



Pulse of '62



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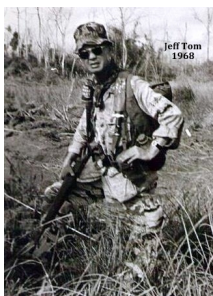
Vietnam Vignettes, Part I

By Trey (Felix) Moran

"Vietnam" was the war that defined our era. The stories of our veterans deserve to be told. Indeed, controversy did surround the war: many were not anxious to enlist or be drafted; some demonstrated their fear or anger by formal protest; and some served in the military. These are but three of our Saint Louis veterans' stories.

Jeff Tom

Within a year of graduating from the University of San Francisco, I was an Army 2LT in Vietnam for the first of three combat tours. I never went without an M-16 rifle or M-79 grenade launcher and my own personal Browning 9mm pistol, even sleeping with the 9mm under whatever served as my pillow. I don't



want to sound like "Rambo" but this was a fact-of-life if you wanted to survive to fight another day!!!

For most of my first tour, I was a combat interrogator with the 101st Airborne. We questioned newly captured North Vietnamese Army (NVA) or local VC prisoners, gathering what is now known as "actionable intelligence", to find out where their unit was, what arms caches or supply dumps were nearby, and often going with the guy to the spot. You got to see the NVA and VC upfront and first-hand this way. Most of the prisoners did not have code-of-conduct training. If treated humanely, with water or a cigarette, they would answer questions.

My second tour was with a 3-man special ops augmentation team at Loc Ninh, 13 kilometers from Cambodia. This tour mirrored how the Special Forces (SF) are now fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. We directly recruited, hired, armed, paid, and fed more than 600 Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Montagnard mercenaries (some only 13 years old). We went on patrols with a minimum of 2 SF soldiers, mainly to talk to a FAC (like Trey Moran) or a MEDEVAC pilot (they would insist on talking to an American for fear of being deceived by the enemy and sucked into an ambush). During this tour, US troops who came to our camp, were often surprised that a "gook" spoke English so well. I don't blame them now for their prejudice. When I dressed in camouflage fatigues or black PJs, without rank or nametags, even new SF soldiers or new tracker dogs

(since our diet was similar to the enemy's) would not recognize me as American.

My last tour was with MACSOG—the top secret unit fighting the cross-border wars in Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam. We had our counterpart South Vietnamese commando unit but most of the fighters were Nung, Montagnard, and Cambodians that we directly hired and trained. I would have extended again but the big boss—CHIEF SOG—had attended my wedding and wouldn't approve my extension. You could say that Mei Ling saved my life since you can avoid the bullet only so many times.

Trey Moran

In 1970, I was a captain in the USAF, assigned to Nakhom Phanom RTAFB, Thailand, as a Forward Air Controller (FAC) flying unarmed OV-10 reconnaissance planes over the "Steel Tiger" region of Laos, in search of North Vietnamese targets moving down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. After the target was located, the FAC remained overhead to direct air strikes and report on the effectiveness of the strikes. My call-sign was Nail 13.



Three months later, I rotated into the night schedule and discovered the joys of flying the Ho Chi Minh trail for four hours in the dark.

We carried two pods of parachute flares and two pods of ground burning flares, plus the centerline drop tank. We always flew with a navigator in the back seat. The pilot positioned the plane over a road, then followed the instructions of the navigator, looking through a floor-mounted night-vision scope, giving instructions: "left 2 degrees, right 3 degrees", and so on, keeping the airplane directly over the road. When the navigator found a target, we would orbit and confirm the target using a handheld scope. We would then get back over the road and pickle off two ground flares, one in front and one behind the target. Finally, the fighters would be called in to do their thing, almost always killing the target, with the best results coming when we could bracket a whole convoy of trucks.

If things were a little boring, we would go gun hunting together. After rendezvousing with the fighters above us, we would clear them in hot on the muzzle flashes from the ground. We'd turn on all our lights, for about 3 or 4 seconds, turn them off, then break left or right. The gunners would usually open fire on the

extension of our flight path; of course, we weren't there. About the time the airbursts started, the A-1s would be dumping bombs on the gunners. It usually worked pretty well, except when the fighter jocks had trouble with simple directions, such as, "We'll stay to the west, and you can have all the airspace to the east."

