a short flight, not much time to think about what might happen.

As best I can remember, our squad was on the third chopper in the second sortie (each sortie had a group of 5 choppers). The Hueys always ran with the side doors open and my spot was on the floor at the open door (no seatbelts either). There was a fabric fold down seat across the back for the rest of the squad. Those of us with the most fire power were always first off when we hit an LZ. I had the machine gun and that is why I was on the floor at the open door.

As we approached and started to descend, I still had no idea of what to expect. All appeared quiet as we watched the first sortie of five Choppers land in front of us and could see those soldiers head into the woodline without incident.

“Bill (Our brand new company commander, I think) and I had made the decision not to put preparation fires (saturate the wood line around the LZ with aerial rounds or fire from Gunships) around the LZ - because it invariable brought "Charlie" (nick name for the enemy). The defensive fires were, however, meticulously planned, and available "on call". I did order SMOKEY (a Chopper that lays down a smoke screen) in on the east, north, and west sides of this LZ because it could be seen from higher ground in Cambodia, and I knew there were base camps close by. [Hell, you could see the tin covered roofs.]

The PZ (pick-up zone) was BURT. I was overhead in the C&C (command and control chopper). Bill was with the first lift. The first lift into the LZ landed "cold". That platoon headed off the LZ into the southern wood line per plan. The second lift was just hovering for drop off when several 51 caliber anti-aircraft machine guns swept the flight. The troops were caught in the open. One chopper crashed and burned, killing the pilot and one door gunner. The other crew members lay near the crash badly injured.”

I was in that second lift Colonel Henchman talks about. As we moved in close to the LZ, all of a sudden all hell broke loose with machine gun rounds and other explosions. At first I wasn't sure if it was coming from our own door gunners on the Choppers or if we were being fired on. Usually it was easy to tell the difference by the sound. But in this case it was both. I knew for sure we were in trouble when I saw smoke and fire coming out of the tail section of our Chopper. We had been hit! By now the adrenalin was running high. We were still in the air and wide open to enemy gunfire. Our Chopper had been hit hard and we had two KIA's (killed in action) on our Chopper before we even hit the ground.

In spite of all the gunfire, the Choppers continued on down to the LZ, and as I sat wide open on the floor I was extremely anxious for that damn thing to get close enough to the ground so I could jump off, take cover and defend myself.

Once on the ground, we laid flat listening to machine fire that just kept going on and on. We waited for what seemed an eternity for our Chopper to take off and get out of the way. It was still on fire and smoking heavily as it lifted off. It managed to get up in the air and just cleared the trees in the middle of the Hour Glass, only to crash land at the northern end.

As we lay on the ground, we finally figured out where the machine gun fire was coming from. With the Choppers out of the way, and fully aware of where our own people were, we readied ourselves to return fire. We found a small dike (maybe only 6 inches high) within the rice stubble, quickly positioned ourselves and returned fire. Pretty soon all the rice stubble surrounding us was on fire, so under the cover of that smoke we were able to get up and make our way from the open field into the surrounding wood line.

“As I looked down on that horrific sight, I saw Bill STAND UP firing his carbine at those gun emplacements, and then guiding one or two members of the platoon at a time into defensible positions on the edge of the woods. He did this ten or twelve times until all the platoon was off the LZ. [I later put him in for his first DSC (*Distinguished Service Cross*) for this heroism above and beyond the call]

What saved that platoon from complete annihilation was that the NVA gunners had AA parapets (*anti aircraft set-up*) and could not depress their muzzles much below three feet from the ground giving an infantryman a chance to crawl under it.”

I never knew about the enemy machine gun mount not allowing them to fire any lower than 3 feet above the ground until I started researching this incident, but do remember when the fire had burned off the LZ, I could see that there wasn't anything out there to protect us and wondered how the hell we could have survived all that machine gun fire. We all should have been killed.

