

*From East
Los Angeles
To The*
Jungle



By Marshall Tall Eagle

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Headquarters and Headquarters MAAG
1st Tour 1963-64 2nd Tour 1965-66

I had been riding East Los Angeles with some buddies of mine drinking and looking for girls. It was early 1954 and I thought I was a pretty cool guy. So did my buddies. Of course feeling cool came to an end as we saw the police lights flashing, indicating that we had just been busted. We were under age, under the influence of cheap wine and driving a stolen car.

The police decided that a night in jail and some rough talking would be of more help than putting us in jail for the rest of our youth. When the sergeant interviewed me, he discovered that my dad was a reserve deputy sheriff and that he knew him. This police officer was not going to let me off easy.

I was given three choices: Jail, telling my dad, who would whip the you-know-what out of me, or to join the US Army. The Army sounded a lot better than jail or my dad getting a hold of me. I had just turned 17 and still very wet behind the ears. I was going to Roosevelt High School and knew a counselor who was in the Army Reserve. I convinced him that I needed to join.

After filling some paperwork, he and I convinced my folks to give their consent for me to join the reserve. My dad told me that I would be carrying on the family tradition of being a warrior as had our Apache ancestors. Little did I know that this Army Reserve unit was an airborne infantry company, and of course I didn't know what all that meant. The clerk in my reserve unit told me that I'd be going to basic and Infantry School during my summer

months at Ft. Ord, California. I would be there for twelve hard, hot training weeks. I arrived there in June of 1954.

I still seemed to have a problem with getting into trouble. I was often on the First Sergeant's "S" list. One time while he was royally chewing me out, he stopped and smiled and just walked away. Upon graduation from the twelve week Infantry Basic Training, which I admit I enjoyed, our training company was assembled in a very large auditorium for a presentation from some airborne guys.

After some introductions, one of the paratroopers told us they already had the first volunteer to join their elite outfit. To my surprise my name was called out as the first volunteer. I was in shock as I had never volunteered for jumping out of airplanes. Turns out that the first shirt had placed my name on the volunteer list, in place for a butt chewing that I had coming. Well it had to be better than another butt chewing.

Jump School was not easy, but my time at Ft. Ord had prepared me physically for this jump course. I was now at Ft. Campbell, Kentucky with the 101st Airborne Division I had to meet my fears face to face as I was afraid of heights. I went on to earn my Parachute Jump Wings and was one proud Paratrooper.

After I returned to my reserve unit, I was discouraged when to find out that the unit had been redesignated to a straight leg unit. I thought my jump training was now useless. Little did I know my future would carry me back to jump status.

After more training I returned to high school. I went into a state of depression. Nothing seemed to help. I needed the camaraderie of Army buddies and excitement of the military life which I really enjoyed. I talked with our reserve unit clerk and asked to be activated. The answer was no. I spoke with the US Army recruiter and he said I needed to graduate from high school first. Just for the heck of it, I applied for the US Air Force. He said, "get your GED and then we'll talk".

In November of 1955, I found myself in the US Air Force and assigned to the 22nd Bomb Wing at March Air Force Base, California. Working as a personnel clerk, I found myself bored stiff with no action. An 0800 to 1700 office job just didn't seem to fit me. I volunteered for every overseas assignment that came across my desk. I'd take any assignment and was willing to cross-train if necessary.

My dream came true and I found myself at Ben Guiere Air Base in Morocco, North Africa. I was assigned to the 10th Aviation

Squadron and performed various duties on top of my personnel job assignment. The 10th stored nuclear weapons. My secondary job was classified, but I can say I was exposed to nuclear weapons in a very interesting way.

Lots of interesting stuff happened while I was stationed in North Africa. I started parachuting with the French Legion troops stationed nearby, as their special guest. I supplied them with American smokes and booze which unlocked a lot of doors for me. I traveled to the Atlas Mountains and met with the Berber tribes people. I was accepted by them because I was like a cousin to them with my Apache blood. I spent lots of my free time with them and made sure I always brought them American smokes and old uniform pants. They had lots of very interesting World War II stories which were translated to me by a good friend nicknamed Lucky.

