

VIETNAM REMF?

365 466

RICHARD GILKEY

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VIETNAM REMF?
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*Dedicated to my wife, Charlotte, my family, and
to all those veterans who served in Vietnam.*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

FOR MANY YEARS AS I SHARED MY EXPERIENCES, people would say I should write a book. Thanks to my parents for keeping all the correspondence, photos and collectibles I sent home. This gave me correct dates and other information refreshing my memory.

Very special thanks to Gail Burnet for her time and dedication to edit and improving my writing.

I elected to use very few real names in this book. The ones I did use were those of good friends, and I felt comfortable using them. There are many names I did not use because I do not hold those people in high regard. You may recognize who they are as you read the book.

Most of the negative comments have not been censored, but are the thoughts and feelings of an immature nineteen- to twenty-one year-old. My comments are not politically correct by today's standards, but to make any corrections would not be historically accurate. I am not trying to offend anyone and this was not my intent, so please accept my apologies.

What I have written is the truth. I only wrote about this subject matter because I witnessed and/or was a firsthand participant in these events. If I mention tales based on folklore or hearsay, I have noted that. I don't mean to offend any veteran whose stories might vary from mine, but I am writing from my experience as I remember it. After all, it has been forty-five years.

You can visit https://www.flickr.com/photos/phu_loi_vietnam_experience/ and see more photos that I took while in Vietnam. Many of the photos allowed me to write about that subject matter.

This, then, is the story of an REMF/combat door gunner.

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ONE

BASIC TRAINING

AS A CHILD, I LOVED TO PLAY ARMY. SEVERAL OF THE neighbor boys enjoyed it also. We ran around making gun sounds and throwing dirt clods at each other. We had plenty of room in my new neighborhood; it was mostly orchards until they started building houses. The construction just gave us trenches and other obstacles to hide behind. Also, life at home with my parents was not that pleasant. So it was only natural that I would join the Army after high school.

After graduation from high school 1967, I wanted to take a little break, but the draft board had other ideas. I was concerned I would be drafted so I enlisted in the Army in May of 1968. I believed that by enlisting I would have a chance to choose a profession or to choose what the military called MOS. Your Military Occupational Specialty is your military school trained job title. After all, there was a war going on, and if you were drafted you usually ended up in the infantry (Grunt). The aspect of walking through a jungle in some damn country I had never heard of while there were bad guys out there trying to kill me had very little appeal to me.

I had two great friends in my last few years of high school. Al Jones and Cecil Howell were great guys, and we got along astoundingly. While at Cecil's house one day after signing my papers to join the Army I mentioned to his

mother what I had done. She thought it was admirable and was pleased with my decision. She heard me say that Cecil could join with me. This was known as the buddy plan. Cecil was lost for words as he stuttered and stammered, but she kept pushing. The next day I took Cecil to the Army recruiter. He was still uncertain; if he wanted to join the Army. That day it was decided Cecil, and I would go in the Army together. On the other hand, Al was very reluctant to join us in our new adventure. So on July 25, 1968 we declared our oath of allegiance to the United States. I was inducted into the Army at Oakland, California along with my best friend, Cecil.

Prior to my enlistment, I had to go through the regular requirements such as a physical and aptitude tests. Cecil's parents drove us to Oakland, but we had to use public transportation to get back to Union City. I had never ridden on public transportation before, only on the school bus. My adventures were starting, and I cherished those thoughts of what was to come! At the Induction Center in Oakland, I was poked, prodded and anally abused for my first time in my life. While waiting in the lobby for my name to be called I watched dozens of draftees line up at Coke machines. I had discovered that these individuals had been drafted and were trying to raise their blood sugar high enough to fail the physical. I watched this one guy drink at least twenty Cokes. Coke must have made a fortune during that time. There were very long lines at each Coke machine and all you could hear were guys asking for change and the sound of the machines dispensing bottles of Coke. In fact, their voices made enough noise to drown out any ordinary conversation that was going on. I wondered how many might have become diabetic from their actions?

They routed us into a room where they separated the enlistees from the draftees. An Army sergeant entered the room and ordered the draftees, to line up and come to attention. He then asked, "Which of you wants to join the Army? Take one step forward." No one moved.

