

## Recollections of Vietnam

By: Michael "Whitey" Harter

I joined MCB 11 in May of 1966 at the age of 19. The battalion was already in-country at Da Nang East, Camp Adenir. I had just finished military training at Port Hueneme and within two weeks I was a "trained killer." They asked our whole group what we had done on the outside (civilian life) and I replied that I had worked in a factory just north of Detroit running a punch press that made light sockets for the auto industry. I only told them the name of the factory-- Watts Electric--and apparently that qualified me to go to "B" Company and join the electricians. So far so good, but the next thing I knew I was not going to work with the electricians. They had plans for this Seaman Apprentice, being the trained killer that I was. I "volunteered" to go into the Village Patrol Provisional Platoon. This was the first time I really said to myself: "What the hell did you get yourself into?" Myself, Paul Heller, Larry Mock and a few others were issued our M14s, helmets, ammo pouches, belts, canteens; all the neat "army stuff," and even a p38 can opener which enabled us to find out how good the C rations were.

Well, here we were on village patrol, 36 hours in the village then 36 hours back on base. Or, to put it another way 4 meals of C Rations then 6 meals on base. The first trip outside the wire was a real thrill; 12 men leaving the security of barbed wire and nice beds going out to who knows what. We would leave the base at 6pm and return 36 hours later at 6 am, heading straight for the galley. Each patrol, when we arrived in the village, we were assigned into 4-man fireteams. As I recall, the first night we stood watches in bunkers and the 2nd night our squad would run "patrol" (patrols were basically a fireteam that would go on a pre-selected route.) During each patrol we would rotate point man and radioman as well as individual positions within the patrol unit.

The first night I found myself in a sandbagged bunker in the middle of a rice paddy about 25 yards off the river. It was a long night and dark like I had never seen before. We rotated watch duty and manning the phone (we had a voice powered phone that tied all the bunkers together) and as I stood my watch I kept thinking-- I joined the Navy for 3 hots and a cot and I'm in this hole with cold, canned food! Some of the other patrols would come by our bunkers and some would not. We would shout out "halt who goes there?" I don't know which was worse, sitting in the bunker or having to approach those bunkers full of guys with guns while on patrol?

I made it through the first night and was happy to see daylight. I remember I was concerned about not knowing what to expect the next day and not knowing who to trust. Before you arrive in country all you hear is about the VC in black pajamas, so imagine my surprise when the first group of native villagers I saw *all* wore black pajamas. Hell, I didn't know that black pajamas were the basic garb. As time went on I made some good friends with the people of My Thi. The days in the Village were quite nice but the best of it all were the kids. Children all over the world are about the same and these were just great, enduring memories.

After a while, my time in the village became pretty much routine. I helped build a school and a medical hut, as well as swings and seesaws for the kids. Like I said routine, until the night the base came under attack and I realized we were outside the main perimeter and we still had to run those patrols where all the training comes back. You become more aware of the trail you are walking on and you watch for trip wires. Your ears pick up every rustle of leaves, and you listen for anything that might go click and you swear everyone can hear your heart beat and your breathing. I stayed on village patrol my whole Da Nang tour in Vietnam. The thought of staying with MCB11 was in my brain, so I wanted to drop the Seaman Apprentice title and become a true SEABEE. I stayed with MCB 11 my entire enlistment going to CE "A" school and getting my DD-214 on January 30, 1969 as a CET3, and am still a SEABEE today! (Once a SEABEE ALWAYS A SEABEE)

### **Life after the Navy**

I returned home, unemployed and looking for work. It just so happened that Michigan Bell had a full page ad in the Detroit News, so still having that CAN DO spirit I went and applied and went to an interview. I guess he was impressed that I was a Seabee because I walked out at the two and one half year pay on a five year scale. I was like any other newbie for Ma Bell; I was married and had one child (Michael) a year later we were blessed again with my daughter Dorene.

I progressed fairly quickly (CE "A" school paid off) and in 2 years I was promoted to PBX installer, and eventually going to a number of Bell System schools. I was soon running jobs and installing electronic switches, long line work and made a final move into splicing to be closer to home. I retired from Ma Bell with 30 years and 1 day.

All in all I have been blessed with 4 children 12 grandchildren and 9 great grandchildren. Linda and I have been married for just under 25 years and are trying to go to all the MCB



11 reunions. Next year we have our sights on Hawaii. My hobbies are ham radio; I hold the Extra Class License, and playing my harmonica.

Receiving my 3rd Class Crow in 1968 from Commander Keith Hartell



My visit to Washington DC to see Our Wall.

Thanks for reading, see you all at the next reunion.

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