

Perseverance, Serendipity and Good Luck: My time in Vietnam

By: Greg Howell

My favorite Can-Do story: The well at Delta Med was failing so MCB11 well drilling team set off to drill it deeper. After some time, the bit showed damp when retrieved from maybe 100' down. Then a Seabee scores the worst possible hole-in-one by kicking a near-by sledge hammer into the well while the shaft was out. "No problem sir, the bit will push it aside". But it doesn't. Hmm. We use the lathe in the battalion machine shop trailer to wind communication wire on to a piece of iron bar. Our simple solution: drop the magnet into the well, turn on the electricity, and pull up the hammer. This works fine until the magnet reaches the iron pipe lining the first 50' of the well. The magnet clamps to the pipe and begins to pull it up. Hmm. I would like to think this next idea was mine but then maybe not. We turn off the electricity, drop the hammer, pull up the magnet, wrap it in barrel staves and bailing wire and try again. This almost works. More hmmm: How about coating the staves with grease? No better idea available, we try and it works! Can do...

Back to the beginning: I went to college on a Naval ROTC Scholarship. At my third annual physical, the doctor notices my shaved ankles and decides they are weak. I explain the University requires them to be taped to play rugby. He tells me he played at Yale, notes my ankles in the file and 3 months later, I am dis-enrolled in ROTC. 1965 comes and my draft board sends me a note to get ready. Instead, I am accepted by the Navy with the provision that I cannot fly or drive ships. I go to Officer Candidate School, am commissioned in the Civil Engineer Corp, and join MCB 11 a few days before it deploys to Vietnam. I am assigned to Delta Company and meet Lt. George Mathews, for a few minutes. He tells me not to miss the plane. I wish I could recall the name of the Chief who took me in just before we left and found me the still useful parachute bag. I think of him every time I use the bag to carry my fishing waders.

First day on the ground in Viet Nam, I am assigned to supervise the construction of towers along the DMZ west of Gio Linh. Petty Officer Pratt (I think) was the driver. On the way north, rifle fire hits our fuel tank. We plug it with a carved stick and move on. At Gio Linh, I introduce myself to the Officer in Charge at the fire base and explain our mission. He keeps walking

away every time I try to talk with him. I ask him please stop and talk to me. He says he is pleased to talk but not when we become targets by stopping and standing still. Back in the truck, we drive 200 yards down the cleared DMZ and stop at the location of the first tower. I step from the truck and am knocked flat -hit in the stomach and saved by my flak jacket. I turn to a nearby Marine and say "Sargent, I've been shot!" "Yes sir you I have." The bruise, deep purple, lasted a month.



The Water Buffalo: Back and safer in Dong Ha, I relieve Lt. Mountjoy, as Security Commander. At first, our line was a lovely quiet green place. Then the artillery and rocket attacks increased so we replaced the un-sandbagged tent on the ridge with two Conex boxes buried near the main trench. A backhoe widens and deepens the trench for 15 rifle pits along the wire. At night , each pit was manned by 3 Seabees. Then we began patrolling the area between our line and the river a few miles south. This was open terrain much like the rolling hills of Northern California. These

early patrols were mostly quiet walks with occasional long-range sniper shots scaring but missing us.

On the perhaps my 5th patrol, CBMU 301 assigns Petty Officer Gary Gordinier (my still close friend) to Security Company. Our CB's carried M14s. He brings the first M16 we have seen. I oppose taking him on patrol as we would have mixed ammunition. I lose that argument. I am ordered to allow Gordinier on the patrol as a member of the "Command Fire Team." This was made up of a Radio Operator, Corpsman, Gary with his M16, and me. On Gary's first patrol, we come over a slight rise to see a cow water buffalo and calf grazing about 100 yards away. The cow raises its head, turns and charges straight for Gary. He stumbles backwards, stiffens, raises his M-16, and fires a short burst. This kills the cow saving him from being trampled. Bravely he steps forward, puts his foot on the animal - Teddy Roosevelt style - and vomits.

The young boy who had been tending the buffalo comes running, crying at the loss. While the calf runs in circles I spread the patrol and try to comfort the boy. We call the base for advice; finally we make contact only to be asked whether this was a North or South Vietnamese buffalo. This didn't help. Then the village headman arrives. Well off our patrol plan, we are told to return to base with headman. An interpreter on the radio tells the headman to return with us in order to receive compensation. The headman agrees to go as long he can wear my helmet. His head is much smaller than mine so the helmet almost sits on his shoulders. We retrace our steps.

Coming over the hill, we see the combat base is under a heavy artillery barrage. We stop and take shelter in the ruins of an old French fort and set out guards. I fall asleep and am shaken awake by Builder 3rd Class Stewart; He says he hears on the radio that a return artillery barrage is being aimed at our location. I grab the radio and tell them to hold fire. The Artillery Officer, not convinced, asks me to break a yellow smoke grenade. I do, he stands down. Whew. We return to base and I take the headman to the base Civic Action officer. He arranges compensation and we return the headman to his village. The next day I am asked to make certain the buffalo has been destroyed. Not knowing how to do this, I ask and am told to gather four 5 gallon G.I. cans of diesel fuel and use it to burn the carcass. I'm not eager to return but on arrival, we find a bloody spot but no carcass. The headman gets the fuel, we return to base and drink our 2 beers.

The Pot bust: One afternoon, I was called to the CO's office because there was a report that Seabees were buying pot from Marines and then smoking it on watch. I learn that a significant buy is planned for later that evening. I did not want people on the line who didn't know their way or understand the protocols for moving in the dark. So we come up with a ruse: I give my wallet to Petty Officer Diorio, a man versed in making these arrests. There would be no surprise because even then I routinely lost things. So I arrange with the Executive Officer to call me when he hears the buy is set to begin. He was to tell the Seabee on watch in the bunker, that my wallet had been found. Then the plan was for me to return to battalion headquarters, retrieve the wallet and lead Diorio to the right place on line.

