And What Was I Doing There?

Stories from the 174th Ordnance Detachment in Vietnam

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To Sergeant John E. Nelson, C Company, 2nd Battalion,
22nd Infantry, 25th Division. Killed in Action, April 13, 1968.
Friends forever.

CONTENTS

Preface and Acknowledgments

This book is about my tour of duty with the 174th ordnance detachment (AR) in Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam. The detachment was part of the 191st Ordnance Battalion that supplied ammunition to Central Vietnam during the Vietnam War. There are no battles described here, no screaming wounded, no medals awarded for valor. The men I served with were just doing what they were trained to do by an army who said their job was something that needed to be done. I think it is a story that needs telling, and our contribution was an important part of the war.

Were we shot at on a daily basis? Nope, and we did not hump the boonies, nor did we sleep in foxholes. We slept in barracks—if you can call them that—and had bunks and clean clothes if we wanted them, and we ate chow in mess halls. But that does not mean our lives were easy or uneventful. We worked long hours and we worked hard.

Many people helped me in writing this book. I would like to thank my friend, Chris Opie, who urged me to start writing down all the stories I used to tell her. My high school classmate, Gay Machado, whose advice and support through the long process of writing this book were invaluable to me, was that connection to another world during my tour, although she did not know it, and the one who convinced me I could do this. My friend Paul Masterson, who was

always available to serve as a friendly critic of my writing, and offer tips on what he thought was right and also what was wrong. Alicia I. Gutierrez, for all the encouragement and positive thoughts. Most of all, I would to thank my editor, Laura Meehan, for her hard work and thoughtful insights.

To the best commanding officer I had in the Army, CWO4 Vern Mello (retired), who was and always will be "Mr. Mello" to the men of the 174thOrdnance Detachment, and to the men who labored in obscurity during the war while humping 150-pound boxes of ammo under a brutal Southeast Asian sun, who worked with explosives while surrounded by thousands of tons of the same, and who never received recognition for their service and all their hard work, I dedicate this book.

I have tried to tell about life as I experienced it during my tour. If I do not come across as particularly heroic, that's OK. That is not what this book is about. It is about what I saw during my tour, not how I should have acted, or what I should have done.

One

Getting There

WELCOME TO VIETNAM

The door opened and the weather I would live with for the next year flooded into the plane. It was September 22, 1968. After an agonizing twenty-two-hour flight from Travis Air Force Base in California, oppressive heat and humidity welcomed me to Bien Hoa, Vietnam. They felt like a warm and humid embrace.

Serving as the unofficial reception committee were the vets who had done their time and were going home on the very plane that had brought me to this hellhole. The taunts and catcalls as we walked past them and were herded onto buses only served to make the coming year seem longer, if that were possible.

Even after we arrived at our permanent duty station, our brand new fatigues would shout FNG's (Fuckin' New Guys). A short-timer could not resist coming up to us and saying, "Seven days, motherfucker"; since we still had almost the whole year to go in country, it just made the time seem interminable.

The sights and smells of Vietnam assaulted us on our way to the Ninetieth Replacement Battalion at Long Binh: dirt streets, children

smoking, *mamasan* urinating along the side of the road, swirling clouds of dust, men holding hands, the ever-present smell of burning feces and urine mixed with diesel fuel.

The driver said the screens over the windows were to stop grenades from being thrown into the bus. Kind of like, "Welcome to Vietnam, a place you can die anyplace, at anytime, any way." That I could be killed before actually getting to the replacement battalion had never occurred to me. I could not imagine being killed within minutes of arriving. If the replacements were in danger of being killed, what the hell was the rest of the goddamn country like? I suppose it gave everyone a taste of what was to come.

My memories of Long Binh are mostly of helicopters and dirt. It seemed helicopters flew over us at least every thirty seconds or so, every model imaginable, going every direction of the compass. The red soil, too, was very pervasive stuff. Some of the paperwork I saved from those days is still stained with it.

We were taken to a barracks and shown bunks where we could sleep, if we were so inclined—few of us did. The beds were just mattresses with mattress covers on them. Those covers were so dirty that some of us refused to lay on them. I'm not talking kind of dirty; I mean encrusted with dirt. I choose to sleep outside with my duffle bag as a pillow rather than sleep on those mattress covers. It was just a new-guy reaction. If I had been returning home through Long Binh, the filth wouldn't have been worth a second look. After a year of never being clean, I wouldn't have thought a filthy mattress cover was a big deal.

