

BLOOD BROTHERS



by: All those who served.

The last major operation of the Vietnam War was the invasion of Laos, called "Dewey Canyon II" or "Lam Son 719." The objective was to support the South Vietnamese Army in their attempt at stopping or slowing the supply routes used by the North Vietnamese Army on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. My brother and I were in one of the supporting American Artillery Units, C-Battery, 2nd Battalion, 94th Artillery of the XXIV Corps.

In early August of 1968, we joined the Army on the Buddy System. That guaranteed we would go through basic training together. Fort Lewis, Washington, became our home for the next few weeks. We then got orders for Fort Lee, Virginia, to become cooks. We choose this great career move because the recruiter promised us that as "spoons," we would never have guard duty or "K.P." (mess duty). What he neglected to mention was that, as cooks, we would be on permanent K.P.! After graduation from Quartermaster Cooking School, my brother got orders for Arlington, Washington D.C., and I was going for my first tour of Vietnam. It turned out to be a release for getting security clearances and enlisting in the Army Security Agency (A.S.A.). All but two went to "NAM".

My first tour was an education of the situation. The attitude, "It don't mean nuthin'," became a reality. Do your time, and go home. "Tet" of 1969 was a real eye opener. We saw Bien Hoa surrounded and the ammo dump blown, but it didn't get that bad. I saw the Bob Hope Show when I was in the hospital for a week with some weird tropical infection. I spent all of 1969 in Vietnam. I was busted from a Specialist Four to a P.F.C., for smoking marijuana behind the Enlisted Men's Club. I lost my security clearance and my innocence. I changed from a naive farm boy to an "Enlightened

Soldier." This awareness of the world, and the events that shape our world, was a reality shock. I didn't believe in the Vietnam War as a solution after this first tour.

Bavaria, in West Germany, was beautiful. I was stationed there for a couple of months until they figured out I had no security clearance. Then they shipped me off to a regular Army unit farther north. It really sucked, so I put in a transfer (1049) back to Vietnam. Meanwhile, my brother had left Washington D.C., and went to Seoul, Korea. He spent over a year in Korea and transferred to Vietnam, also. To make a long story short, it all came down about the same time. He got to Vietnam first and was cooking for some "brass" in Danang, by the time I got there.

I turned twenty one in the Oakland Army Terminal while being shipped back to Nam. Somehow I'd always imagined my twenty first birthday to be a lot different! I got back to Vietnam through Long Binh and looked up my old unit; the 303rd Radio Research Battalion. It was a memorable reunion with some friends, both American and Vietnamese. I said my goodbyes and was shipped up North to I Corp. I hit Danang with a pocketful of money and partied away the first couple of weeks. I got my orders and stopped by my brother's mess hall to tell him where they were shipping me. He had a real cushy job, but said it sucked! I ended up on a firebase called "Hill 65" about twenty seven miles southwest of Danang, overlooking the "Arizona Territory."

There were constant firefights and we spent many nights watching "Snoopy" (a light plane with mini guns) work out. The Marines were on one half of the firebase with 155mm, and the Army Artillery with 175mm and 8" cannons on the other half. My brother transferred out there with me in



C-Battery, 2nd Battalion, 94th Artillery, of XXIV Corps. We were there for a few months until we got orders to move.

On the 24th of January, 1971, C-Battery left Hill 65 and headed north to Firebase Nancy. This was the start of Operation "Dewey Canyon II." There was a news blackout, and years later my mother said she had a feeling that something was happening to her boys. All we knew was that we were ordered to pack up everything and warm meals gave way to C-rations. The move was slow up the coastal Highway, QL1. The scenery was beautiful, but the feeling of impending doom lingered behind every bush and tree. By the time we left Nancy, we knew that this was more than just an excursion for a "fire mission." Crossing into Quang Tri Province, we headed for Dong Ha. On the 29th of January, we set up at Firebase Vandegrift. This was midway, in a mountainous area between the coast and the Laotian Border. We were in tents and when the cannons would fire, the concussion would blow out our candles. We were on Herion by this time and getting worried. We talked a lot about what was happening. On the fourth of February, we moved up Route 9 to Lang Con in the Khe Sanh area. We dug-in and waited.