“As soon as the two platoons were in, I had to decide: what next. The two platoons were taking heavy mortar and small arms fire from across the LZ to the north. By now, of course, I was firing

everything available around those platoons. I had ISSUE 11 get air in-bound; I had SMOKY continue to make passes until he was too full of holes to continue; I requested and got gunships two at first, then more.

By now it was midmorning. I needed to reinforce the two platoons on the ground because they did not have enough combat power to make it alone. I ordered the next platoon in, but the lift was hit hard by small arms fire, and the LZ was covered with mortar fire. The lift commander chose to abort.”

By now we were feeling a little safer inside the wood line off the LZ and my squad was not as heavily involved in the ongoing actions to secure the site. Those that had gotten out of Choppers on the other side were closer to the enemy positions and more involved in clean up. We knew our Chopper had crashed and heard that there were two KIA's, the pilot and one of the door gunners.

From our standpoint on the ground, we knew that there was a lot of fire power coming at us, but had no idea how serious our situation really was. I assumed we had just landed in a well-planned ambush (since they had seen us in the area the day before) and once we cleaned up this situation we would move on with our sweep of the area.

“Now, my choices were limited. It was obvious that we had landed in the middle of a very sophisticated headquarters, well-defended. I had to reinforce in real strength, or get those two platoons out of there. I asked Colonel Daemes to get Company A and D saddled up wherever they were and get them ready to reinforce.

His response: "Let's wait a bit, Henchman, and see what happens here. Maybe we can handle this with what you have here." I waited, and time was **not** in our favor.

An hour went by-it is almost noon now. Some of B Company's guys had rescued and secured the rest of the, shot-down crew. The troops in the wood line had dug in, Bill and I were in constant contact. Their situation was precarious. But I needed more people on the ground, or needed to get those two platoons OUT!”

I remember this part of the day and heard we recovered the pilot and door gunner's bodies from the downed chopper and thought everything at the Hour Glass was now secure and under our control.

“Meantime, I had more and more firepower allocated. At about 1300, I had one SMOKY; three Cav LOH doing recon; TWELVE gunships sort of going in a big circle delivering ordnance, jets were making continuous bombing runs with GPs, 20mm, and clusters; and I had priority of Division fires that could reach this area-which was basically Daemes DS Arty battalion at BURT.

Again, I told him we should reinforce with the whole battalion. *(We are into)* something very big - a *(NVA)* division headquarters?

His response: "I can't do that. We can't afford to let FSB BURT be that undefended." I was furious. If I could have gotten TROPIC 6 on the line, I would have. He was not available to me on the net I had in the chopper.

About 1330 - 1400, one of the Cav LOH saw a bunch of weapons near positions that looked abandoned on the ground in the woods just west of the LZ. Daemes ordered me to put one platoon of Company A in there to get them. I set that up very reluctantly.

While this activity was going on, the battalion net was flooded with some Phony Australian claiming to be operating in our AO, and all this fire was dangerous to his operation. I needed to stop it. **No way!** We did some triangulation on him with the choppers, and bombed him harder because he was transmitting from Cambodia. Later, I was chastised about responding on the battalion "Push" by Communication Security guys, but as I explained, they knew all our frequencies and, besides, I was in full control on my alternate frequency.

When the A company platoon got on the ground west of the LZ, "hot" of course, it turned out that this was just a trap. I spent the next two hours, and lost a couple more choppers getting them out in one piece with only a couple WIA's.

It was about this time that the C&C was hit by a lot of ground fire, the pilot [the BLACKHAWKS C.O.] told me we were "going down". My RTO said the engine was on fire. We crash landed into an open field about 2 KM from the Hour Glass, and all of us were picked up almost immediately by Colonel Daemes in his C&C. Only now his C&C was so overloaded that we had to go back to BURT to unload. Soon as I got to BURT, I got into a slick--only thing available--and was back in about 30 minutes. Only, I did not have the good communications afforded by the C&C.

