

GUNNERY SERGEANT DON COUNTS VIET NAM VET

24 Years of Service

Once a Marine Always a Marine

In 1967 my squadron, VMA(AW)533 got orders to go to Viet Nam. I was in the middle of a divorce and was granted leave to join the squadron later. Usually units are deployed as a group. This meant I would be going to Viet Nam by myself.

After the divorce I caught a flight, refueled in Hawaii and landed in Okinawa for a couple of weeks awaiting a flight to Viet Nam. I was surprised on the day of our flight. I was given a handcuffed prisoner and a loaded 45 with orders to shoot to kill if he tried to escape. He must have done something pretty bad to be going to the brig in Danang Viet Nam.

After I turned the prisoner over to the brig I made arrangements for a flight to Chu Lai Viet Nam to join my squadron. Upon landing I was taken to the living area.

Nothing was wasted. We slept on cots with an air mattress. They had built a porch on the front of the hut with a small table and a dishpan to bathe. Pallets were used for construction from supplies that had been shipped to us. They were used to make a sidewalk in front of our huts and for a patio with the wood insulation for our bomb shipments on the sides.

There was a two man out-house with 50-gallon drum cut in half. We would wake each morning with lower ranking marines burning the contents. You can only imagine the smell. The Vietnamese that worked on the base had never seen an out-house, they would squat over the hole, sometimes missing because they were used to squatting in their yard.

We build a shower later with water from an aircraft drop tank, an ammo box with jet fuel and the water line. We would throw a match in the heat the water.

We built a bunker out of sand bags and a piece of metal on the top.

We had a small PX (Post Exchange), in 1967 I bought an aluminum Christmas tree which I still have and put up every year. The PX had a drainage pipe that ran into a small ditch. One day I saw a Vietnamese woman washing her clothes in the ditch. She had to urinate so she pulled up a leg of her slacks and went in the water. Then continued washing her clothes.

I worked in Air Operations/Intelligence/war room. Each night I would go to the Group Headquarters through the jungle armed with a loaded M1 rifle to get classified messages and documents. The information was used to write the schedule of where and when to drop bombs. Most were 500 pound bombs.

We could hear gun fire and bombs being dropped in the distance. After a while we could tell how far away they were and if in the distance we would go to sleep.

On January 31st 1968, I had a volunteer working nights in the office and he had gone to the Group Headquarters when the enemy fired a mortar into our bomb dump destroying our offices, the hangar and several aircraft

I was asleep when we got the word, was loaded into a cattle car and taken to the work area. We went to our bunkers and took turns to see if the enemy was going to try to attack, when my turn was over I would go to sleep while bombing fragments was landing on our roof. Marines were on the perimeter protecting the base. The next day we started rebuilding and getting back to operations.

I have to mention the traitor Jane Fonda. She went to Hanoi North Vietnam. She had a two-week tour of the country visiting villages, hospitals, schools and factories damaged in the war, weaving her comments about what she observed at those sites with denunciations of U.S. policy in recordings broadcasts of propaganda to U.S. servicemen via Radio Hanoi. She met with international visitors and reporters who were also in North Vietnam. She spent about an hour chatting with seven U.S. POWS at a meeting arranged by her North Vietnamese guides and posed for photographs on an antiaircraft emplacement set in a rural area just outside Hanoi.

Rest and Relaxation:

We had an enlisted club (1st through 3rd pay grades), and NCO (Non-Commission Officer) club for 4th and 5th pay grades, an Officers and Staff NCO (6th through 9th pay grades). We got two 3 day passes to get out of Country. I went to Hong Kong and Bangkok Thailand.

I lucked out and got two-week duty in the Philippines. Our duty was to get the Filipinos started washing our aircraft from the war. We had liberty till the next morning. After the aircraft were clean we would load the drop tanks with beer which was flown back to the squadron and stored in the First Sergeant's office for distribution to the troops.

The USO and others would bring in entertainment to the Clubs. The most memorable was the Bob Hope Christmas Show with Raquel Welch.

PTSD (Post Traumatic Disorder) has been called by different names through the years, including soldiers heart, battle fatigue, shell shock and over 80 different names. Now this includes any traumatic event whether in war or not. When I got home I was taking my daughter Dori and son Donnie out to lunch. I heard a jackhammer, I hit both children in the back of the head but didn't knock them down, I thought it was a machinegun, I realized what it was before I knocked them down. This is still a trigger for me caused by PTSD.

Years later I found a quote by General VoNguyen Giap. He was a brilliant and highly respected leader of the North Vietnam military. The following quote is from his memoirs currently found in the Vietnam war memorial in Hanoi. "What we still don't understand is why you Americans stopped the bombing of Hanoi. You had us on the ropes. If you had pressed us a little harder, just for another day or two, we were ready to surrender! It was the same at the battle of TET. You defeated us! We knew it, and we thought you knew it. But we were elated to notice your media was helping us. They were causing more disruption in America that we could in the battlefields. We were ready to surrender you had won."

General Giap has published his memoirs and confirmed what most Americans knew. The Vietnam war

was not lost in Vietnam—it was lost at home. The same slippery slope, sponsored by the U.S. media is currently underway. It exposes the enormous power of a biased media to cut out the heart and will of the American public

Gunnery Sergeant Don Counts