

Memoirs of a Grunt

By Duke Barrett

From The Recesses of my Mind

It's been over forty years since I was drafted into the armed forces to go fight in the Vietnam War, so many of my memories are foggy at best. Amazingly though, time has not stripped my memory of the main ingredients of those formative years and experiences, and before it does, I've decided to record in book form what I'm able to remember, for my own entertainment, posterity, and if lucky, prosperity too. I'd also like to leave an accounting of those days as a young, dashing, adventurous paratrooper, for my kids and grandkids, but not necessarily my poor wife.

Take my wife, please. I kid! Sorry Henny. The poor woman's pretty well sick and tired of hearing of my experiences, and I can't say as I blame her. In fact, she's heard of them so many times she could write the damn book herself. I guess I do have a habit of repeating myself... repeating myself. She did however know me when I was young and dashing. I must admit I am not one of those guys who don't like to talk about what he did in the war. In fact, I'm proud of what I did. Besides, not only is it cathartic but I tend to talk about myself. As previously stated, just ask my wife.

In regard to time served in-country, (Vietnam) I never killed anybody out of hate, recklessness or just for the thrill of it, although it is a thrill. In fact I took part in company size sweeps and firefights while serving with A co. of the 1st Airborne Brigade, 1st Air Cavalry Division where we engaged enemy positions, assaulted hills and killed bad guys. How many did I personally kill? Beats me. I also took part in numerous ambushes while serving in the reconnaissance platoon, killing a number of enemy soldiers. Kind of a drag, know what I'm saying?

War is Hell. Seriously, it is. I was fortunate to have served with a top notch, well-trained bunch of guys, and I believe we always took the moral high ground and I thank God we did. It makes for better sleeping. Life-long friendships were forged in those days of our youth, and believe it or not, I wouldn't trade those experiences for any amount of money. Well maybe, I just might. It depends on the amount. I'd have to give it some serious thought though.

Having recently talked about some of our experiences with a dear friend and fellow combatant of mine, come to find out a whole bunch of what we did, and more importantly, what I did, came as news to me. Selective memory I guess. What I'm now trying to do is to remember just exactly what the hell I did do over there, of my life and death experiences and how dealing with those experiences could possibly help lead to world peace. I kid! I'm far too violent to work for peace. Hell, I can't even find it at home, let alone in the world.

My Induction

In the spring of 1965, rumor had it that the draft was going to get all of us no-account punks who roamed the streets, off of the streets of Kenosha, Wisconsin. Being a blue-collar town, the pickings were plentiful and they weren't whistling Dixie. In short order it proved difficult to find an unmarried, non-asthmatic deferment-free male roaming any street in my hometown

See, the good old US of A went and got itself militarily involved in some God forsaken place in Southeast Asia known as Vietnam, and needed bodies, young male bodies, and I qualified. Like many other Kenosha young men. I received My "Greetings" (draft notice) letter from Uncle Sam in April of 1965 and was instructed to report at 6:00 AM, June 17th, 1965, to the local draft board at the KYF building, aka, the Kenosha Youth Foundation, in downtown Kenosha, Wisconsin.

Being quite familiar with the location, I had no problem finding it since I was once a member of the Kenosha Evening News Golden Gloves Boxing team in 1962 and 1964 and our training facilities were in the basement of the KYF. So after a series of goodbye parties, hugs and kisses from my family and a thought to be romantic farewell from my fiancé, myself and a host of other conscripts who'd been rounded up off the streets of Kenosha, reluctantly reported as instructed in the early AM for the purpose of induction into the armed forces of the United States.

On that morning of June 17, 1965 we boarded a Milwaukee bound bus that would take us to the official Southern Wisconsin Induction Center for our physical, and if healthy, to include our formal induction ceremony. Well as luck would have it, I was fit as a horse, a small horse (1962 Kenosha bantamweight Champ) but nonetheless fit. They wanted me; they really, really wanted me.

Nothing terribly remarkable had yet happened that day and before I knew it, I had been sworn in as a Private in the U.S. Army. Terrific! Shortly after the swearing in, all of us volunteers and draftees were bussed to the train station in downtown Milwaukee to board a South bound train to Louisville, Kentucky, twenty miles from our destination of Fort Knox, Kentucky. Talk about whistling Dixie.