One of my closest near-death experiences came in exactly this way, near Tchepone. I was on my side of the river and so was one of the A-1s when he rolled in on the target. When I started a turn away from the target, there he was, canopy to canopy with my OV-10. All I could see in my windscreen was the A-1 silhouetted against the sky. Biggest damn thing I had ever seen, or so it seemed at the time.

"Sorry 'bout that, Nail," the fighter jock said. With this formality over, we both continued with the business at hand.

Jim Howe

Uncle Sam called after my graduation from Notre Dame. Always a sailor and loving the ocean, it seemed natural to sign up for Navy OCS. I did the ninety day wonder routine in 1967 and was assigned as a green ensign to the USS Luzerne County (LST-902) as the Communications Officer.

Being a landing ship, you could run her (Navy ships are always female) aground and not have your Navy career cut short. We carried tons of cargo to the Navy Seal detachments that patrolled the Mekong and Bassac Rivers in Vietnam. We ran our ship aground at places like Can Tho, Vinh Long, My Tho and numerous times in the river estuary where the sands shifted around so much you never knew where the deep river was. We continually dodged fishermen's nets strung across the river, in a 350-foot ship that didn't maneuver too well.

We dropped off cargo like ammunition, cement, lumber, beer, coke and other staples. The River Patrol Seals were always glad to see us and let us bum helicopter rides back to Tan Son Nhut to pick up our mail. These 1967 Seals are the grandfathers of the guys that just got Osama bin Laden – they were just as fearless back then, too. Rumor had it that they used to water-ski behind their patrol boats. They were a hardy lot.

Each night when our ship was on the beach or at anchor on the river, we often had the night watch randomly drop percussion grenades over the side to discourage sappers from planting mines around or on the ship. One memorable evening, as the officers sat down to dinner, there came a thunderous noise right outside the wardroom window. A dozen normally cool officers stumbled over each other racing for the door, sounding general quarters, and generally panicking from what we thought was an attack by the Vietcong. Turns out, it was the Bosun's Mate acting like John Wayne by pulling the grenade pin with his teeth (he lost one in this episode) and dropping the grenade on the deck above the wardroom. Someone had the courage to

grab the "about to explode" grenade and drop it over the side. It went off just ten feet down, right outside the officers' wardroom. Yeah, that guy got a Captains Mast and docked a month's pay, but all survived; only the officers' egos were damaged, and the Bosun Mate's tooth, of course.

Sometime in 1968, around Tet, some wag in the Pentagon got the brilliant idea to have the cargo ships travelling up and down the rivers, perform Psychological Operations activities. We received a kit of speakers and sound gear, along with recordings in Vietnamese: "Surrender yourself – no harm will come to you – all we want is peace" and all that crap. Well, talk about stirring a hornet's nest – we had been pretty much ignored by the VC in our travels – not any more. They started shooting the minute we turned on the speakers and kept at it



until we turned them off. Several of our sailors were wounded when we took a few hits from rockets and small arms fire. Needless to say, we much preferred to travel incognito.

During liberty in the Philippines, I met-up with Scot Finkboner (Maryknoll class of '62), a Navy pilot flying off the Enterprise. He got me a flight in an F4 Phantom – neat trip flying at treetop level, dodging clouds at mach 1, loops and rolls over the ocean, lucky for me we did not have to land on the carrier. I had a death grip on that barf bag.

After a year, I was given orders to Pearl Harbor. Join the Navy to see the world and they send me home! It was nice duty, of course. I lived at home, hung out with old buddies, met my future wife and had a ball as a bachelor on Oahu. I finished my Navy tour in Hawaii; my wife was homesick so we went-off to California for our next great adventure.

BOTTOM LINE—Jeff said it well in closing his story. "We were young, dumb, and Vietnam was the only war we had!! We don't consider ourselves heroes and know we were lucky to survive. It is only so often that the odds and risks will not bring the 'good day to die!!'."

Now, Jeff's youngest son is career Army, going back to Afghanistan for his 5th combat tour (2 in Iraq & 3 in Afghanistan). His repeated rotations into the war zones are normal for today's career soldier. Keep him and all our soldiers, sailors and airmen in your daily prayers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Trey served 28 years in the USAF, after graduating from Washington State University in 1966, including assignments in Thailand during the Vietnam war and Turkey during the first Gulf war. Retired in 1994, he now lives in Polson, Montana.