A Marine sergeant entered the room. He congratulated the draftees with, "Well ladies you just joined the Marines." This was hilarious because they just moaned and groaned. At that point some actually volunteered to join the Army. No one had signed up to be a Marine. "It's too late for the Army,"

the Marine sergeant declared, “Saddle up and follow me, dumb asses; you just joined the Marines!”

They paraded us around from room to room in our underwear examining this, looking at that, and asking us questions. It was a full scale physical. They brought all of us into an enormous room. There had to be at least a hundred of us in our boxers shorts or tighty-whities. We were instructed to face the wall, drop our drawers and bend over and grab our ankles. I broke out in hysterics as I looked through my legs to the other side of the room. This long line of bare asses looked back at me. At the early age of nineteen, I discovered what a prostate exam was, hence the anal abuse! The sounds the guys made when the doctor inserted his finger made me giggle until it was my turn.

That fateful day, 25 July 1968, I swore allegiance to the United States. They loaded us on a bus that took us to an airport where I had my first plane ride. We flew to Sea-Tac Airport near Seattle Washington. Then the army bused us to Fort Lewis.

During the first four days in the Army, we were given many tests. We received at least a dozen shots. One day we were given eight shots; we had sore arms the next day.

What was funny was that the sergeant issuing our clothing only had to look at us and determine our size. Mine was small regular. Uniforms flew over the counter. We quickly stuffed them in our new duffle bags. The sergeant issuing our footwear glanced at our feet and tossed us two pairs of combat boots and a pair of dress shoes. Boy, did I hope they fit!

In those four days, we also received the famous buzz hair cut. There were three butchers cutting hair. When the long haired guys sat down in the barber chair, the barber buzzed stripes, mohawks, and other goofy haircuts to ridicule the trainees. We all laughed hilariously until it was our turn! Afterward, we walked outside rubbing our heads and giggling at each other.

Then the fun started. Our second morning in Basic Training was a day to relax after a hectic Saturday learning so many new things; what to do and what not to do. We were overwhelmed and exhausted. We looked forward to our Sunday off. The applied training started on Monday.

Early Sunday morning a whistle blew loudly, as someone yelled “FALL OUT!”

Forty-eight GIs hit the stairwell on the third floor. We rushed down the stairs and encountered the tail end of a hundred guys on the second floor making their exit. All of us hit the front door of the barracks, charging out the double doors. We ran around the barracks and fell into formation in the back parking lot, as instructed the day before.

On the podium was a corporal staring at his watch. We were all at attention when the corporal started yelling at us. He enunciated every word very clearly. “IT TOOK YOU TWO MINUTES AND TWELVE SECONDS TO FALL OUT, THAT IS TWELVE SECONDS ENTIRELY TOO LONG!” What the hell, we had the day off, and now someone with a Napoleon complex was going to harass us. Oh yeah, he was short. “YOU WILL RETURN TO THE BARRACKS AND WHEN THE WHISTLE BLOWS YOU WILL FALL OUT IN LESS THAN TWO MINUTES.” “FALL OUT!”

As we ran around the building, we were a very determined group of GIs. We were dedicated to making this happen. Several of us tried to pump everyone up to put forth their best effort. The whistle blew, and we made every effort to beat the two-minute mark. We rushed into formation, winded and confident that we had accomplished the task. Maybe this dumb ass corporal would leave us alone.

“IT TOOK YOU TWO MINUTES THAT IS, EIGHT SECONDS. THAT IS, EIGHT SECONDS ENTIRELY TOO LONG!” What the hell, we had to have beaten the two-minute mark. “THIS TIME YOU WILL FALL OUT CARRYING YOUR LAUNDRY BAG, AND IF YOU DO NOT SUCCEED YOU WILL CONTINUE TO BRING ADDITIONAL ITEMS.” “NOW FALL OUT!” What the hell, what other items? Geez!

Once again, we ran around the building, still a very determined group. The guys were telling one another to empty the laundry bag we each had. Then we were back on the third floor waiting for the whistle, still committed to making the two-minute mark. We were a little winded and slowly getting

exhausted. The whistle blew, and we heard “FALL OUT!” We ran down the stairs, skipping four or five steps at a time. We ran like hell and quickly got into formation.

Once again the corporal started his rant: “IT TOOK YOU TWO MINUTES AND TWENTY-TWO SECONDS. THAT IS TWENTY-TWO SECONDS ENTIRELY TOO LONG. THIS TIME YOU WILL FALL OUT CARRYING YOUR LAUNDRY BAG AND ALL YOUR SHOES. “FALL OUT!”