I had lots of R and R time in Europe and enjoyed seeing the different cultures. The people in England treated me with respect when they found out that I was an American Indian or "Red Man" as they liked to call me. I made lots of great friends and was at a loss when I was rotated stateside. When my enlistment was up I got out, returned to East Los Angeles and started college. I reverted back to lots of beer, pizza and parties. I was now over that and boredom set in fast. In 1963 I enlisted in the US Army as an infantryman. As I was airborne qualified I was immediately enlisted and assigned to Ft. Bragg.

I felt like I was back home in uniform again. I was back with men instead of boys and that great Army chow. I really enjoyed the SOS. I quickly buddied up with a former French Legionnaire Sergeant I had met in Morocco. We had parachuted together in the desert. After leaving the Legion he enlisted in the US Army under a special program and was assigned to a Special Forces outfit getting ready to be assigned to a place called Vietnam.

I had not yet been assigned a unit and was living in temporary barracks for a couple of weeks. My buddy Sergeant Maurice introduced me to his First Sergeant, a man by the name of Merryweather. Later we had a couple of beers together and I found out Merryweather was not his real name.

The next morning I was told that I had impressed his first sergeant and he wanted to buy me lunch later that day to talk to me about being assigned to his unit. He needed a replacement to accompany his unit to Vietnam and asked me if I wanted the job. I accepted without blinking an eye. "When do we leave and where is Vietnam?"

A long life may not be good enough, but a good life is long enough. (Benjamin Franklin)

I trained hard for the next month prior to being shipped out. I needed all the refresher training I could lay my hands including a few more jumps and weapons training. Afterwards, I took a short ten day leave and returned home. I told the family I was going back overseas. They had never heard of Vietnam. I intentionally left them with the idea that this was a good will tour of duty.

Our small detachment was assigned to a small Vietnamese military post on the outskirts of Saigon. We called it our home away from home. We trained RVN Army troops the fine art of jungle patrolling, weapons training, map reading and some parachuting. We also learned a lot from them. Our main unit was MAAG. Lots of CIA guys in civilian clothes hung around us daily. It seemed we took instructions almost exclusively from them or that orders came through them.

I was also responsible for recording all training we put the Vietnamese troops through and made reports of what went on. At first things were great except for the heat and humid weather. We working during the day and had Army parties at night. After about three or four months of training the troops things began to change. We started taking our Vietnamese soldiers out on real jungle patrols. Things started to get a little hairy as we were being shot at by those who we called the bad guys. After a few patrols we realized that they were very serious as we took a number of wounded. During this time I was promoted to Staff Sergeant.

My six month tour was coming to an end and I found our patrols getting longer and much harder. On what was to be my last patrol in country, I found myself in the central highlands, as assistant patrol leader of ten well trained Vietnamese troops. Sgt. Maurice was our patrol leader.

Our patrol was searching for a small ammo depot which the enemy had located near a village. We had patrolled this location only one week earlier and had found nothing. The CIA guys had given us some newly found info as to the location of the ammo. What they did not tell us was how many troops would be guarding this place.

At about 0700 hours our point man stopped dead in his tracks. We knelt down. We could hear lots of talking and laughing not far off. Sgt. Maurice decided to back away about 50 meters and discuss our next move. We had just found a good location when all hell broke lose. The bad guys knew we were there and anticipated our next move. We were taking small arms fire, but no machine gun fire yet.

We took our first battle field causality that day; a young Vietnamese boy not more than 16 or 17 years old. He was a good

soldier. We immediately returned fire. Sgt. Maurice asked me how many troops we had encountered. "Most likely a company" I replied. Our back side was open to escape, so we retreated while continuing to fire our weapons. My weapon of choice was the .45 caliber Grease Gun while the rest of our patrol carried the smaller .30 caliber Carbine.

We radioed in coordination and asked for air support. We continued our retreat as we gave our map location. After traveling about 200 meters and firing our weapons behind us at the pursuing enemy, we received a radio message to take cover; a bomb run coming in five minutes.

