

## The Challenge by Gary Flesner



It was an evening in August 1967 at Camp Barnes, Dong Ha when three companions and I headed out to the west perimeter of our camp for 'outpost duty' that night. About dusk we were settling in and were laying down a couple of shelter halves for those to sleep on who were not on watch. About that time a few Marines and a lieutenant walked past us a short distance away headed out to 'listening posts' about fifty yards further out.

I had the first watch and I sat down on a folding chair that we had brought with us. It was a moonless night and it quickly became quite dark. About thirty to forty minutes into my watch I could

barely distinguish a shadowy figure coming towards me. I was pretty certain it wasn't a VC or an NVA soldier partly due to his casual stroll. I was pretty certain that it was one of the Marines coming back. I was also pretty certain it was most likely the Marine lieutenant. I assumed he had probably just gone out to inspect the listening posts and to get his men positioned.

As a result of my observation, there arose a mental debate. Should I challenge him? Was it necessary? After all, I had seen him go out and as he had passed by he probably noted us too. I thought it might sound a little green and nervous of me if I did. By then I had been in country for several months and didn't want to give the impression I was frightened or jumpy. On the other hand there was enemy activity in the area, we had been under frequent rocket and artillery attacks, and this was technically guard duty. Recalling from boot camp my Eleventh General Order for Sentries *To be especially watchful at night, and during the time for challenging, to challenge all persons on or near my post, and to allow no one to pass without proper authority*, I could see myself getting 'reamed' for not doing it by-the-book if he was some gung-ho Marine officer. So, when he was about 50 paces away with my rifle lying across my lap, no round chambered, and with my deepest commanding voice I yelled, "HALT! WHO GOES THERE?!"

The reply was instant. "OH MY GOD, DON'T SHOOT!" In fact it was a sort of a pleading scream.

I was on a roll now, may as well continue. “ADVANCE AND BE RECOGNIZED!” I commanded.

More pleading; “Don’t shoot!! I’m a Marine! Are you guys Seabees?”

In my mind’s eye I could imagine what he was thinking. Some wild-eyed nervous Seabee had him in his sights with an itchy trigger finger.

I don’t think he could see me or at least not clearly until he got close and as he advanced he chattered like a magpie to convince me he was one of the good guys.

Then, it occurred to me that I may be adding insult to injury if he saw that I was relaxing in a folding chair with my rifle in my lap. So, I thought I had better continue the charade. I arose and held my rifle at the ready as he came into view.

He stood there with me for a few moments and we exchanged small talk and then he went on his way—and I think still a wee bit shaken as a result of ‘the challenge.’

During my time in the Navy, I was a UTBC, UTB3 and UTB2. I think I made UBT2 before the end of the Quang Tri deployment. At Dong Ha I worked on construction of the Chow Hall, the laundry, showers, hooches, graves registration, and the camp water supply. Also some other miscellaneous jobs like trash hauling, and hauling surplus materials to the Dong Ha villagers.

At Quang Tri I worked on the camp water supply, boiler, hooch construction, and various camp plumbing jobs. I also worked for some US contractors in Quang Tri City and later on the fuel pipeline along Highway One south of Quang Tri City.

### **Life after the Navy**

Following my release from the Navy in 1972 I enrolled in Denver Red Rocks College and then attended classes at Metro State. I graduated with a degree in Civil Engineering Technology. I took a position with the Metro Wastewater Reclamation District where I worked for 32 years. At the time it was the largest single-plant wastewater transmission and treatment facility west of the Mississippi (now increased to two facilities). I began as Staff Engineer. Over the years I participated, in and/or managed millions of dollars of engineering and construction projects and ultimately became a District Project Manager.

It was a most rewarding career and I attribute my success to the Lord and the schooling and experiences in the Navy Seabees. A spark was ignited in me while attending A School at Port Hueneme to pursue a civil engineering education. I've never regretted it. I'd recommend the Navy Seabees to any young person considering military service.

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