We rushed around the building still determined but starting to get angry, not to mention tired. Someone said we should put our shoes in the laundry bag to make it easier.

The damn whistle blew, and we were off again in an attempt to beat the two-minute rule. We had a big problem, we were winded and tired. We quickly fell into formation breathing hard and with not so determined looks on our faces. From the look on the corporal’s face, he was enjoying this torment, “IT TOOK YOU TWO MINUTES AND THIRTY FOUR SECONDS. THAT IS THIRTY FOUR SECONDS ENTIRELY TOO LONG!” By now I think most of us knew it was impossible, but what are we going to do? “THIS TIME YOU WILL FALL OUT WITH YOUR LAUNDRY BAG, YOUR SHOES, AND YOUR FOOTLOCKER!”

What the hell, if we didn’t make the time without our footlockers, how were we going to make it carrying them? We ran around the barracks with a little less enthusiasm as we were trying to pace ourselves. We all agreed to put everything in the footlockers, so we were only carrying one item.

We waited, footlockers in hand, and even started to sneak down the stairs in an attempt to succeed. The whistle blew, and we once again heard, “FALL OUT!”

All forty-eight men, footlockers in hand, hit the top of the staircase on the third floor. It was awkward and very difficult. One of the trainees, footlocker in tow, tripped and tumbled down the stairs. A chain reaction started and other men started falling. Some just let their footlockers go. Broken footlockers, clothes, and other contents in our footlockers, lined the

staircase. It seemed hilarious at the time. I was getting worried that someone might get hurt. Suddenly someone screamed loudly. One of the trainees ran upstairs, heading for his wall locker. He got out his Army entrenching tool (small collapsible shovel). Screaming like a mad man he ran back down the stairs. We all followed to witness a potential murder.

When he hit the lobby area of the barracks, he headed out the back door. We had been instructed never to leave the barracks through the back door. He charged out the double doors yelling like a banshee as he charged towards the corporal. The corporal is shocked and jumps off the podium and starts running through the parking lot towards the woods; the trainee with the shovel in hot pursuit. There were three or four guys in pursuit of the shovel yielding trainee. Hilarious! The trainee never caught the corporal, to our surprise. A calm settled in for the rest of the day. No corporal in sight. On the day of graduation from Basic Training, the corporal stood on the podium and complimented us for not putting up with his harassment. He informed us we were the first Basic Training class ever to put a stop to his fun.

The first week of Basic Training a drill sergeant pulled two other guys and myself out of morning formation. They drove us to a motor pool and I learned we were selected to get our military driver's license. We took a written test and all three of us passed that part easily. They took us outside and we had to perform a behind the wheel test. One big problem, the test was going to be in a thirty-passenger bus. I had driven a few large trucks prior to the army and considered myself to be an expert driver. I had high expectations of being a race car driver after the army. I drove the bus around the base and performed all the traffic laws perfectly. I was instructed to drive up a steep hill. Half way up the hill I was instructed to pull over on the shoulder and stop. As I started to pull back onto the road I finessed the emergency brake, gas pedal and clutch slowly pulling out. It was perfect, the bus didn't slip one inch backwards. We returned to the motor pool and I saw orange traffic cones in a large area. We had to drive the bus forward through the cones, and then backwards through the cones. At least a dozen right and then left turns as we zig-zagged our way through the cones. We were allowed one time to pull

forward to correct a mistake. We all failed! On the drive back to the company area, we all got a good ass chewing. The next morning I was pulled out of formation again and given the opportunity to take the test again. I was told if I failed the test I was dead! I passed with flying colors and the company decided they would get by with one driver instead of three. Driving the deuce-and-a-half was fun. I was ecstatic about driving a large army truck and my enthusiasm showed every time. I was so proud of my truck; I even took a picture of it parked in the corner of the parking lot behind the barracks.

Being the company driver had its advantages. The day of our training in the gas chamber had arrived. I was pulled out of formation and instructed to get my deuce-and-a-half and report to the supply room. The supply sergeant informed me I was driving him to the base laundry facility to pick up that week's fresh bedding and towels.