The fire missions were becoming more frequent. The B-52 craters were everywhere. We spent some of our time scouting around and finding places we could get together, talk, and smoke some dope. The craters were about ten to fifteen feet deep, keeping the smoke down and also we were below the horizon and out of sight. This was the second time in my two tours that I was close to the bombing of the B-52s. I've never heard anything so horrendous in my life. The ground shook like an earthquake, the noise was like a thousand thundering skies. I could only thank God it wasn't being

dropped on me and my conscience quickened at the thought of another human being under that hell from the sky.


We were there for three weeks. There were plantations of coffee trees and wild sugar cane growing to snack on. From the tunnels we found, we knew the North Vietnamese had been there, but had moved from the bombing.

On the 26th of February, we left Lang Con and continued down Route 9 to the Laotian border, to a place called Lao Bao, or Hellhole, as we later learned to call it. I remember as we approached one gully crossing, a Deuce and a half truck, lay on its side. We jumped out of our truck to see if it had just happened and if there was anything we could do to help. Inside was someone's guts and blood all over. I found a picture of his wife and kids. It made me feel bad for them. Then I noticed a blue "peace" flag on their truck. We immediately removed it, figuring the enemy sighted in on the flag!

At Lao Bao, we started filling sandbags to make our firebase. While burning brush on the perimeter, someone caught a six inch black scorpion!

My brother and I had a multilevel bunker. The bottom being about ten feet down, the second level about four feet from the surface. We were there twenty three days, but it seemed like a lot longer. The North Vietnamese started shelling us soon after we settled. We were receiving between 100 and 200 rounds a day! B-Battery got the worst of it. They were getting the hell blown out of them. We could hear the round being shot off, then the low whistle getting louder, then the explosion, then the guys screaming.

"Whoever controls the media, controls the mind." Jim Morrison




A good friend of ours that we called "old man" told me he couldn't take it anymore. I could tell from the look in his eyes, he was losing it. One morning we walked over to some canisters of powder. He was supposed to break the metal bands with a hammer. I tried to talk him into breaking one of his fingers with the hammer. He asked me if I would do it and I said no, that I just wouldn't feel right about doing it. He said he couldn't do it either. The shelling continued and the next thing I knew, someone told me that "old man" got shell-shock, he didn't know who he was or what he was doing. His mind just checked out. He was back a few weeks later, but he was never quite the same after that.

We spent a lot of time in our bunker for obvious reasons. A lot of the guys hung out down in our bunker. My brother and I never knew if it was because of our poster of Bridget Bardot on a chopper, the extra chow we got, or the fact that we were ten feet down. On one volley of incoming fire, my brother hit his head bad enough that he needed stitches. While he was in the rear area getting stitched up, a rocket came in and exploded in an empty bunker. It was Poncho's, whose wife just had a baby, he said he wanted to see it and he wouldn't be back. Had he stayed, he would have been dead. There was a casualty however. Vernon was in the mess truck, right next to Poncho's bunker when the rocket exploded. Another cook and I were in my bunker at the time. The rocket lifted the ground what seemed like a foot and slammed back down so hard that the dust in the air down inside our bunker made it almost dark. As the dust cleared, we could hear someone screaming. I rushed to the surface to find Sergeant Bishop, O'Brien and Goldie trying to pull Vernon out of the mess truck. The truck's ladder was keeping them from pulling him clear of the truck. I pulled him to my bunker, as it was the closest cover. He was a real mess, one of his legs was barely attached, and scrap metal was either stuck in his ribs or had scooped out chunks of flesh. I'll never forget those next few minutes of waiting for the Medevac chopper to come and pick him up. He had sucking chest wounds, and when I tried to comfort him with a drink of

water, they said no, he might drown. That also meant no morphine, not with a chest wound. He laid there in pain and the minutes seemed like hours. The Medevac chopper roared in and six of us guys ran him over, where the pilot and crew picked him up.