The funny thing is that I can remember most of the details I had to do in Long Binh and some of the people involved, but I cannot remember ever going to a mess hall and eating chow. I was there for a week and would have eaten three meals a day, but I remember none of them. When I reported for duty in Vietnam I had been in the Army

eleven months and I was a spec four, so I had plenty of experience with Army mess halls, and Army chow. If the meals had been exceptionally bad or good, it seems I would have remembered. So the chow must have been typical Army chow, bland and forgettable.

Some of the incongruities only the Army could have thought up. We had to brush our teeth with a fluoride mixture that looked, tasted, and was the consistency of ready-mix cement. And to top it all off, we could not spit it out—we had to hold the vile stuff in our mouths for a very long time. It seems strange they were worried about our teeth while we could've died any minute from a myriad of causes. But maybe they wanted us to have stronger teeth so we would not go on sick call and could keep killing and being killed. But I will admit the stuff seemed to really help my teeth.

The EM (Enlisted Man) Club at Long Binh was a scene of alcohol-fueled angst as could be expected of men far from home, facing the unknown. Loud music blasted over the speakers, making normal speech impossible. A projector showed a movie depicting a B-52 strike blasting some unknown jungle somewhere. Nothing like death and destruction set to music. It seemed surreal to watch a movie like that while sitting in Vietnam. Since everyone was drinking, it was a pretty disorderly bunch; the sentiment was "we who are about to die."

One guy had been assigned to the 173rd Airborne Division, and it seemed he could not wait. He kept yelling he was going to the "173rd gook killers" at the top of his lungs. I have always wondered what happened to him. Hopefully he did not get the tables turned on him.

Twice a day, there was a formation out in front of the barracks. The cadre would call out the last four numbers of a GI's serial number. If they hollered out yours, then you would go and find out where they were sending you. I always assumed that I would work

at the job I was trained to do, my MOS (Military Occupational Specialty). Never even gave it a thought that I might end up doing something else. But of course I had never been in a war before, where warm bodies are one of the biggest supply shortages.

If for some reason there was no need for his specific MOS, then a GI might find himself shipped off to an infantry outfit. Protest was useless, since everyone had been to basic training, not called BCT (Basic Combat Training) for nothing. And just about everyone was given a week of RVN (Republic of Vietnam) training before leaving the states. So the theory was that we were more or less combat trained if we had completed basic and RVN training. Of course everyone knew that was BS, and in reality it was a death sentence for a clerk or mechanic who was unlucky enough to be there on the wrong day. But hey, the quota was filled. This very thing happened to an NCO (Non Commissioned Officer) I knew. Although he was an ammunition specialist, he spent months out in the bush before writing his congressmen, who eventually got him transferred out of the infantry. He had complained to the unit's first sergeant about knowing nothing about being in the infantry, but the first sergeant's only comment was, "You'll learn." It always gave us such a warm feeling when the people in charge really cared about our welfare.

Meanwhile, an interesting switch happened in the 174th during my tour. There were not enough trained ammunition people in the replacement battalions for us, so they sent men who had been trained to be infantrymen to my unit. Now is that weird or what? We couldn't believe it. The commanding officer explained to them that they would never be promoted to sergeant because they had no training in ordnance. Most of them were more than satisfied to stay and not be out in the bush.

FLOWER BEDS OF BIEN HOA (LONG BINH)

It took about a week to get processed in and receive my permanent duty station assignment. Now, everyone who has been in the service knows that during that week, you couldn't just sit around. If your name was not called for assignment, then the Army would find something for you to do: details.

We would be sent out in groups to do things no one else had time to do, or that no one else wanted to do. One job we spent several days on was sorting field gear—ponchos, ammo pouches, packs, web gear, and other assorted equipment. Since the stuff was really mangled, I asked the short, dumpy NCO who was watching us work, "Hey Sarge, where did this stuff come from?"

Giving me a sneering look reserved for FNGs, he said, "All this gear came in from the field, and let's just say that the former owners no longer need field gear where they are headed." I got a sinking feeling in my stomach when he added, "Yeah, that's right—they were KIA."

After being told its former owners were killed, we began handling the gear with a little more reverence. No one wanted to look close enough to see blood stains. Whether he was telling the truth or lying just to scare us, I don't know, but if the latter, it worked—we were certainly scared.

After I had been there a few days, a staff sergeant took four or five other men and me over to the BOQ (Bachelor Officer Quarters). He showed us a pile of lumber, some nails, and what looked like a skinny hatchet (there was no hammer) and explained that he wanted us to build flower beds in front of the building. Now, when I received my orders for Vietnam, I had imagined all kinds of things happening—being killed or wounded, coming down with some dread disease, or maybe getting a medal for some heroic act—but never in my wildest imagination did I see myself building flower beds.