We drove a short distance, arriving at the laundry facility. I backed the truck up to a pair of doors and jumped out. I had to help load large, heavy piles of clean sheets and pillow cases. We loaded up and I drove back to the company. As I pulled up I saw a drill sergeant heading to the truck. He didn't look like he was in a good mood. He yelled at me and wanted to know why I wasn't with the company. The supply sergeant tried to straighten things out, but the drill sergeant didn't want to hear it. He told me to get in the truck and he jumped in the passenger seat.

He instructed me on how to get to the gas training area. Damn! I thought I was going to get out of being gassed. As we pulled up to the training area, he told me where to park and yelled for me to hurry up. I joined all the other guys in the company getting ready to enter the tear gas building. We were instructed to put on our gas mask. They then marched us into a small building. We also put one hand upon the shoulder of the guy in front of us. The room was full of white smoke and tear gas when we entered. We started running around the room in a counter clockwise direction. We ran around in a circle getting winded and started breathing hard. Someone instructed us to remove our gas mask. The second we did, our eyes felt like they were burning out of our head. I started choking and gagging. We did a few laps

breathing in the gas. We were becoming disoriented when they opened the doors and let us exit. We all ran a few feet from the building gagging and crying. Some of the guys had started vomiting. Just one guy throwing up caused others to follow and toss their breakfast. They let us use water from our canteens and flush our eyes.

They walked us over to another area that had short poles buried in the ground with wires running from pole to pole creating a web of wires about three feet off the ground. You could see shallow trenches between the poles where hundreds of other GIs had crawled. There were walking platforms over this whole area above the wires. They instructed us to crawl in under the wire with our rifles. They said when we sensed gas to roll over, keeping our rifles from touching the ground. We had to remove our helmets and place them on our chests. Then yell “gas!” and quickly put on our gas mask.

As we crawled under the wires we heard the sound of grenades being popped. Some of the guys started to roll over, but they were beaten with sticks that the drill instructors carried high above us all. They yelled at us and said it was only smoke and to keep crawling. The second I heard another grenade pop, I rolled over and put my mask on. I thought I was pretty smart and had beaten them at their game. The white smoke covered my movement and I was proud to have avoided the gas. But as I put both my hands on the sides of the mask to cover the filters I pulled the mask away from my face. At that exact moment one of the drill instructors had stuck the gas grenade in my face. Just enough gas had entered my mask and as I took a deep breath, it hit me! It was far worse than tear gas. The CS gas had the same effect as tear gas, but multiplied times a thousand, it was more effective. My body started to burn everywhere there was moisture. I started gagging and threw up in my mask. I yanked it off, which made things worse. I crawled as fast as I could to clear the wires and jumped up and ran a short distance flushing my eyes with water, which didn't seem to help. WHY? Why did I have to drive quickly back to the company area. Another five minutes and I would have missed all this fun.

I heard a lot of laughter and looked into the woods. We had a very large

black guy in the company and he let us know just how big he was. He tormented us, teased us and just made our time miserable. During the gassing he had jumped up and managed to step his way through all the wires. As he ran, he was stripping off all his clothes screaming and yelling. By the time I saw him, he was totally naked screaming and running in circles. We all had a good laugh and it seemed to help us with our horrible experience. From that day forward, he withdrew and the bullying went away. He never bothered any of us again. The bigger they are, the harder they fall.

The company was preparing for bivouac and one of the mess hall cooks took me back to the motor pool to sign out a water buffalo. A water buffalo was a two-wheeled trailer with an oblong shaped 400 gallon tank on top. He helped me hook up the trailer and air lines that operated the trailer brakes. When we arrived back at the barracks, the cook told me to drive to the water distribution point over on the hill and fill the trailer with potable water.

As I drove out of the parking lot I was not sure exactly what hill he was talking about. The only hill I knew was the one we all hated. It was a rutted washed out gravel nightmare they made us run up every day. I drove over to the hill and got out of the truck; I needed to strategically calculate my adventure. I jumped back in, shifted the truck into low gear, or as we called it, "granny gear," and started my ascent. Half way up the hill the truck stopped and started jerking and bouncing as the rear tandem wheels spun in the loose dirt and rocks. I was stuck! I applied the emergency brake and climbed out to evaluate my predicament. It appeared the only solution was to back down and try again in a different location. I climbed back in the driver's seat and slowly released the brake as the truck started going down the hill backwards. I watched in the mirror, and saw the trailer in my mirror starting to jack knife. I put the truck in first gear and started back up the hill, but the same problem haunted me. The washed out ruts in the hill dictated my direction and when backing up also dictated the trailer's direction. I jumped out and evaluated my problem. I realized at that moment that the truck was an all-wheel drive

vehicle. This meant I could engage all ten tires. But not being familiar with the truck I hesitated.