It was getting along toward 1600. Two platoons of Company B were still in the tree line, *(That would be the 1st and 2nd platoons with my squad in the second platoon)* getting hit with all sorts of fire. Since it was obvious I could not reinforce, I concentrated on getting these guys out.

The first lift of slicks came in about 1630, took lots of fire, and the LZ was covered with mortar fire, but they made it out--just barely."

Late in the day we got the word to get ready for the Choppers to pick us up and this is how I remember it. It would take 15 choppers to get us all out, but there were only 10 available at the time. Also, the LZ was only big enough to land 5 at a time. The evacuation order was that 5 Choppers would come in first, load up and take that group back to FSB BURT. The remaining 5 Choppers would stay close and wait for the others to return so they could come in quickly, one group right behind the other. In that way, they could get all the remainder of the Company out and not leave anybody stranded.

The first 5 Choppers landed, loaded up and headed to FSB Burt without incident. As the returning group of Choppers approached the LZ to pick us up, the enemy must have known exactly what we were up to -- they opened up on us with everything they had. We were caught out in the open again, positioned out in the

burnt out rice field ready to load the Choppers. I could hear the machine gunfire and see the dust and smoke being kicked up around us as the incoming mortar rounds exploded. As most of us sat there in bewilderment wondering what the next order would be, we were amazed to see the Choppers come on down and land right in front of us in spite of all the hostile activity. It was obvious that they were fully committed to getting us out. So as they got close to the ground, we grabbed our weapons and our gear, and made a mad dash for our designated Chopper through the dust, the explosions and the cracking machine gun fire.

What happened next amazed me even more, as we loaded and lifted off, the next five Choppers braved all of this and landed right behind us to pick up the rest of Bravo Company, so there wouldn't be anybody left behind. But it didn't work out that way. Those still on the ground headed back to the wood line for cover and the last five Choppers took off empty. This didn't look very good, but personally I was busy counting my own blessings for making it out alive.

What happened next is mostly from the following account by Col. Henchman and from what we could make out on the radio when we got back to FSB BURT.

“That left Hector Colon's platoon in the tree line, some dead, some wounded. All critically low on ammunition, and darkness only a little way off. If they could not be out before dark, that platoon would have been lost in the night. They did not have the combat power to survive.

BLACKHAWK 6 and ships from the 187 Assault Helicopter Company rallied to the cause, got a few birds without holes together.

I had made a very low level pass with the slick I was in and pushed out several cases of ammunition to Hector. It wasn't much, but it was all I had.

I recall giving what encouragement I could, ending with: "God bless you, Hector, and KEEP UP THE FIRE. We will move heaven and earth to get you out of this."

First try was no good. Flight aborted. Too much fire. Second try, Hector had his guys ready, carrying their dead and wounded, and got them on the choppers which took off immediately as loaded. Only problem was, two took off without a full load, leaving the last slick with a crew of 4, seven dead and four wounded, a total of 15 for a slick designed to pull out with a maximum load of 11. I literally willed that slick to fly. It barely made it over the tree line, and barely made it to BURT.

What Hector's guys did-individually and collectively-was gallantry in action. NO soldiers ever did better for each other. I put the entire platoon in for decorations for heroism. Some, sad to say, were posthumous. From that day to this, my respect for those MANCHUs is immense.

But the effects of that day were, not over:

The support helicopter companies were severely damaged. Three had been shot down' and burned somewhere, including the C&C I had been riding. They had quite a few WIA's among their crews, and most of the slicks needed lots of holes patched.

I was visited by the Communications Security guys from MACV who chewed my ass for communicating with the enemy on my net!

The rest of the time at FSB BURT-January 6 to January 18:

I sent Company B back to Tay Ninh. They were very much in need of a stand-down. On January 17, there was a memorial ceremony for those who had been killed in the Hour Glass and in other fights in the area, and then in the afternoon, an awards ceremony. An extract from Dexter's diary tells the story:

"Rifle salute as we entered the chapel...for those who had lost their lives [recently] some twenty-seven of them. ... there were moist eyes and bowed heads ... but there is a feeling we must carry on."



