

# **What I Remember about My Tour in Vietnam With the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division (Mech)**

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January to June 1969 and Brigade Engineer of the  
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## **Period as Company Commander**

I was just about at the end of my first year of a three year tour in Italy, where I was serving as the Facilities Engineer of the Vincenza Military Post, when I received a letter from the Personnel Office alerting me to the fact that "We need you in Vietnam; your tour in Italy will be cut to one year." This was in September 1968, I had arrived in Italy in December 1967.

I arrived in Vietnam on or about December 1, 1968. After routine processing through the replacement detachment at Cam Ranh Bay I found myself in route to the 1<sup>st</sup> Engineer Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division (Big Red One) located in An Khe. Upon arriving there, I was told by the Battalion Commander that the Battalion had just received a new S3 Operations Officer and that they did not need another field grade officer (I was on the Major's list to be promoted any day). This really made me feel welcome and needed!

I spent 35 days working as assistant to the S3 in the 1<sup>st</sup> Engineer Battalion waiting to find out to where I would be reassigned. I finally received word that it would be to the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division (Mechanized) located in Quang Tri. After what I recall was an exciting and eventful trip up north, I arrived at the Quang Tri Combat Base in early January 1969. We were trucked over to Camp Red Devil where I met the Brigade Commander and was informed that I would be taking command of Company A, 7<sup>th</sup> Engineer Battalion right away. CPT Reed, who had brought the company over from the states, had been in command over six

months and needed a replacement. This was good news for me, I finally felt needed.

After taking command, I realized that I did not have any line platoons to command. Each of the platoons were attached out to the three combat battalions of the Brigade. This left me with the Company Headquarters, the Equipment Platoon and a Bridge Platoon and some miscellaneous elements such as the water purification detachment. I was told that the company mission was to support the line platoons with what ever support they needed even though I had no control over the platoons. I accepted the mission and made the best of a very difficult situation.

During my six months in command, I constantly campaigned to the Brigade Staff to bring control of the platoons back under the Company Headquarters so that we could consolidate the engineer effort and accomplish true engineer missions. I was aware, for the most part, that the platoons were not being used in an engineer role with the battalions, but, I was constantly told that it was up to the Combat Battalion Commander to use the platoon in what ever manner he saw fit to accomplish his combat mission. This usually meant to use the engineers to reinforce the Infantry rather than in an engineer role. I could go on and on about this situation but it suffice to say I was not successful in my argument and the platoons remained attached to the battalions during my entire command period.

We did receive a lot of support mission requirements. This included everything from sending the Combat Engineer Vehicle (CEV) out to blow up bunkers with the demolition gun, to sweeping and clearing the roads outside the base camps of mines each day before traffic could start using them, to providing base camp improvement support.

One of the base camp projects that remains vivid in my mind after all these years is the hot water system for showers that we installed in the company area at Camp Red Devil. One of the company Sergeants obtained a very large storage tank from the Navy which held several 1000 gallons of water. The tank was stood on end and mounted on a 8 foot high platform made from bridge timbers. This provided a gravity flow water source. (the storage tank was filled each day by a water supply truck with purified water from the water point that the company operated) Next, two 55 gallon drums were welded together end to end (with the tops cut out). To one end of this 110 gallon container, a fire box was welded where a diesel oil fire

could be contained and controlled. This was also stood on end and piping connected from the storage tank through the 110 gallon drum container and on to shower heads mounted inside an enclosure which constituted the shower room. We were the first unit, and for a long time the only unit, on Camp Red Devil to have a "home made" hot water shower. We were the envoy of the Camp.

Some of the incidents that are still very clear in my mind today, one night, in the March, April time frame, the company area at Camp Red Devil came under a mortar and rocket attack launched from outside the wire in the middle of the night. At this time, we were sleeping in the "SEA Hut" buildings that had been constructed by the "Seabees" (Naval Construction Engineers). When the first round hit, Lt Larry Marlin and myself jumped out of bed (army cots) and started running for the sand bag bunker. On the way, we were joined by the Sergeant who was the NOCIC of the Water Purification Detachment (I can not remember his name). The Sergeant was in the center and Larry and I were on either side of him. Just before we arrived at the bunker, a mortar round landed just in front of us and exploded. Mortar shrapnel struck the Sergeant in the face and neck (wounds were not fatal) but not a single fragment struck either Larry or myself. It was at this very moment that I developed a strong belief in a supreme being; the Deity.

We lost one soldier from the headquarters during my command and this was not in combat. One night, one of the soldiers drank an excessive amount of alcohol. He passed out on his bed. While asleep, he regurgitated and suffocated from his own vomit. This loss was as hard to deal with as a combat loss because it was so senseless. The soldiers in Vietnam were under a lot of stress. Alcohol and other drugs were a major problem with which we had to contend.

Another responsibility for our Engineer Company was providing purified water for all of Camp Red Devil, and several of the surrounding base camps such as LZ Sharon and Nancy and Camp Evans among others. We had a Water Purification Detachment attached to the company and ran the water point just off the main road into Camp Red Devil. It was a real challenge keeping the two 3000 gallon per hour water purification units running to meet the demand for water. I would make a daily trip to the water point to talk with the soldiers that were operating the units. This was not the most exciting job in the Army and was pretty boring after you did it

for a while. I felt that it was important for the Company CO to let the guys know that their job was important and we were counting on them to keep the camps supplied with adequate water. I was very proud of our Water Purification Detachment.

