

*“Thank you!”*

I arrived in the A Shau Valley in May 1969. My first night in the Valley was spent at NDP Ann popping flares in support of a search and rescue for a downed helicopter crew. As a scared FNG, I had no way of truly appreciating what we were doing that night. Eleven months later, I found myself and a dozen of my guys in a spot from which our only hope of survival was the air cover provided by a bunch of Huey door gunners and a couple of Cobra gun ships.

Since my return from Vietnam in 1970, I have tried to be an objective student of the “war.” I recently read *Vietnam: The Necessary War*, written in 1999 by Michael Lind. Mr. Lind offers two alternative scenarios describing why the U.S. lost the war. First, “...it was America’s fault – because we left the South Vietnamese unprotected in 1973.” Second, “...it was South Vietnam’s fault – because they would not or could not fight their own battle.”

I subscribe to the latter. In two separate actions, I say South Vietnamese cowardice in the face of the enemy and outright South Vietnamese treason – both at the expense of my troops.

The first time was on the northern edge of the A Shau Valley. I had a platoon of engineers with earth moving equipment, protected by ARVN mechanized infantry, working on the Barbara Road when they were ambushed. During the initial volley of fire, my platoon leader was wounded and the ARVN infantry platoon leader was killed. Like in the old western movies, the ARVN platoon of armored personnel carriers circled my unit. We assumed this was their standard defensive-ring maneuver. But, when the lead ARVN APC reached the ass end of the column of my platoon’s equipment it hightailed it away from the firefight, followed by the rest of the ARVN unit. My guys were left alone to defend themselves. There were no other US or ARVN ground forces close. Fortunately, our TOC communications had gun ships on station shortly after the initial battle started and no further casualties were sustained. However, the second most difficult situation I faced during my tour happened just a few minutes later. A number of my senior NCOs had been in the comms bunker with me when we learned what was going on. As it became clear that our guys had been deserted, many of my guys grabbed arms and headed to the back gate of our compound. Their intention was to ‘meet’ the ARVN unit that had left our guys in the field. I got to the back gate at about the same time that the first ARVN APC came into view. It took everything I could drag out of my bag of tricks to keep my troops from blowing away the ARVN ‘good guys’ that afternoon.

The second time that I saw ARVN desertion, actually complicity with the enemy, was in April 1970. I lead a volunteer unit of engineer troops to the Mai Loc Special Forces compound to rebuild the adjacent airstrip for that spring’s incursion into Laos. The day we got to the compound about half of the U.S. Special Forces command and about half of the ARVN troops on the compound had just started a Search and Destroy mission. While under strength, the outer perimeter of the compound still had over 100 ARVN troops and family members surrounding the interior U.S. compound. At about 3:00 a.m. on April 10, the outer defensive perimeter of the compound was breached by a company-sized unit of NVA regulars. We later learned that the rest of the enemy battalion was in position to take over the compound if the initial assault was successful.

A path through the perimeter minefield and exterior compound concertina wire barrier was created by strategically placed Bangalore torpedoes. The breach was aided by the ARVN personnel in the immediate area of the opening, who first helped direct the placement of the demolitions for maximum effect and then deserted the lane of entry and left the compound at the time of the initial assault. During the first few minutes of the battle the outer perimeter M-60 machine guns were easily overrun by the enemy and turned skyward on the gun ships that were called in to help us.

The following morning hours were filled with NVA sappers clearing out the inner perimeter bunkers, gun ships providing suppressing fire inside the outer perimeter, and a lot of hand-to-gland fighting inside the inner perimeter. At daybreak, the sky was clear, a company of U.S. tanks from nearby Camp Carroll had surrounded the compound and the surviving Americans in the inner compound were rescued. I lost four killed in that action and the rest of us sustained wounds of varying degrees of severity. Those of us who survived owe our lives to the courage of the helicopter

pilots and their crews that stayed with us through that night. I have spent the last thirty-plus years thanking every helicopter pilot I have ever met.

Vance Titus, 1969-1970

*“Mai Loc”*

My last memory of First Lt. Titus was on one knee with my hand on my best friend (Whiteman Sp5), I was saying goodbye. The LT was at the other end doing the same thing, I believe. He had his head down standing there with his steel pot and his flack vest on and an M-16 in his hand in the carry position. He had no shirt on. He was covered in grime and blood. He seemed to always have a tan, but this morning had turned black. His eyes were clear but sad. He was clearly combat worn to the bone. Whiteman and I were 6'4", we were the biggest in our unit, I think. The LT stood about 5'10" or 5'8", if I am remembering right, but he always walked tall. That day he walked like a giant of 10'. I remember looking at him and knowing he had done everything that he could do and then some. Only by having the heart of a warrior and God's grace did he survive. To his left about 25' was a pile of enemy bodies (hard core NVA). It was 25' to 30' across the bottom of the circle and went 12' to 15' high. We could get 5 to 6 of them in a bucket of our front-end loader at a time. We kicked their ass!!!

Ron Hooker, 1969 - 1970

*“Souvenirs”*

In the fall of 1969, I was staged at “Hot Rocks Quarry” near Ban Me Thout in the Central Highlands. During the couple of months that my unit was at this location we had the opportunity to help the residents of one of the nearby Montagnard villages. Using road-building materials from the quarry we resurfaced the road leading into the village. We also build a new schoolhouse. The roadwork was easy, that was what we did every day. The building part of the schoolhouse was easy too. The challenge was getting the materials needed to build it. Being enterprising young engineer troops, we hired a local mama-san to make VC/NVA flags, which we then ‘aged’ in mud puddles and decorated with cigarette burns, and we collected bows and arrows from the Yards. We took this loot into the large, rear area base camps in Nha Trang and Cam Ranh Bay and traded them for building supplies. The REMFs loved the stuff and a rural village got a schoolhouse. To the readers who may have brought home an enemy flag, I say thank you and I assure you that your flag is ‘real’ even if you got it from me or one of my guys. I am quite sure that the lady that made our flags was also supplying flags to the bad guys.

Vance Titus, 1969-1970