Both Sgt. Maurice and I decided to get more distance between us and the bad guys. I was already dead tired but we pushed ourselves and the troops a few more meters. We could now hear some aircraft overhead and dove to hug the jungle ground. The explosions were numerous and loud. We could feel the incredible force from the incoming fire power as it hit the ground. The pilot was right on target with his ordinance.

We could hear the screaming coming from the enemy. After a few minutes we stood up to continue our retreat. I immediately I felt the pain of a bullet enter my left knee cap. My first reaction was, "hey that wasn't that bad." It hurt but it was bearable. I fell and immediately found Sgt Maurice at my side inspecting the wound. We had a well trained medic nearby. He cleaned the wound, patched me up and said the bullet had entered the skin above the knee cap and went right out. It was a "bleeder". We did not have any real pain medication, and I was able to walk somewhat with some support.

The air support had stopped our pursuers but we still received some sporadic light small arms fire from the few who had survived. We traveled about two or three hundred meters where we boarded a couple of helicopters. During this operation we had one KIA and one WIA. We had to leave the young Vietnamese soldier in the jungle that day.

After spending sometime in the camps clinic, I requested a US military doctor to examine me. I had confidence in the Vietnamese medical staff, but I just wanted a US military doctor to certify that I was wounded in combat. The CIA guys provided a Marine Corps Captain without a name tag.

Within a couple of hours after returning we had a de-briefing and again the CIA group was there. We told them that it appeared the enemy knew we were there and had prepared a welcoming party for us. They shook their heads in disbelief and walked out

without saying a word. After this patrol I was presented with a Green Beret by Captain James Horton the commander of our detachment.

After recuperating for a few days, I got my rotation orders and had about a week to say my good-bys. Sgt. Maurice and I located the family of the young soldier. We both felt really bad about having to tell them what happened. We met his father and returned his son's clothes and personal affects. He just stared and told us that he was proud of his son. He hoped someday all foreigners would leave their country forever.

I returned to Ft. Bragg for about 15 days and then returned home. I was a different man and felt the need to return and finish our job. My memory kept going back to that young Vietnamese trooper we left in the jungle and what his father had told us. I kept my family in the dark regarding my duties while in Vietnam. No notice was ever sent to my family about being wounded as my job was classified. My mom would of gone nuts if she knew the truth.

During my second tour in 1965-66 I was assigned to Headquarters at MACV and attached back to Command and Control North just outside of Da Nang, coordinating various types of patrols as directed by the higher command. The CIA guys were still around with different faces. I did not trust those guys. I met up with some old buddies and Maurice was gone. No one knew where he was stationed.

I met a great guy while on a training mission out of Loc Minh named Sergeant First Class Roy Benavidez who later became the recipient of the Medal of Honor. He was full fledged Special Forces and had my total respect. Years later I later met him in Portland, Oregon where he was giving a motivational speech. We exchanged some good old war time stories had a shot of booze. Years later he passed on. What a great honor it was for me to know him.

My second tour was majorally uneventful. We went out on a couple of patrols. Being with the troops was like being at home for me. I knew the day would come that I would miss all of this.

Toward the end of my second tour in Vietnam, I was assigned to Ft. Ord, California to garrison duty. My jumping days were over, as was the excitement of overseas duty. When it came time to enlist I decided against it. I could tell politics were gearing up to lose the war or to



Marshall Tall Eagle wearing the Warrior's Medal Of Valor

pull out before the job was done and done right. I was in the middle of a Army that was changing it's interest in Vietnam.

I returned home and enrolled to college. I really felt out of place without any real direction in my life or military structure and with the anti-war movement in full motion. I married my girl friend, moved to Oregon and went to work as an investigator for the Department of Justice. I also joined the National Guard. After serving a total of 17 years in the Armed Forces of the United States of America it was time to get out and live at peace with my growing family.

Now I am involved in American Indian veteran's organizations. I also conduct various Indian honoring ceremonies across the country that honors veterans of all cultures. I often ask myself what would I've done differently if I could start all over again. To that question I am still searching for the answer. ➡