

# **A Taste of War**

## **An Infantry Platoon Leader's Recollections of a Year in Vietnam**

**William H. Powell**



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# Introduction

*A Taste of War* was written because those whom I know and respect asked me to write it. Our country has been blessed by generations of soldiers who gave their all for our freedom. They stepped forward at Bunker Hill; they stood a solid line in the trenches of hell and death known as World War I. Our brave soldiers parachuted from airplanes in the dark of night. They waded in waist-high tides from the landing craft and watched their fellow GIs fall beside them. Yet they continued to crawl up the beaches and cliffs. One after another, they fell to their death at Pacific Island after Pacific Island. On the beaches of Normandy, in the deserts of Africa, and on the high seas they fought, they gave their all. Some quietly now lay in our national cemeteries; others lay at the bottom of the largest oceans.

Now, generations later, we are asking our young men and women to become soldiers, marines, aviators, and seamen, and to give their all. Today, we have troops scattered across the globe. They fight, they are maimed, and they die at lonely outposts in the deserts of the Middle East. They are well trained, well armed, and have the world's best technology. When they are wounded, they are cared for by the best nurses, doctors, and military hospitals the world has ever known.

However, all too often, they go home emotionally or physically scarred for life. All too often, they go home in flag-draped coffins.

I was lucky. I only had a taste of war. This small sample — this very small taste — was something I pray my son and the youth of our country never have to experience. This taste of war was worse than any food, any medicine, and any punishment I could ever dream up. I have known and fought beside officers and enlisted men who had seen comrade after comrade die. I have listened to the stories told by veterans of World War I, World War II, and the Korean War.

For most of these brave men and women, talking about their experiences in war is hard. They do not want to open up the deep emotional wounds they had worked so hard to bury. Where veterans gather, and sometimes with the benefit of some strong drink, their silence can be broken. Sometimes when they hear a comrade's story, they will share of the horrors they faced.

I have known World War II, Korean War, and even Vietnam War heroes who gave so much. One I know lost a leg; one gave up both legs and one arm. One endured a shipboard Kamikaze attack and lived. I have been honored to walk beside a veteran who had four ships blown out from under him in the Pacific. These veterans gave and gave because it was expected of them. They gave to protect freedom and their homeland. Their country called and they, as well as far too many of their fallen comrades, stepped forward to protect that which they valued almost more than life itself.

I was blessed and was indeed lucky for I experienced only a small taste of war. I saw the enemy up close but a few times. I had the enemy in the sights of my weapon only a few times. Much more often, I saw the enemy at a distance or saw the results of our overwhelming firepower as I counted their dead. I hugged the ground beside GIs who were scared, GIs who were dodging bullets, and GIs that were firing their rifles as

fast as they could. Thankfully, I lived and was able to, with other GIs, tremble with the shakes for hours after facing enemy gunfire. However, the combat I faced was always short lived and mostly conducted from afar. In the combat I faced, it was very unlikely that the enemy would overwhelm us.

*A Taste of War* is written to give a deeply personal and perhaps different perspective than some who write of war. I write not as a combat hero. I write not as one who experienced month after month of intense combat. I write as one who only sampled a taste of war and found it profoundly horrible. I did not get draft deferments. I went to war, and I was lucky that I returned whole.

A true World War II hero asked me to write of my taste of war. He and I believe that if these words slow down even one of those who have never tasted combat to rush into war then it was worth it. If, by sharing my experiences, even one young man or woman will never see, experience, or die in war then I can live my last years in peace. My small taste of war leads me to agree completely with General William T. Sherman who said, "War is hell."

I salute all the true heroes who fought and those who gave their lives that I am free to write and you are free to read these words.

The individuals identified in *A Taste of War* are all real. However, except for my wife and her parents, I have changed all the names. I did this to protect the privacy of those with whom I served in combat. As I wrote (sometimes between freely flowing tears), I realized that I had lost touch with those with whom I had faced the enemy. Whether it was because of decades of hiding the pain of war or some other reason, my mind long ago forgot the names of most the brave soldiers with whom I served in Vietnam. In incidents where my notes, letters, or photos clearly indicated a soldier's real name, I chose not to use it for the book so that neither the soldier nor his

loved ones would somehow be made to recall, or worse yet, relive a combat pain and a past long ago suppressed.

The exact locations and details in *A Taste of War* are based upon my best recollection nearly four decades after they occurred. I attempted to be accurate, but the accuracy of *A Taste of War* was no doubt blurred by time, impacted by my faulty memory, and colored by years of trying so hard to forget the bitter realities of war.