I also remember on a number of occasions when I would visit worksites, I would see a soldier that was wearing a stateside fatigue uniform which was modified with short sleeves. I remember how good it looked on him and that it really made him stand out in comparison to the other soldiers who were wearing the sloppy looking Jungle Fatigues. I remember thinking that if he felt comfortable in wearing this uniform that I should not take any action to make him wear Jungle Fatigues just for the sake of some uniform policy. Conditions were difficult enough for the soldiers in Vietnam and anything they could do that would make the situation better for them was "ok" with me. I was always looking for ways to keep the unit morale up. I did not know at the time who this soldier was but I found out now that it was none other than Tom Grafton.

### **Period as Brigade Engineer**

Upon completing the maximum period of six months in command of the company, I moved to the Brigade Headquarters and was assigned as the Brigade Engineer. Captain Larry Marlin, who had arrived in country with the Company in July 1968, and had now been there almost a full year, extended his tour so that he could take command of the Company. With Larry now the CO and I at Brigade Headquarters, we continued to work on the Brigade Staff to get control of the company line platoons back to the Company Commander. I can not remember the date when this happened but I do remember that at some point the control was given back to the CO of at least one of the platoons.

My duties at the Brigade consisted mostly of briefing the Brigade Commander and staff on a daily bases on the Engineer situation going on in the Brigade AO (Area of Operation). I do not remember too many of the details about this period except for one major task. Right after I moved to Brigade, the Commander (or Staff ??) decided that they needed a new TOC (Tactical Operation Center). The original one, built right after the Brigade arrived in country, was small and was in very bad repair. I was given the task to design the new TOC and the Engineer Company given

the mission to build it. Captain Marlin and I worked together to design it (right out of the FM 5-34 Engineer Field Manual) using the available materials. There were plenty of materials available, mostly bridge timbers. We ended up with a TOC three times as big as the original one, which was mostly below the ground surface with 4 to 6 foot of fill over the top. I remember the Brigade Commander and S3 being very please with the final results.

I departed Vietnam in August 1970, after an additional 8 month tour with the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division (Ambl). My next assignment was with the Engineer School at Fort Belvoir teaching Combat Engineer Support subjects (late 1970 to 1973). While at the school, I had the occasion to talk with a number of officers who left Vietnam with the pull out, for the 1<sup>st</sup> Bde, 5<sup>th</sup> Mech Div in August 1971. One officer who had come to the school after this period, told me about the details of the evacuation of Quang-Tri and Camp Red Devil. He said that when the Brigade left Camp Red Devil, they called in an air strike to destroy the TOC that we had built. In checking after the air strike, they found the TOC still in usable condition and had to then send in a Engineer Demolition Team to destroy the TOC with explosives from within the structure. It made me feel pretty good about the fact that the design was such and that the Engineer Company's work was such that it made such a lasting facility and one that was so hard to destroy.

I had a number of good pictures of the TOC during the construction of it, but, while I was at the Engineer School, I use the pictures as a part of the block of instruction on Combat Engineer Support and when I left the school, I let the school retain the pictures. At that time, I never dreamed that some 30 years later I would wish that I had the pictures back. The only pictures I have now are what is left in my memory.

### **Conclusion**

These are the thoughts that remain in my mind today, 32 years after.

For a number of years, I think for the reason that it was not popular to talk about Vietnam, and if you brought the subject up in a non-military setting you would receive frowns and in some cases an outright attitude of distain, I had dismissed from my mind any thoughts of Vietnam. Until I was contacted in March by Tom Grafton, I had not attempt for many years to

recall any of the details. The net result of this is that I can not remember but only a very few of the soldier's names who at one time played such an important role in my life. I feel very badly about this today and am somewhat embarrassed over this fact.

I am very pleased about the fact that Tom and George Baldwin were able to locate me and get me involved in the activities of the 7<sup>th</sup> Engineer Battalion Reunion. I do feel that this is going to fill a long standing subconscious void that I have felt for some time. I am looking most forward to this experience.

On a final note, in the several conversations that I have had with members of the Company after I was located, I have been asked if I knew the status of Captain Larry Marlin. I feel sure that there are others who have the same question. After Larry left Vietnam in late 1969, he was sent to Stanford University to work on a Masters degree. While he was there, he started having a lot of problems with his stomach and digestion track. As he told me about the details when I talked with him about his condition, he said that he believed that he had developed a stomach ulcer and that it would go away after he had finished the courses at Stanford. He did not do anything about the condition until it had gotten so bad that he finally went to a doctor. The doctor determined that he had cancer of the intestines and he was immediately sent to Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington, DC where I saw him in late 1971 – early 1972, can't remember the date, but I was at Belvoir at the time with the Engineer School. Larry died in Walter Reed hospital several months later of complications from the cancer. Larry was a most outstanding officer and the most outstanding person that I had ever had the pleasure of knowing and working with at that point in my life. The loss of Larry left another big negative factor in my life at that time and helped to further bury any thoughts about Vietnam into the subconscious.

I hope that my thoughts will help bring back some memories for those who read this. I am also hoping that after I have the opportunity to talk with the guys that show up for the reunion in August that it will cause me to remember even more details and I will than be able to expand on what I have provided here.

So long for now, and I hope to see you at the reunion.

GCC, Jr.