I knew I needed to get the truck off the hill before someone saw me. I climbed back in and started reading all the instruction as to how to engage the front differential. I moved a lever adjusted something else and decided I was ready to go for it. I slowly let the clutch out and let the emergency brake off slowly at the same time. The truck lunged forward and I slammed on the brakes. I then realized I had to use more finesse. I started the procedure over. I gave it a little gas, slowly released the emergency brake and the truck started climbing the hill. What a relief! As I reached the top of the hill I started looking for the location to fill the trailer. All I saw was another Basic Training company staring at me. To my left was a gravel road leading from the base of the hill to the top. Funny when I think about it, I never saw that road from the dozens of times we ran up and down that damn hill.

I jumped out of the truck and looked around, that's when over on another hill I saw another driver filling his water buffalo. The distribution point was off a paved road, part of the base I had never seen. By now my truck and I had piqued the curiosity of one of the officers with the Basic Training company. He had probably seen the maggot patch above my right chest pocket. Maggot patches were all white with black letters noting the company I was in. He started to walk over; I quickly jumped in and drove to the road to get off that stupid hill. I left the officer in a cloud of dust.

I found my way over to the water distribution point and filled my trailer. When I arrived back at the barracks, the cook asked me what took so long. He laughed like hell as I told him what had happened.

Our training cycle had arrived where we camped for several days in the woods of Fort Lewis. It was called "bivouac." I stood in the parking lot and watched the company board cattle cars. My friends and not-so-friends were on their way to camp in the woods. I couldn't help but grin, knowing I was not joining them. A mess sergeant approached and instructed me to get my

truck ready and another mess NCO would show me where to deliver the water buffalo.

We drove out into a vast wooded area of Fort Lewis on a paved road. I made a right turn onto a single lane dirt/gravel road. The road was narrow and had culverts for drainage on both sides. The mess NCO informed me that during my night delivery of water I was not to stop for anybody and turn out the lights. Aggressors might hijack the truck and get me to drive them into the company bivouac area. We arrived at the campsite and I saw my friends setting up their pup tents. I received some dirty looks from Cecil. After all, I persuaded him to join the Army with me and now I had abandoned him. I backed the water buffalo between two trees, jumped out and disconnected the air lines and the trailer from the truck. I couldn't wait to get back to the barracks.

Early that evening I drove back to the bivouac area and picked up the water buffalo. I drove the truck to the water distribution point and filled up the trailer. It was getting dark and I knew that by the time I drove back into the woods it would be pitch dark. I cautiously drove down the gravel road and made my way back into the company area. I was greeted by several trainees wanting to search my truck for aggressors. One of the cooks wanted the trailer in a different location. The trailer was much narrower than the truck so I could not see it in my mirror. The cook was guiding me as I felt the trailer hit a tree. The cook ran over and jumped on the running board and started yelling at me. I had a slight attitude and yelled back that I could not see in the darkness and could barely see him. I pulled forward and tried again to put the trailer where the cook wanted it. I was still unable to see what was behind me or even see the cook. So I decided to turn on the lights, which brought one of the company officers over screaming. "Turn out the fucking lights!" he yelled. I was getting pissed, so I turned off the lights and continued to back up.

I didn't hear the cook tell me to stop and then I heard a loud hissing sound. The truck wouldn't move so I jumped out to investigate. The trailer had jackknifed and ruptured one of the air lines. With no air to the trailer

the brakes were locked. It wasn't going to move. The cook was yelling at me as I quickly disconnected the trailer and jumped in the cab. He was insisting I move the trailer, but I ignored him, starting the truck. I slammed the truck into second gear and lunged forward, escaping the screaming cook.

I was driving down the one lane road when I saw several guys standing in the middle of the road. I smashed the gas pedal and down shifted to pick-up speed. The enemy aggressors jumped off the road as I zoomed past them. In my mirror I could see muzzle flashes from their rifles as they screamed and yelled and fired their blank rounds at me. I laughed and realized I had escaped them.