William H. Powell  
1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant  
United States Army  
1968-1971

## CHAPTER 1

# Leaving on a Jet Plane

**A**fter having been up what seemed like all night, the sun began to peek through the light clouds. It was going to be a bright, sunny day just south of Harrisonville, Missouri. Soon the sun would begin to warm the surrounding air, but no matter how strong, it could not touch the coldness in my heart.

That day, the farmhouse south of Kansas City, Missouri was filled with my wife's family. Her sisters, their husbands, her mother, and even her father who had taken the day off work ate quietly around the huge kitchen table. My mother-in-law, Mary McVay, was nicknamed "Sarge" by her three son-in-laws who were in the military. As always, Sarge directed the meal preparation and clean up and pushed us out of the kitchen so a carload could begin the long drive to the Mid-Continent International Airport in Kansas City.

As the chill began to burn off the outside air, we stood around as long as possible. We exchanged hugs, deeply locked our eyes for a few brief moments, and somehow, in this special way, conveyed a profound depth of feeling and concern. My father-in-law, George McVay, whose parents just didn't express emotions, could only reach out with his huge hand and say, "Good luck, boy." For some reason this time, being called



Officer Candidate  
Powell and Marilyn  
12/23/1968.

“Boy” didn’t even bother me. George had served in World War II. He had faced a Kamikaze attack on his ship in the Pacific. He had fought on-board fires caused by attack aircraft, and while his ship was cruising in full blackout conditions in the dark of the night, he fell through an open hatch crashing to the deck below. He had no broken bones, just a very serious head injury. Now this combat veteran was sending me off to war.

Now it was my turn. It was time to load my large, olive drab, Army-issue canvas bag into the trunk of the car. For the next year, that canvas bag – with my name stenciled neatly in black – would be with me and would hold all my personal possessions. It would hold the letters from my wife, the extra pair of combat boots, the socks, and even the olive drab, government-issued underwear.



*Second Lieutenant Powell and Marilyn the Sunday before leaving for Vietnam.*

The shutting car doors seemed to slam unusually loud that day. Perhaps it was because they contrasted so with the silence inside the car. What do you say as you ride north to the airport to meet the plane that will take the newest member of your family into the highly protested and mixed-up mess know as the Vietnam War?

For the last time in hopefully only a year but perhaps for the last time in my short life, I drove down the highway. Now, oh so many years later, I cannot recall the details of the trip. The trees flew by, the farmhouses sat quietly in the emerging greenness of their Midwest fields, and the Angus cattle seemed to stand unusually still. However, I do recall, in the hurry to get this trip completed, I drove faster than I should have. I was in a hurry to get to the airport so I could kiss my bride, Marilyn, over and over again. I longed to hold her in my arms as long as possible.

I drove with haste because I had lingered too long and waited to leave for the airport until the last moment. I sought out one more hug and one more stolen moment of peace. My mind jumped from fear of war and death to the immediate pain of

separation from the one I had come to love so dearly in just a few months of marriage. The flood of these emotions and the daze of it all clouded my judgment. It could have all ended on that road as I drove far too fast and foolishly passed one car after another.

Oh too soon, Marilyn and I stood in the airport terminal, waiting until the very last moment to say that long-feared goodbye. Then, over the airport sound system or perhaps it was from a nearby radio, came the strands of a popular song. As the soulful words penetrated the air so dense with emotions, Marilyn and I began to cry. I will never forget one line from that song. Just before our last parting kiss I heard, "I'm leaving on a jet plane; don't know if I'll be back again."

What did my fellow passengers think? Was this whimpering and teary-eyed, second lieutenant the best our country had to offer? Oh sure, I looked crisp and clean in my second lieutenant's uniform. Of course, I was lean; toughened by 44 weeks of the some of the best military training in the world. However, that morning on the way to Vietnam, I quietly, softly, and so deeply sobbed. It was hard to wipe the tears before they could flow down my cheeks. There I sat a reluctant, but fully trained infantry officer. Soon I would depart to fulfill my duty to my country. My journey was oh so different, but in many ways the same as those of other generations of soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines, who went before me. War after war, far too many of our brave "GIs" returned to their loved ones wounded and maimed for life. The lucky ones came home outwardly whole and only inwardly scarred and shattered. Some of our country's bravest young men and women went off to war in a faraway land and came home in a coffin to lie beneath row after row of silent white crosses.

These, and many other thoughts, raced through my mind as the Midwest prairies and the rugged mountains seemed to somehow zoom below the plane in which I rode. Never before on previous trips to California, had the hours of the flight gone so quickly. Somehow, I settled into that strange inner space

into which we can enter when emotion and the stress are so overwhelming. Here in this noisy jetliner, I wanted so badly to find a peace, a feeling of comfort, a spiritual rest, or perhaps even a deep quiet. Instead, the roar of the plane and my own fears of unknown horrors yet to be faced, brought to me visions of war.