The morale was at an all time low. Not only were we getting the hell blown out of us, but our own gun tubes were blowing up. One of our gunnery sergeants was killed instantly when a piece of metal went through his head. A real nice guy named Dale Hollowell from Tennessee with a wife and three kids. It was like that, one day they were there, the next day gone. By the time the orders came to pull out, we were sure we weren't going to get out of there in one piece. My brother and I stuck close and hoped for the best. The brass started pulling out the other Batteries on the 18th of March,. We didn't get out of there until the 21st. We didn't know we were cut-off, we just figured they weren't ready for us yet and from the sounds of the fighting on the road going back, we didn't know which was worse, staying there or trying to get through.

We finally got the go ahead to get the hell out. My brother and I jumped on a M-548, a track vehicle (which is not known for it's speed). It seemed like a good idea, so we joined Bryant, the driver, Shultz, our company dog Queenie and her pups. My brother and I were on the back and they were in the front with the dogs between them. It was loaded with canisters of powder and our gear. The road ahead was full of smoke and explosions. As we approached the same spot that we found the blown up Deuce and a half truck on the way in to Lao Bao. The column stopped. Rocket propelled grenades (R.P.G.s) and light arms fire erupted. We jumped out and took up positions. I found myself in a depression, and keeping my head down for a few seconds, I looked around as hard as I could, but I couldn't see anything moving out there. I did this a couple of times when I heard my brother call out my name. I turned my head to see them heading down the road. When I started running toward the track, I noticed to my disbelief, that the sandbags we were



driving over were parts of guys bodies! There was a three-quarter ton truck on it's side and equipment and guys laying in pieces all over the place. My heart was in my throat and life seemed in slow motion. When we got through the ambush, we were all shakin' like leaves and glad to be alive. It was then that we realized that Queenie and her pups never left the track. That stretch of Route 9 became known as Ambush Alley. We were to find out later that a Major and a ranking South Vietnamese Officer were scattered in the road from a direct hit by an R.P.G. The refusal of another unit to risk more men to retrieve some equipment in Ambush Alley made Time Magazine that year.

Our next stop after the ambush was Lang Con, then Vanegrift, then on to Mai Loc. The last thing I remember from Lao Bao were the South Vietnamese soldiers hanging on to the helicopter skids, the ropes, and each other as the chopper pilots brought them back from Laos. The North Vietnamese Army was kickin' some butt out there. My brother got malaria in Mai Loc. He was so sick I had to help him over to a Medevac. From there he went to the hospital ship, Hope. He was gone for a few weeks and when he got back, he told of seeing Vernon and hearing the screams, three floors up when they changed his bandages.

I guess for all of us that survived that time together in Hellhole and Ambush Alley, we still relive those moments, over and over again and wonder about who made it and who didn't. We wonder how it affected the other guys, our families and friends. My brother and I stay in contact and see each other often. We don't talk about those times without pain or real intensity. We drank solid for at least a year when we got out, but we couldn't seem to drink those memories away. It was a constant problem at family gatherings. This was not an isolated behavior problem among Vietnam veterans. I've been in counseling for almost two years. I stopped using drugs and now I have ways of coping with these feelings.

My hope is that this article reaches some of the guys that were there with me or any that are experiencing any problems of anger, isolation, or guilt that you made it out and your buddy didn't. I never believed in the Vietnam War, but I believe in survival and that's what it was all about. Try to get to a Vets Center. It's helped me to cope, even if it's just to have someone listen for a few minutes.

I often wonder how different my life would have been had my brother not called out for me that day. He's helped me many times in my life, the last was helping me break the hold drugs had on me. He gave me support and a place to dry out. We've always been close and shared many experiences together, the good and the bad. I guess that's why we're such tight, blood-brothers.