Memorial Service in Tay Ninh



Seven Gun Salute at Memorial Service

The rest of the battalion stayed at FSB BURT until January 18, conducting small sweeps since we were severely down in combat strength A, C, and D could barely muster 80 people each for operations outside the perimeter. “

There were many other hostile, life threatening experiences during my time in country. I was hit three different times (once by a bullet and twice with shrapnel), but none ever drew blood (thus, no Purple Heart). The bullet that hit me went through the sole of my shoe and out the top, traveling between the toes. The shrapnel hits landed on gear that I was wearing so the skin wasn't broken. In other incidents, the kid that took over the machine gun after me, took a bullet in the middle of his forehead in his first firefight (was that supposed to be my bullet?). The soldier that carried the Captain's radio after me was severely wounded in both legs and was sent home for long term rehabilitation. That particular incident happened while I was home on leave for my Father's funeral. In an even more brutal encounter, Delta Company took over as the lead company in Bravo's place because we had a number of casualties on the previous day. Walking in our place, they went directly into one of the most deadly ambushes of

the entire war. They lost over 50 soldiers within an hour or so. I don't remember how many were wounded. That was supposed to be Bravo Company.

I also remember other firefights that lasted longer and were bloodier than the Hour Glass, but because I found Colonel Henschman's account of this battle, I decided to use it because it offered a unique perspective of the bigger picture of what was going on that day. Some of the details were even news to me as I did this research. As combat soldiers, we were mostly kept in the dark and not always aware of how much danger we faced. I also want to add that not all of my account may be completely accurate, but 40 some years later; this is how I remember it.

Being in Vietnam was tough, it was brutal and it was very dangerous. By my own estimate, I think we lost over 30% of our Battalion as KIA's and out of those that survived, more than half of them were wounded at least once. We had no MIA's. We stayed engaged in every ambush and firefight until we had all our dead and wounded accounted for. Nobody was left behind. However, the survival rate for those that served in combat was not good. Of all the soldiers who served in Vietnam, only about 10% of them were in combat. The other 90% were in support roles. While all were in danger of being killed or wounded, it was nothing like being on the front lines on a daily basis.

I also want to acknowledge that there were many other soldiers that had it a lot tougher than I did. I felt fortunate that Bravo Company was a well-trained, well disciplined group of soldiers and as with any competition (or conflict), the better prepared team usually comes out on top. I certainly credit Captain Baker for his leadership role. I truly regret not trying to contact him sooner so I could see him personally to express my appreciation for his leadership role before he died.

COMING "BACK TO THE WORLD" IN 1968

Coming home (or "back to the world" as we used to say in Vietnam) and getting discharged from the Army on November 18th of 1968 has to be counted as one of the happiest days of my life. The Army did the paperwork to discharge us, gave us a new uniform to wear out the door, a steak dinner, our final pay in cash, and that was it. I remember walking out of the Oakland Army Terminal and as I waited on a dark street for my ride, I couldn't help but smile uncontrollably. It was just too good to be true.

Mom and my brother Richard drove to Oakland that night to pick me up and took me home to the house I grew up in. I went into a deep sleep in my old bed. I vividly remember waking up the next morning, wondering if Vietnam could have

really happened. Being home was just so different and unreal, it is impossible to describe the feeling. I remember thinking, could it really be true that just a few days before I had been walking around in the jungle in full combat gear with a loaded weapon?

Being home felt so good that I believe that I must have subconsciously decided that there was no need to relive or share what I had been through that past year. Besides, it was an unpopular war and nobody really wanted to hear about it. Also at this time in the late 60's, there was no meaningful transition program for those returning from combat to civilian life. There was no praise for the returning Veterans and I thought it just might be best to pretend it didn't happen and try to be "normal".