I turned the headlights on and suddenly saw this large log across the road. Now what do I do? I kept up my speed and ran over the large log doing thirty-five miles per hour. The truck bounced like a basketball two or three times. I was all over the road and almost in the culvert. Many years later, I would see a deuce-and-a-half bounce just like that day in the movie Rambo. I didn't realize I had become a stunt man!

I returned to the barracks and went up to my room. Peace and quiet prevailed and I was happy to lie on my bunk. Suddenly a drill sergeant entered my room. I jumped off my bunk and snapped to attention. The sergeant told me to relax and to follow him. We walked down the stairs to an area I had only briefly seen once before. We entered one of the DI's (drill instructors) rooms and there were several NCOs watching TV. One of them offered me a beer and told me to sit down and relax. They offered me pizza and another beer. WOW! They were actually human. After a couple of beers and pizza, I went back to my room. If Cecil and the other guys in the platoon knew what I had done, I would have had been the recipient of a blanket party where I would be wrapped in a blanket and have the snot beat out of me.

The next day I went through the same routine with one exception. I drove faster to get back to the barracks. Bivouac was fun!

Third platoon had one guy that was not fond of bathing. He was getting pretty ripe and the other guys started to complain about his odor. Cecil and I were in our room polishing our boots when we heard a ruckus. A group of guys had this smelly soldier wrapped up in a blanket and was dragging him down the hallway to the latrine. They took him into the shower and several guys held him down while a few others started scrubbing him with a scrub brush and lye soap. He was screaming, which got the attention of one of the cadre. When he arrived at the scene, he just laughed and walked away. After the stinky guy's shower and lesson learned, he managed to stay cleaner through the rest of Basic Training.

They marched us daily to a large field to perform our exercises known as P.T. (Physical Training). The field had to have been several hundred feet wide and as long. At the head of the field was a raised podium where one of the drill instructors gave the orders for the different exercises. Several drill instructors and the cadre walked amongst us screaming and yelling at us. The number of repetitions for each exercise were long and created much pain as we tried to do as instructed.

One of the exercises was known as "leg lifts." We would lie on our backs and raise our legs together to a ninety degree angle. When the legs were in the up position we would tilt them to the left and back center and then to our right. We repeated the exercise over and over.

The field had river rocks strewn everywhere. The rocks ranged from small to three inches in diameter. As I got into position for the leg lifts, I had a large round rock in the middle of my back. It was painful and difficult to lay in that position. I carefully maneuvered sideways and tried to reach the rock. I was not going to be able to raise my legs with the rock centered in my back. As I tried to get rid of the rock, my moves became more visible. One of the drill instructors saw me and quickly walked to my side. He stuck his combat boot in the middle of my chest pressing down. He yelled, "Keep that fucking rock where it is."

Pain shot through my back as I tried to raise my legs. His foot, pushing harder and harder on my chest, was causing so much pain I thought I was going to pass out. He removed his foot and instructed me to remove the rock, which I quickly did. My back was killing me, but the repetitions for the leg raises caused my stomach muscles to start burning. Now the stomach pain was greater than the back pain. My legs were no longer at a ninety degree angle to my body and they started to drop. That same drill instructor ran over and stuffed the toes of his boots into my ass. He screamed for me to keep my legs up. I struggled. We lowered our legs to the left, but when I tried to raise them his body was in the way and my boots crashed into his side. He started screaming and then kicked me in the ass extremely hard. This gave me enough strength to raise my legs, but his kicking continued. Finally, I couldn't take the pain of the leg raises and my ass was becoming severely bruised from his kicking. I dropped my boots until they rested on the drill instructor's chest. This really pissed him off!

He was screaming so loud I was sure he could be heard for miles. The intensity of his kicking increased as I dropped my feet down to protect my ass. My boots crashed on top of his spit shined Corcoran Jump Boots. I scuffed his boots pretty badly. The punishment continued with his screaming and kicking. He told me that he would visit me that evening and I would polish all his boots and dress shoes. Thank goodness, he never showed up that evening. We barely had enough time to prepare for the next day and would have found it difficult to add other tasks. Lights out at 21:00 hundred hours. It was an uncomfortable night's sleep, my back and butt really hurt.