Returning to the reality of this plane, I looked around. I could see salesmen getting ready for a major presentation, businessmen on their way to meetings and discussing corporate plans, and a few grandparents no doubt on the way to see their own children and grandchildren. The nice elderly woman who I had helped stow her carry-on bag slept quietly beside me. The couple with their two toddlers was busy keeping them entertained. Then I noticed the young couple snuggling as close together as the airline seats would allow. The unwelcome pain of my own separation and the reality of my flight with an ultimate destination into an area of war and of death again stirred my emotions.

I had flown enough times in my young life that I could sense when a commercial plane began to slow down and start its gradual approach to the airport. Now, feeling those sensations, I knew that soon I would be landing in San Francisco. If it were not for the fog, my fellow passengers could have watched as the coastal mountains slid under the plane. As the plane crossed over the central valley area and began its descent, they would have been able to watch the beautiful city of San Francisco appear. In only a few seconds, they would have gotten a glimpse of one of God's most beautiful creations as we flew over the dark blue waters of the San Francisco Bay. However, this day and this landing – much like the next phase of my life – were shrouded in a gentle mist and a thick fog. As the plane descended, the clouds seemed to thicken and just rush by the plane's windows. Suddenly, we broke through the clouds and there below us was the salty and chilly waters abutting the airport. Little did I know that sudden landings like this would become commonplace and a regular part of my life in Vietnam.

As this jetliner, this winged cylinder of life that whisked me away from my bride, approached the terminal, I half-heartedly listened for the instruction of which baggage carousel would have my large, olive drab, Army-issue canvas bag. My orders were to report to the communications center for departing military personnel. Even at that time, the San Francisco International Airport was huge by Midwest standards. Perhaps it would be hard to find; perhaps I would need to ask someone to help me locate the next station in my departure to war. If I were lucky, instead of my olive drab, Army-issue canvas bag being misplaced by the airlines, the military personnel waiting to send me off to war would misplace me.

However, I should not have worried. Not far from the baggage claim area, I could see two lines of GIs. One line wound around and curved back around as grim-faced men waited their turn to use the pay phone. The other line looked so much unlike all the other lines I had stood in during my short military career. The expression on the faces of the GIs here was different. The air above these soldiers was heavy and still, yet I could hear a nervous chatter. A few GIs greeted old friends, some played cards in the midst of the uncertainties they faced, but most stood or sat, or even slept on the cold, hard floor in eerie silence.

This line was not the one we stood in for hours to have our head nearly shaved as recruits. This line was not the one with medical personnel on each side using a large stainless steel gun to give us all kinds of injections. This was not like the chow lines, nor was it like the lines at stateside mail call. For the first time in my military career, I stood in a line with women waiting quietly beside other GIs. While the women were young and fit, the GIs hardly even noticed them. This line, which was the gateway to war, moved faster than any military line I had ever seen or would ever see again.

The soldiers would step forward and give their name and serial number. They were swiftly given a meal voucher and three sets of orders. The first set of orders was to board a

shuttle bus at 14:30 hours (2:30 p.m.) for a bus ride to Travis Air Force base. The second set of orders were to board a plane at 18:30 hours, and the third set of orders (in triplicate) were to be retained and submitted to the officer in charge of the plane taking them to Vietnam. Upon landing, one copy was to be turned over to the officer in charge after landing in Vietnam. For one brief moment, I wondered what would happen if I would just “lose” my papers. Instead, I held them tight as if doing so would bring me a better assignment or some kind of good luck.

Now with my orders in hand, it was my turn to join the line of other grim-faced GIs who were waiting to make that last quick call. It seemed like hours but soon my turn came, and I first made a local call to my parents who lived in Martinez, California just across the San Francisco Bay. They were almost within eyesight of where I now stood ready to ship out, to fly off to a faraway war. What do you say to your father under these circumstances? What can you say to the woman who gave you birth, who nursed you, who mended your small wounds, and who dried your tears? How does a tough GI say goodbye to his mother? What words can be said in a mere three-minute call? All too soon, my time was up. With one final goodbye, the phone clicked and the line was silent.

Even as those behind me grumbled, I made one more call. Once more, I wanted to hear the voice of my bride. We had only three minutes to talk. We could not touch, we could not hold hands, we could not kiss, and we could not even look into each other’s eyes. I don’t remember what we said. I don’t know what promises were made. No doubt, I promised to come home. No doubt, I promised keep myself safe. No doubt, I promised to stay away from danger. Marilyn, who was wise beyond her youth, knew that fulfilling these promises was beyond my control. As I hung up the phone, the tears flowed. Even as I wrote about this simple phone call almost 40 years, the page upon which I wrote blurred as again the tears flowed freely.

