

Trustee Tapped for Vietnam Veterans Oral History Archive

by Vic Bary

In late March I was contacted by the Vietnam Center and Archive at Texas Technical University and asked to provide an interview about my service in Vietnam for their oral history archive. This is a shortened abstract of what I told them.

I arrived in Vietnam January 7, 1967, carrying a Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) of 11B10 - Light Weapons Infantryman. Upon arrival at 90th Replacement Battalion, Long Binh, Vietnam, I fell in with a group of other 11Bs. We soon became familiar with a daily routine. After a morning formation, trucks from the Infantry divisions would arrive first, one division at a time. Those tapped for each division would have their names read out, and were directed to board the heavily sandbagged trucks. After all the Infantry division candidates were called, individuals going to other (less dangerous) units would have their names called by unit. The whole process was repeated again in the afternoon.

By the third day, we 11Bs knew the routine and tuned it out once the Infantry divisions had been called. That afternoon, after all the Infantry divisions had been called, I heard my name called along with those of several of my buddies. "What unit was that?" I inquired. One of the guys said, "I heard just part of it, the 11th something or other." That seemed to make sense, as there was an 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, a track-mounted Infantry outfit commanded by General George S. Patton's son. We asked the NCO in charge where the trucks were that we should board, but he said "just wait a bit, your transportation is arriving shortly." A few minutes later we heard, then saw, a Huey helicopter arriving. "There it is", the NCO said. We all knew something good had just happened. Goodbye Infantry, hello Aviation!

For reasons I will never understand, four of us were spared Infantry division assignment and had been selected for the 11th Combat Aviation Battalion (11th CAB) of the Army's 1st Aviation Brigade, for duty either as a helicopter door gunner or in the Security Platoon to man bunkers on the sector of the base perimeter that the 11th CAB was responsible for.



Vic in Vietnam

Upon arrival at the 11th's Phu Loi base camp, we were directed to Personnel for in-processing. While going through my records, the clerk conducting the process noted that I was a college graduate. "Can you type?", he asked. Having taken a non-credit typing course in high school to prepare myself for high school and college term papers, I responded "Yes, 40 words a minute." (This was on a manual typewriter.) He asked me to demonstrate this proficiency, which I did. Then he asked me one more question. "Do you play Bridge?" "Yes, I responded, rather well." (It turned out the Personnel Department's Bridge 4th had just rotated home.) "Well," he said, "we have two positions open that I can offer you. One is as a security guard on the bunker line, the other is as a personnel specialist here in this office. Which will it be?" "I think I'd prefer to work here", I replied.

Thus began my 12 month career as a personnel specialist with the enviable task of making sure that each of some 800 junior enlisted men (privates through staff sergeants) had their next assignment and a plane ticket back to the States when their 12-month tour of duty had ended. I did get some flying during the 12 months of my tour with the 11th CBT Avn Bn, but I must tell you that office work is ever so much more fulfilling than staring over the top of an M-60 machine gun hoping that nothing will happen (and then being bored, but relieved, when nothing has happened).

The 11th sat at the foot of an area known as the "Iron Triangle" (the name speaks for itself), which had been the headquarters of the National Liberation Front (Viet Cong) since the French

Indo China War. We provided the Infantry - primarily the 1st Infantry Division - with air transportation and aerial machine gun and rocket support with our Huey and Chinook helicopters in a tactical area of operations that stretched from west of Saigon to the Cambodian border. As an airplane nut as a kid (my father served in naval avionics in WW II) I was thrilled to be serving with a chopper unit and proud of the record it was making for itself.

I worked hard at my job and was rewarded with three promotions during my year in Vietnam. (From private to private first class, from PFC to Specialist 4th Class, and from SP-4 to Specialist 5th class - the equivalent of a buck sergeant.) While my year was nothing like the experience I expected to have as a light weapons infantryman, it was not without some frightening moments. Our base was in a dangerous area and was attacked periodically. In one instance, on the night of July 29, 1967, we were one of four 1st Infantry Division bases to be the first targets within III Corps to be struck by 122mm and 140mm rockets. We had aviation companies at three of those four bases (Phu Loi, Phuoch Vinh, and Lai Khe) at which the 11th suffered a total of 84 casualties during the attacks. By sheer bad luck, I was on internal guard duty when the attack on Phu Loi started. The company clerk (who was Charge of Quarters runner that night) and I, of our own volition, divided the company area into halves and ran from billet to billet (about 40 in all) and made sure that all the men were awake and moving to the bunkers. All this while rockets and mortar rounds rained down on us. It probably took us less than five minutes to accomplish, but it seemed like an eternity at the time. For our actions, we were each awarded the Bronze Star "V" for heroism in ground combat, which was personally presented by the Deputy Brigade Commander. (The Brigade was comprised of 22,000 men, so it was quite an honor.)



Huey helicopter destroyed by 122 mm Rocket

Four months later, I was three weeks from returning home to my wife and 3-month old daughter when fate struck again. As the ranking NCO present, I had to disarm a crazed GI of his AK-47

and two 50-round ammunition clips who was threatening people in the Enlisted Men's Club. Without a weapon of my own, my plan A was to use my wits and charm to gain possession of the weapon, knowing full well that if that approach failed, I had no backup and no Plan B. Since I'm here to tell the story, you know that Plan A succeeded. In many respects that experience was more frightening than the rocket attack, as I knew in advance exactly what I was getting into. At the end of the year, I was also awarded the Army Commendation Medal for exemplary service.

I would never have joined the military were it not for the Draft and my wanting to control the arc of my adult life upon graduation from college. (I had a job offer from IBM waiting for me which I didn't want interrupted by the Draft.) I certainly would never want to repeat my year in Vietnam. That being said, no other year in my 72 years of life stands out in such stark relief as 1967, and I am, I think, justifiably proud of the quality of my service, both in terms of rank achieved and decorations awarded.



Vic receiving an award on his last day of service