In 1968, the combat rifles carried by soldiers were M-14s. It shot a 7.62 NATO round, the same as the M-60 machine gun. It came time in our training to qualify our weapon. Prior to our firing live ammunition we had class after class regarding safety, care of our weapon and of course more safety. We were instructed about the Rifleman's Creed. They made us march

and repeat, “This is my rifle, this is my gun,” grabbing our crotch, “this is for killing, this is for fun”—once again grabbing our crotch.

At the rifle range we sat in bleachers listening to a drill sergeant explain the operating components of the M-14. He also talked about recoil. The sergeant evaluated all of us and selected the guy he thought was the most fragile. He selected a guy named David, and pulled him from the bleachers for a demonstration. The instructor shouldered the rifle and squeezed off a round. He was trying to demonstrate that it didn’t require bravery to shoot the rifle and that we should not be afraid. He took David and stuck the rifle in his crotch. You could see the fear in David’s face. He was protesting, saying he didn’t want to show everyone that it did or didn’t hurt. David closed his eyes and the instructor pulled the trigger. The look on David’s face was one of relief, and he smiled and told us it didn’t hurt.

We were assigned a firing station and we all moved out to our own location. We fired the rifle in several different positions, lying or prone, sitting and of course standing. On another day, we shot at pop-up targets ranging from 25 meters to 500 meters. The silhouette figures became larger the further the distance. This was fun; they gave us several rounds of ammunition and we fired on targets as they popped up. We had three do-over rounds just in case we missed. I was doing really well, when the target at 500 meters popped up. I quickly dispatched my target, but noticed the guy next to me had missed his target. I tried to make my movement slight so as not to be noticed. I squeezed off another round and took out his target. I wasn’t thinking that between the two of us, we had two other sets of eyes watching. Fortunately the sergeant behind the guy next to me didn’t notice what I had done. The sergeant behind me yelled at me, but didn’t seem to be that mad. When we finished firing, he told me that was a hell-of-a shot.

The day finally came to qualify for a shiny badge we would wear on our dress uniform. The sergeant observing me told me that sometimes shooting low in front of a target would get the same results as a direct hit. The rocks flying through the air were just as lethal. Things were going great and I didn’t see the target at twenty-five meters had popped up. The sergeant wanted to

point it out, but he couldn't. I had a perfect score going and this was going to screw me up. At the last second I saw the shorter silhouette directly in front of me and threw a hand full of rocks at the target. The target fell and my perfect record was still in place. We fired on some other targets, if I remember, and that's when I missed. I had missed enough targets to qualify me as Marksman. I really wanted to qualify as Expert, that being the best.

One evening we had finished evening chow and returned to the barracks. We began preparing for our twenty mile forced march. I had never walked that far and wasn't sure if I could do it. About an hour before dusk we fell out in the parking lot dressed in full combat gear. The march was not only a challenge of endurance, but there was a time factor involved. One of the sergeants stood on the podium and ordered us to remove the steel pot from our helmet liner. We set the helmet liner at our feet and were instructed to hold the steel pot high above our heads. When the sergeant yelled "Attention," we were to drop the steel pot on our heads as our bodies snapped to attention. We did this over and over and we started moaning and groaning from the pain of the steel pot slamming onto our heads. I was getting a pretty good headache. Why were we doing this? Somewhere around the fifth drop one of the guys had the brim of the steel pot land on his nose. It split his nose open pretty good and the blood flowed. The sergeant then realized we had had enough and they gave first aid to the wounded recruit.

They called us to attention, and gave our instructions for the night. It appeared that the drill sergeants wanted to break the post record for a forced march. They marched us out of the parking lot and on a dirt road we knew so well. The company was split in two with half the company walking on one side of the road and the other half on the opposite side. We learned what interval we were to maintain in case we were ambushed. We marched several miles and it was now dark. We knew that sometime during the march aggressors were to attack us. You couldn't see a thing and the shadows in the woods were eerie.

Suddenly, the woods on the right side bust into rifle fire. We were under attack! I dove into the culvert alongside the road and tried to get paper thin. I stuck my rifle over the top of the culvert and yelled “bang bang.” I felt silly acting like I was seven years old. Then I hear an order for us to advance into the woods and capture one of the aggressors. I started running and screaming as loudly as possible. They taught us that screaming might give the enemy the thought that we were crazy and they might surrender. A form of intimidation! I was totally blind from the darkness and tripped on a fallen tree. I bit the dust face first, but that didn’t stop me. I jumped up and continued my screaming assault on the enemy. I suddenly found myself eating forest floor again and decided this was insane. I crawled over to a tree and felt that if I couldn’t see anything or anyone then no one could see me taking it easy. Moments later, we were instructed to fall back into marching formation and we continued our forced march.