We all just sat there momentarily, dumb looks on our faces, and one guy said, "You want us to build what?" Kind of like a group "Huh?" With a patronizing look on his face, he patiently explained again what he wanted, and build flower beds we did.

The stupid hatchet he had given me was only about an eighth of an inch thick, and it was very difficult to hit the nail squarely with it. Watching me struggle, the staff sergeant asked me where I was from, and I said, "California," and he said, "That figures." Apparently pounding nails with a narrow hatchet was something everyone learned at an early age wherever he was from. Probably someplace with no running water and where everyone married their first cousins, I thought angrily.

What we did not know was a Special Forces (Green Beret) major was listening to our conversation. He said, "You know, Sergeant, my parents are from California." That staff sergeant did not know what to say; his patronizing look was gone, replaced by an, "Oh crap, what have I done now?" look, as he stammered an apology. And we all said under our breath, "Fucking lifer." But at least he left us alone after that, and we went ahead and built the flower beds. I have always wondered where the flowers were going to come from; in the course of my whole tour, I never saw even one flower, much less a Vietnamese Home Depot.

When I received my orders for my permanent duty station, I went by bus back to Bien Hoa Airport to fly up to Cam Ranh Bay. It was great to get out of the mud and dirt of Long Binh. While we were getting on the plane, a C-130, I bumped into the same Special Forces major. For the flight up to Nha Trang, he had to straddle my boots while sitting on the floor of the plane. I always wished that I had found out his name or introduced myself, but I held back; spec fours did not have conversations with majors. I hope he made it back home OK.

Two

Castles in the Sand

BARRACKS LIFE

We were lucky at Cam Ranh Bay in that we had barracks to stay in. No matter how flimsy they were, they were better than tents. Each building was just a frame covered with a nylon screen and one-by-four boards that were set as louvers for the first five feet or so up from the floor.

Blast shields of sand bags about three feet high were set up around the barracks. I can't imagine how they would have protected us from anything the enemy had in their inventory. Like many things, they looked nice, but did not work very well.

The barracks were infested with rats and cockroaches, even though there was poison set out everywhere. Nothing edible could be left out uncovered overnight or it would be eaten by the rats or full of cockroaches the next morning. In our feeble attempts to rid ourselves of these pests, we would set traps for them, the roaches especially.

People often got cookies in care packages from home, packed in two-pound coffee cans—the only way to ship anything so it would not get crushed. After the cookies were eaten and just crumbs re-

Be it ever so humble...my barracks.

mained in the can, we would set it out overnight, and the next morning it would be full of cockroaches. We would take the can, squirt lighter fluid into it, and set it on fire. On a hot and humid Vietnam morning, there was nothing like the smell of cockroaches roasting on an open fire. It was not unusual to walk by on the way to morning formation and see a coffee can sitting out in front of a barracks with black smoke boiling out of it; you could hear those roaches crackling in the fire from the boardwalk.

Now, our roaches were not your everyday cockroaches—they were big, up to three inches long, and they could fly like birds. They would fly around at night and land on you and run up your leg or arm—or, as happened to me on several occasions, your face. I used to sleep with my arm hanging over the side of my bunk, but the roaches seemed to think my arm was the perfect landing strip. So they would fly through the barracks and land on my arm and run

up to my shoulder. Did you know roaches have really scratchy feet? To this day, I am unable to sleep with my arm hanging outside my bed, even though it was over forty years ago.

One memorable night, I was sleeping when a roach landed on my leg and ran up to my chest. Jumping out of bed, I grabbed a shower shoe and tried to smash the offender, cussing a streak all the while. I happened to look up, and there stood my friend Spec Four Johnson, who was serving as CQ (Charge Of Quarters) that night. Johnson, who normally looked like a laid-back California surfer dude, looked overtaken by fright.

"Are you all right?" he said.

"Yeah, I was just trying to kill a roach that landed on me."

Later on, he told me he had just been doing his job and walking through the barracks, when I jumped up right in front of him in my attempt to slay the enemy roach. He said he was afraid I had completely lost my mind, another victim claimed by the stress of just being there.

Rats and cockroaches were not the only nighttime visitors to the barracks; there were whores around almost all the time. There was a village nearby, on the Cam Ranh Peninsula, and even though it was off-limits the whole time I was there, the whores still got though the wire. Sometimes they were caught by the MPs, but were soon back, having paid their "fines." Turned out MPs were GIs, just like the rest of us.