It was time to move on and I was ready. I had a job to go back to, I was going to get meaningful paychecks, real money to spend... I was ready for the good life. For most of the next 40 years, I said very little about the experience and stayed away from Veterans, especially those from Vietnam.

However, I still have the uniform I wore home. It has moved with me from place to place for over forty years, and always hangs in the back of a closet. It hasn't been touched since I first took it off and hung it up when I got home. I may take a look at it again someday... probably doesn't fit any more.

TRYING TO ASSESS THE VIETNAM EXPERIENCE - 40 SOME YEARS LATER

A few years ago I wanted to test the waters, and on Veteran's Day of that year decided to try and make contact with someone from my old Vietnam unit. With the aid of the internet I found one in short order, Doc Lupo (our Platoon Medic and the only other college person in our platoon), and sent him a note. We carefully corresponded and acknowledged that each other was alive and doing well. Quite formal...that didn't seem so bad. I also decided to dig out my Bronze Star, which is now framed and hangs proudly in my office.

Also as part of this awareness process, I finally acknowledged that I was partially deaf and started talking to the Veterans Administration about hearing aids. There were forms to fill out and interviews to tolerate, but through all this talk about being a Combat Veteran, obvious anxieties started to surface.

Further opening up about the experience didn't seem to bring any peace. I was now starting to feel like I had opened a very dangerous door -- and maybe this had been a mistake. I was thinking I needed to get that door slammed shut just as quickly as possible. Fortunately, before I got to that point I was able to find

and get help from "J. J.", a very knowledgeable and insightful person within the Veterans Administration. He cared, he listened, and to make a longer story short, offered the following basic rules to help with the healing.

Five Rules for Healing

1. Give meaning to the experience
2. Be involved in a meaningful relationship
3. Tell the story (but don't go on and on)
4. Have a sense of humor
5. Give something back

I could see some good news right away; I believed I was making good progress on #2, #4 and #5.

As for #1 -- giving meaning... this has been a real tough one for the past 43 years. The first part of giving meaning for me has to do with being patriotic. I never thought of questioning our Country as to the validity of the war, and when drafted I knew I needed to oblige and serve. Running to Canada was never an option for me. However, the real heartache is that we were involved in a losing effort that resulted in a high cost in both lives and resources. This isn't much comfort for giving meaning.

However, in the last few months I have come across another source of meaning. I've gotten to know a fellow professional, a young man who was born in Viet Nam during that war era. As we talked I learned his father was part of the South Vietnamese Army during the war. After the war, and still as a young child, he had the opportunity to immigrate to the US (short version of another long story). It's a very touching story that "L. T." shared with me. What he told me added true meaning. He said that he is grateful to the USA for providing opportunities for him and his family that they would have never had under the Communist regime. He is the first Vietnamese person that I have allowed to get close since coming home in 1968 and his sharing has helped me see something that I missed. A meaning I never thought of before. Thank you, "L. T."

Moving on to point #3; "Telling the Story", this is what this write-up is about. It's an attempt to complete that task and get the story out of me and to others that are close to me. I have never shared these events in so much detail before and

this exercise is certainly more for my benefit than yours. I thank all of you for taking the time to read and help me get through this.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The skinny shy kid from the Big Sur Coast grew up very quickly during that conflict and somehow, by the grace of God, survived many incidents where others right beside me, didn't. For some unknown reason, I've been blessed with many fortunate things in my lifetime and surviving Vietnam was certainly one of the big ones.

I know we all have crosses to bear, but war is still hell for all the combat soldiers. Nothing short of street gang warfare can prepare you for what it takes to survive, and the soldiers that do survive are changed forever.

I haven't talked about this much in the past and after getting this out really don't plan on talking about it much in the future.

The final message I want to share with everyone is that I used to think it was all my own doing that got me through the war experience. I now realize that there is no other explanation for surviving so many close calls other than the grace of God.

The remaining challenge for me now is to make sure I don't disappoint him with the time I have left.

THE END

July 4, 2011