About 10pm, I receive a report that there is a fist fight behind Post 7. Hmm, this isn't right. I saddle up and make my way to find 4 drunken Marines beating a fifth. That one was apparently trying to walk to Da Nang to visit his Teelock. Despite stern commands, the 4 Marines won't stop their beating. I pull my pistol and slide a round into the chamber. The sound of that puts all the Marines on the ground. While trying to sort this out the Seabee on watch in the command post calls to tell me that Diorio has found my wallet.

So I call a Seabee from Post 7, give him my pistol, and leave him in charge as I go off in the dark to organize an arrest. Cresting the hill, I discover an unoccupied jeep. I use it to pick up Diorio and bring him back to Security Company. We return to my command post. He tells me the buy is set for Post 8. This post, immediately in front of the command bunker was manned by the best fire team in Security. Hmmm. We arrive there and find Seabees standing a proper watch, neither smoking nor buying. Diorio tells me that Corpsman Beals had radioed those Marines were the source of the pot. Hmmm. I convince Diorio that the buy is 150+ yards to the west where the Marine and CB lines connect. Now a problem: how do we get there without alerting the line? The answer: Take the handset from each post along the way as we move west. The transaction with the CB is just completing as we arrive. We return to camp and find a significant container of pot under his bed. He is arrested. Later we find that Bealls actually said, "Come Posthaste." The Marine Captain who had been sent to arrest the Marines trying to cross the wire to Da Nang found his jeep the next day parked some distance from my bunker.

September 3rd. Lt. Hudspeth from the relieving Battalion was in my Bravo Company office when I heard the first soft sounds of a large incoming barrage. I pull him out the door only to find our "Command Trench" already full. We dive into another trench before the first of the all day long series of very large explosions. The little finger on my left hand is dislocated by tangling in Lt. Hudspeth's shirt as we tumble into the ditch. We pull the finger back in place and keep our heads down. I believe Petty Officer Jim Bagnell, just out of surgery for appendicitis at Delta Med was also in that trench.

Time passes: pictures are taken with each dramatic blast - each more powerful than the last. The ammo dump is on fire and burns for days. Later in the day, I remember that I am responsible for the camp water and power systems. We put my jeep back on its wheels, from which it was knocked by the blasts. I drive past Alpha Company's crushed shops toward the main gate. I see 6 or so marines behind a small berm of dirt maybe 100' beyond our perimeter, Petty Officer Johnny Johnston (there may be a novel in the story of his time as a Seabee) aims his pistol on me as I try to leave our compound. I radio for help and Johnny is told to stand down. I pick up the 6 Marines and drive back toward our medical bunker. Another round lands and shrapnel creases my left hand. I roll out on to the ground but the Marines stay put. I get back in drive to our medical bunker. Apparently the doctor treated my wound as later I receive the Purple Heart. (LT. Bob Cahill and I both believe that the shrapnel that hit me was from the same shell that wounded him far more seriously.) Out of the medical bunker, my Jeep is leaking fluids and the tires are flat. Walking back to Bravo Company, I pass Petty Officer Koziol welding holes in our water tank. We had quit sandbagging the tank when the Chaplain said the bags were worth more than the water. This was true when he said it...but we never thought the tank would be hit. The next few days are a blur; I remember most simply being exhausted.

When we left Dong Ha, I gave my flak jacket to an officer from the relieving battalion (MCB 5) as he deplaned. He reluctantly held it as one might hold a long dead fish, and asked if he really needed to wear it. I pointed to the missing zipper and pushed out fiberglass fibers from the earlier incident and urged him to wear it.

Years later, at a reunion of the Stanford Construction Program, I recognize him sitting to just the right of my wife. As introductions begin, I remind him of that moment when I gave that dear, if smelly and damaged jacket, to him. He said he traded it for a new one as quickly as he could. The war follows you home in ways you never expect.

A closing contradiction: The Viet Nam war was a terrible waste. And I am glad I was there. The Wall brings these perspectives: an irresolvable clash: tears, sadness, courage and loss.

Navy Experience and Career Since

After the Dong Ha deployment, I led Seabee Team 1112 in northern Thailand. Then I returned to serve as Admiral Wooding's aide in San Diego until he retired. Oddly, probably not coincidentally, most of the other aides had Purple Hearts. I wrote the commissioning speech given by the Admiral at the launch of the USS Marvin Shields. I left the Navy because I could not imagine ever having the insight and intelligence of the Admiral (and the Navy refused my request to take the job at the South Pole for a year.)

My active duty ended when Admiral Wooding retired. Then I spent 4 months in Ireland trout fishing, drinking Guinness and reading history. On return, I worked for Paulo Soleri, the noted, if controversial, architect in Arizona as his engineer, went to Grad School, lived in New Jersey for a while, ran an electronics firm making TimeLapse cameras, spent 10 years as a Professor at the University of New Mexico, and then co-founded the Lean Construction Institute. After that, I worked as a consultant for Lean Project Consulting.

I retired from this a few years back and now live in Ketchum, Idaho with my lovely, tolerant, fearless traveler, and orderly wife, Dana. Our daughter Emily is a Public Defender in Kalispell Montana. Married to Ian Thomsen - we have two brilliant and talented grandchildren. Drop me a note – Box 1003, Ketchum, Idaho, 83340 or GAH2343@mac.com.