One night, a new captain from the Forty-Sixth Ordnance Company was chasing some of them down the boardwalk. He fired his .45 automatic in the air to stop them, scaring the crap out of the sleeping men. The next morning, we complained to our CO, and he said he had already informed the battalion commander about the episode. I am guessing the captain was just being security conscious, because a number of the whores were probably spies, but he could have killed a GI, and he may not have survived that kind of incident.

Sometimes I would be having a beer and a smoke with someone, and right next to us someone would be having sex with a whore under a sheet, and we would think nothing of it. Life really was reduced to the lowest common denominator; such was life in Vietnam.

One day, when I had been in the company area and was headed back to the barracks, I came upon a couple of men crouching by one of the many fire barrels, fifty-five gallon drums painted red, standing in front of the buildings. Since there was no running water in the barracks, these barrels were full of water to be used in case of fire, and each had a couple of buckets hanging on it.

For some reason, probably some obscure Army regulation, the phrase "non potable water" needed to be written on the barrels. I cannot imagine anyone being tempted to take a swig of the evil brew, which consisted of rainwater and whatever else had been thrown in or fallen in. Certainly no GI would have. The only other people around were Vietnamese, and most of them could not read Vietnamese, much less English—but it was doubtful that even they would have wanted to give it a try.

Despite this, the CWO (Chief Warrant Officer), Mr. Mello, had to put out the order for the barrels to be so labeled. Being the intelligent man that he was—and still is—Mr. Mello did not think to ask the men detailed to do the deed if they knew how to spell "potable." He just told them to get a stencil and get busy.

When I showed up, I happened to glance at their handiwork and noticed that they had stenciled "Non Portable Water" onto the barrels. When I pointed out their spelling error, they did not believe me. I told them the correct spelling was "potable," not "portable."

Thinking I was pretty funny, I laughed, "Wow, must be some pretty heavy shit, if it's non portable. If the water is that heavy, maybe you guys can sell it to a nuclear weapons facility."

This comment of course, was returned with any of number smears

CWO Vern Mello at the 174th.

concerning me and my ancestry, the kindest of which was, "Mac, you think you are so fucking smart." I said, "No, I don't think I'm all that smart, but I sure as hell know how to spell 'potable,' and that is not it." But they did not believe me, and would not change the spelling, no matter what I said.

So, from then on, we had non portable water in the 174th Ordnance Detachment. At least it was worth a chuckle every time I walked down the boardwalk in front of the barracks. Never did find out what Mr. Mello thought, though I imagine he probably just shook his head and walked on.

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The monsoon season in Southeast Asia is a time of being wet and miserable, and it is a fact of life that nothing is ever dry then. If, during the day, your fatigues got wet, they never dried, only stayed kind of damp. The house girls would wash clothes, but you would put them on still damp because they never dried. If you wanted dry

cigarettes then you bought a plastic container for the pack; if you didn't, you had damp smokes. Since it rained every day, the sands of Cam Ranh Bay could not absorb all the water, and large puddles pooled everywhere.

An especially large puddle in front of my barracks grew to the size of a small pond. One night, during a really hard rain, the sand dam containing it gave way. When I happened to wake up to go to the latrine, I swung my feet out of my bunk and found I was standing in about six inches of water. The water was running in the front door and out the back. I hollered and woke everyone, and we hit the lights to see beer and soda cans, shower shoes, and everything else floating along in the current.

Everyone quickly put their footlockers up on something to keep them dry, along with their boots, and after this was done, we all went back to sleep. Looking back, it seems strange that with a creek running in the front door and out the back, we just went back to bed. I guess it shows how sleep-deprived we were. Curiously, this was the only time in my whole tour when mosquitoes were a problem—they drove us nuts the rest of the night.

The next morning we had a monumental cleanup job ahead of us, getting rid of all the mud that had washed in. It was the first time I used a shovel to clean up a barracks and my area. No real damage was done; it was just an inconvenience for all involved, making a miserable time and place even worse.

One night, Mr. Mello showed up in the barracks with a determined look on his face, searching for a particular GI who shall remain nameless. Turned out this GI had never written to his mother since shipping out to Vietnam, and she called the Red Cross, thinking the worst. Anyway, Mr. Mello located the missing GI and took him by the arm. Anytime a commanding officer showed up looking for you, it was not a good thing, and the look on the GI's face reflected his concern.