A short while later we were ordered to take a break. We moved a short distance into the woods and sat down. I drank from my canteen and lay back against a log. Then the sergeants moved through us and whispered for us to move farther into the woods, telling us we needed to be as quiet as possible in our move. Once again, we settled down and the sergeants told us we would be there for a while. This was great, but how were we going to break the record by sitting on our asses? We had been marching for about two hours when we took this break. We sat around and whispered to each other for about an hour.

Some of us were falling asleep as we sat in the darkness of the woods. I had learned that you gain complete night vision within twenty minutes. That didn’t seem to help, it was pitch dark. The night sky was not visible through the trees. We were instructed to fall out on the road, and we quickly got into two long lines on both sides of the road. One of the sergeants ordered us about face, which was the direction to go back to the barracks. We had not marched more than a few miles when we took our long break. I didn’t care, I only wanted to feel the sheets on my bed. We started marching and the order was to “quick time march,” meaning a quick walking speed. We did this

for about a mile and then they ordered us to “double time,” meaning run. It was difficult running in full combat gear and of course this added to our exhaustion. We ran for quite a while, finally running into the parking lot at the barracks. We were beat and then they congratulated us for our efforts, we had beaten the record.

On 27 Sept 1968 Cecil and I graduated from Basic Training class E 1-2 (E Company, 1st Battalion, 2nd Brigade). I also had managed to achieve my first promotion from Private E-1 to Private E-2. I had a single stripe, sewn on my dress uniform—one of only eight promotions given in Basic Training. Cecil’s parents and sister had driven up to Fort Lewis for our graduation ceremony. We both were a little homesick, and it was great seeing familiar faces. My family couldn’t make the trip, but sent a small care package for me. We discovered that we would not be going on leave. I was a bit upset that we were denied leave prior to our next adventure, but who was I going to complain to, and what would they do—send me to Vietnam?

The evening after graduation, they marched the company over to the PX (Post Exchange). I was nineteen and about to buy my first beer. I was first in line as they ushered me through the back door of the PX. They opened the cooler door and I was shocked, they had six packs of beer stacked door height. I remember buying two six-packs of sixteen ounce Olympia Beer along with two other six-packs. Why I bought that much beer I will never understand.

All three companies within the battalion (Bn.) were at the PX. There were 400 to 500 Basic Training graduates buying beer. Within an hour the whole area surrounding the PX was littered with thousands of beer cans. You could not walk without stepping on beer cans. Everyone was in a great mood, of course we were all drunk.

I had run out of beer. I don’t remember if I drank it all, but if you were still standing and didn’t have a beer in your hand someone gave you one. I was so drunk I could not walk, so I started crawling. I crawled two blocks to

get back to the company area. I crawled up all three flights of stairs, found my room, crashed on my bed and the room started spinning. Cecil was crawling around on the floor and had crept under his bunk. He got stuck and started screaming for help. I grabbed his ankles and pulled, but the bed came with him. He continued to yell for help. I managed to stand up and lift his bunk as he crawled out from under it. He thanked me for saving his life.

I told Cecil I was going to puke and started heading to the latrine. About half way down the hallway, I threw up all over the walls and floor. Cecil was right behind me laughing and told me he would clean up the mess. As I walked out of the latrine wiping my mouth with my hand, I saw Cecil mopping my barf all over the place. We both went back to our rooms and passed out on our bunks.

About 02:00 hours they made us fallout for a head count. Most of us were capable of walking or staggering out the back doors of the barracks and got into formation. The guys that had passed out were carried and laid on the asphalt in the squad and in the position they belonged. Guys in all three platoons were urinating in the parking lot. The men laying on the ground became soaked with urine as it ran into the gutter. One of the guys was urinating on the leg of the man standing in front of him. We all laughed. The gutter flowed yellow.

They started calling our names in alphabetical order to return to our bunks. I was pretty happy that my name would be called soon. I felt sorry for the guys with last names that started in the second half of the alphabet. The men that had passed out just lay there until the morning or whenever they managed to wake up.

The next morning we all awoke with horrible hangovers. We quietly packed our duffle bags and waited for our transportation to take us on another adventure.