Within a short time I came to realize my life had changed, and not for the better. Chaperoned by Army MP's, we weren't afforded many liberties, and as a free spirit I found this aspect a bit troubling. As we passed through the cities of Chicago, Illinois and Indianapolis, Indiana, it became apparent from our assigned seating arrangements that we'd only be afforded a passing glance of what the cities had to offer its visitors. It had also become apparent to me that we weren't even visitors, who were passing through, but instead, cargo. That's right, just United States Military cargo, in assigned seating. Apparently the possibility of conscripts going AWOL was a concern for those in charge. The MP's kept a tight leash on us.

At approximately 9:00 PM that evening, our group of sorry civilians arrived in Louisville, Kentucky where we were met by a few surly and burly NCO from the Fort Knox training center, our destination. An astute observer, hell, even a moron could tell immediately that these guys weren't all that friendly. The welcoming staff of non-com's, unsmilingly guided us toward awaiting Greyhound busses for transfer to Fort Knox. In the late PM of that day, a day that will live in, well, you know. Up to that point, all in all, things had proven to be a bit unpleasant, but uneventful. Then we arrived. Great!

It was at the moment of arrival at our destination, that our lives were changed forever. Not to be left to wonder, we were greeted by yet another handful of informative, snarling and screaming NCO drill instructors that excitedly fell into character the moment the busses arrived. The DI's paced back and forth, like hungry lions in a cage, in wait for us at the bus stop, so all on board could see. Anxious as any thespian whoever longed for a curtain rise, these physically-fit DI's couldn't wait to perform their tough guy, tough love role and seemingly cherished every moment of their performance. I'd like to say the same, but can't.

Once we disembarked our more than comfortable mode of transportation, the Greyhound busses, unaware it was to be our last comfortable moment for some time, the awaiting group of thespians, aka, DI's, screamed at the top of their lungs. Either unknowing or uncaring of the long-lasting consequences of abusing one's vocal cords they delighted in yelling themselves hoarse. Bulging veins in their necks testified to the damage being done by expanding thrice their normal size. For added effect, Smokey the Bear DI hats were fully tilted to a point where the brims balanced on their noses, only enhancing the intimidation effect. Yes, hard to believe, but Intimidation ruled the day and many to come.

Proverbial chickens with their heads cut off came to mind as the intimidated green recruits, including myself, tripped and stumbled, try as they may to obey the commands to make two straight-line formations. The voluminous, vocally enhanced cadre bestowed thought to be humorous names upon the new recruits, like "f**^*-up," "s**^*-head," "s_**^* for brains," "lard-ass," "maggot" and "faggot," to name a few of the not so clever monikers used by the intimidators. It became clear as a bell to anyone with half a brain why these guys were in the military and not writing for the "Tonight Show."

With order attained, the tripping and confusion brought to an acceptable level, we marched off in more of a "sidewinder rattler" formation than a tight military column of two's., to a supply facility where we were issued brand new army threads, also known as fatigues. No military themed wardrobe would've been complete without a matching hat, socks, underwear, boots, and to top off this smart new ensemble, a duffle bag.

. Clothed to the teeth and feeling a little more military than only hours earlier, we now smartly marched to our new housing facilities, also known as barracks, where we were assigned sleeping quarters just around midnight. In the Vietnam-era, army barracks were state of the art facilities, nineteenth century state of the art that is. Rows of long,

narrow, yellow wooden firetraps with two lines of double bunk beds, covered by extremely thin mattresses were to be out new temporary digs. Nice!

You know that saying, time sure does fly by when etc. etc., you know, must be true. It was now the 18th of June. Following some quick instruction on the proper procedure of making a military bed and a little more harassment from cadre, we were finally allowed to get some much-needed shut eye. Around 12:30 a.m. on the eighteenth, we put our weary bodies to bed. Once my aching head hit that cheap-ass pillow, I was out like a light. Bad analogy. It couldn't have been but 3:15 am, less than three hours since I lay my weary but fit army body down, that I would be rudely awakened by one of many blinking, un-shaded 100-watt light bulbs directly overhead. That, coupled with the annoyingly loud voice of one of our DI's, screaming for us to, "rise and shine, ladies," as he banged on a metal garbage can lid caused me to think, oh-my-God!

The humor was killing me. Well, that and the fact that I'd only slept less than three hours. Up to this point it wasn't only the longest day of my life, but also the shortest night. Come to think of it, I guess you could say it was the first of many longest days and shortest nights for some time to come.