

Lucky in Vietnam
By Wayne Fujioka
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Carol and I will soon be touring Vietnam and Cambodia, which got me thinking about my time there in 1970, compliments of Uncle Sam. I'd like to share some random thoughts which remind me of gratitude and being fortunate and lucky during that time.

During the June 1969 artillery officers' graduation ceremony at Fort Sill, OK the speaker congratulated us young lieutenants for completing the 12-week course and for our new assignments. He especially wished good luck to those who were being assigned to a 12-month tour of duty in South Vietnam. He said that the life expectancy of a 2nd LT there was just a few minutes, especially if he was a forward observer or FO. When I arrived at my new unit, I didn't have to be a FO because the 2nd LT who was already a FO really liked it so he requested to keep doing that for a few more months. MAN, I WAS REALLY LUCKY.

I arrived in-country on January 3, 1970 at Long Bien Army Post. As a field artillery 2nd LT, I was assigned to a battery of about 85 men. For 4 months we were at Fire Base Hull, about 40 miles north of Saigon or what is now known as Ho Chi Minh City. Ho Chi Minh, the man, was president of North Vietnam 1945-1969. Our artillery battery had six 155mm self-propelled howitzers, which can be driven and look like an army tank.

My first main job was the Officer in Charge (OIC) in the Fire Direction Center or FDC, which calculates direction and distance for the howitzers to shoot a fire mission from the ground coordinates received from the FO in the boonies. One evening we were attacked by Viet Cong or VC. I was asleep in my bunker so when I heard the gunfire and other noises, I put on my pants, boots, and helmet, but not my shirt, and grabbed my weapon. As soon as I got outside, one of our guys quickly swung his rifle around and pointed it at me. He thought I was a VC, but for some reason, he didn't instinctively fire his weapon and hesitated just long enough to recognize me. Under certain circumstances, especially in bad light, sometimes, to Caucasians, we Asians all look alike, Japanese or Vietnamese, same same. I WAS REALLY LUCKY that he didn't shoot me.

Each day, garbage from the mess hall or kitchen had to be taken outside our compound and dumped into a big hole dug in the ground then covered up when it was filled with our garbage & rubbish. One day I accompanied the truck to check on what was happening. After dumping the garbage from 55-gallon containers and as we drove away, many women and children came running out of the bushes to fill their containers with our garbage; that was their next meal. Needless to say, I was stunned. We should be GRATEFUL for what we have, especially food on our table 3 times a day.

One night after a rocket attack, a kid from Puerto Rico went back into his bunker to go back to sleep and found that a rocket had penetrated the wall of wood, metal panels and 55-gallon drums filled with sand & dirt, but had not exploded. The nose of the

rocket was about 12” from where his head would have been if he was sleeping on his cot. He quickly went back outside, dropped to his knees, and thanked his Lord in prayer. He was REALLY LUCKY.

One of my extra duties was to teach artillery classes to ARVN or Army of the Republic of Vietnam soldiers. One day I asked my translator, who was a sergeant about 21 years old, how long he had been in the ARVN and how much longer he had to serve. He said that he had already served several years and would continue “until the war was over”. My military obligation was 2 years of active duty and 4 years in the reserves. We Americans are LUCKY. FYI, the Vietnam War ended 5 years later, with the fall of Saigon on April 30 1975.

When I needed my first haircut, I had to go to a Vietnamese man on the fire base. I didn't know his routine included a shave and more. He used a straight razor blade to shave the short fuzz in my ear before I knew what he was going to do. When you rub or scrape inside your ear, it sounds really loud, right? I gently told him to stop and when I saw the blade, it freaked me out. I thought he was going to slice my ear & neck with it.

The explosive powder for the howitzers came in a gauze-like bag packed in a metal canister about 10” in diameter and 48” long. In the morning I filled one of the empty metal canisters with water and left it out in the sun all day. I would pour the “warm” water into a 5-gallon canvas bag with a shower head at the bottom to take a shower. You could “screw” the shower head open or close to control the flow of water. It wasn't very much water and not actually hot, but it was nice to have a warm shower almost every day.

From 1 May to 30 June 1970 U.S. military forces, including our artillery unit, were in Cambodia.

1. In the first few days I met an American infantry major who was from Alabama and liked rice. He got hot cooked rice each day from a Vietnamese army unit so he had his driver bring me a little every day for about a week. That helped make the c-rations taste okay.
2. Once, in the early morning darkness, we set up for a fire mission in a small village. Several hours later when the morning haze and smoke cleared after the fire mission and the sun was up, I looked around and the area reminded me of the lawn & palm trees in front of the Historic County Building here in Lihue. The houses built on long poles or stilts in front of us reminded me of the 2-story County Building itself. For a moment, I reminisced about Kauai, but suddenly, back to reality, we had to head out for another fire mission.
3. While in Cambodia, I found a stray puppy and named him Shorty. A soldier was called a “short timer” when he had less than 100 days left in his 12-month tour of duty in South Vietnam. I had Shorty for about 5 months and I wanted to ship him to the U.S. when I came home, but the red tape was too much so one of my fellow soldiers who had more time in-country and who Shorty already knew, kept him.

A good day was when you received a letter from home. The best of the best was in June when I received a letter and a wedding anniversary cake from Carol. It was amazing that it actually got to me somewhere in Cambodia. It was dropped from a helicopter along with our supplies so it got squished a little, but it was the best looking cake.

During my 11 months in-country I don't recall that our unit had any fatalities, we had just a few injuries when a track hit a land mine, and some guys were wounded during several sapper and mortar attacks. These stories reminded me that we were very lucky casualty-wise and there was much to be thankful for. I appreciated that I was able to work with men who were smart, skilled, and did a good job. Carol said that I came back from Nam a changed person, maybe somewhat harder around the edges, but I think it was about becoming more mature, of living through the harsh conditions of war, and seeing the realities of that part of the world, far away from life as a happy-go-lucky college student in Colorado and an innocent, protected childhood on Kauai. Many of the American kids who served were only 18 years old, just 6 months out of high school, trained to kill an enemy in a strange, foreign land.

Although it's been over 40 years since I was in the Vietnam War, I have some appreciation of what freedoms we have in America, that we have choices, that we can vote for our government leaders, drive a car, choose our schools and occupation, live in a house where we want to with indoor plumbing and electricity, shop at modern grocery stores, eat 3 fresh meals a day, explore our national parks (and seniors over 62 can get in free), have access to nearby medical care, can usually safely walk or drive down streets without encountering booby traps, car bombs, and rockets and bombs falling from the sky, and we can worship freely.

Some people may not have a lot of material things, but we should appreciate what we do have, especially our freedoms, and not think so much about what we wish we had. Yes, lucky we live Hawaii, but also lucky we are Americans.

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