Standing there amidst hundreds of other GIs and feeling somehow weak and unmanly, I wept. They stood aside and let me pass. No one chided or teased me for my show of weakness and sorrow. They too had made their last call. They had said their last goodbye and were waiting in dazed and dead silence. Those large, olive drab, Army-issue canvas bags were everywhere and no one seemed to mind as I threw mine upon that stack that was already chest high and growing rapidly. A few of the GIs went for a smoke. Some sat and read. A few tried to make lively conversations and joke. Somehow, the conversations always ended quickly and the jokes fell upon deaf ears. As these young GIs faced a future unknown and fraught with deadly danger, they were not in the mood for humor.

We were off to serve our country. We were young, we were brave, and we were some of the best-trained GIs America had ever sent off to war. Getting ready to ship out, I knew that I was just fulfilling my duty as an American. It never really occurred to me that I could walk out the door, buy civilian clothes, sneak off to Canada, and avoid the war. I had been given a draft deferment to allow me to finish college but was denied one to attend graduate school. In the Midwest, getting into the National Guard was very difficult. Without family or other special influence, the waiting list for enlisting in the National Guard was nearly a year. I did not know people, nor have family members with power and influence who could save me from my fate. I was going to Vietnam.

In true military style, the bus that would take us to Travis Air Force base was two hours late. Some of us hoped that the military had forgotten us and that they would just send us back home. Of course, that was not to be. At that time the military may have been slow, it may have not been equipped with high-speed computer or cell phones, but orders to Vietnam were not forgotten and never rescinded. Now as the chill of a San Francisco night settled, in the U.S. Air Force big gray bus arrived.

There was no pushing, there was no hurry, and some GIs even tried to hold back as if somehow being the last one on the bus would give them one more moment of peace. All too quickly, the doors closed and we were off to another staging area for GIs. As we pulled into the unloading zone, GIs were everywhere. As at the San Francisco airport, occasionally two GIs would recognize each other. During the Vietnam War, enlisted personnel who had trained together often shipped out together. Some lucky GIs were able to share memories of their basic and advanced military training. These experiences rushed to fill the silence and the fear of the moment. Nevertheless, even the intense training experiences these GIs had undergone had not prepared them for, nor given them the power to overcome, their fears of the future. It was eerie how after just a few hurried moments of comradeship, a deep hush filled the air.

Many of those I had trained with in Basic Training had long since received their orders and were lost somewhere in the mass of humanity that was the Army. Nearly all of those who had entered Basic Training with me at Fort Dix, New Jersey were somewhere else. I looked over the mass of GIs to see if I could find someone with whom I had attended Advanced Infantry Training. Seeing none, I guessed they had left for Vietnam already. As large as the Army is, I thought for sure that I'd see at least one other second lieutenant who had graduated with me from Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia or who had trained with me in Jungle Warfare School in Panama. Through the dense air, I saw no one I knew.

As a second lieutenant, the government had spent so much on my training that it wanted to get a few months of stateside duty from me before I shipped off to Vietnam. Being an officer, I was often segregated from most of the GIs. As a young second lieutenant, I did not have enough rank or years of military experience to earn significant special privileges. I had not been in the military long enough to form the bonds that

come from the comradeship of years of military leadership, military command, and combat. Somehow, in the midst of this sea of GIs, I was all alone.

At sometime in the middle of the night I heard a grizzled old master sergeant roared out “smoke ‘um if you got um and hit the latrines.” A warrant officer much more quietly informed the group of officers that it was time to head out. The darkness of this California night was broken now by bright lights which shone on a huge jet liner and on the lines of GIs grimly climbing its aluminum steps, ducking their heads, and beginning the flight to the most dangerous stage of their young lives. Only one or two of the flight attendants were young; the rest were indeed attractive but went about their work with a skilled professionalism. They knew how to joke with a plane of GIs going off to war. Only later would I would learn that each crew made multiple trips to and from Vietnam each week.

The normal airplane chatter was subdued and as the lights of San Francisco disappeared, a deep and almost depressing hush settled in. Oh, there was the occasional attempt at humor, the quick, almost-halfhearted brag of one last night of drinking, bar crawling, and female conquest. Somehow, these fell on deaf ears. The plane was loaded with young men off to a country of which they knew nothing to fight an unpopular war for reasons they did not understand. Some of them would be “in country” only a few days before they would be sent home in a coffin without having even known why they had been sent off to war. A few of the GIs had tried college, some were high school graduates, but most were high school dropouts. Stateside, they could not get a real job until they completed their military obligation. So now, they were off to a land unknown – a country that was mysterious and clouded with fear. Now they were off to face and hopefully avoid death.

How long was the flight to be? When would we arrive? Quietly and gently, the flight attendants deflected these questions. Hour after hour, we shuffled to and from the four small toilets on this plane. Gradually, I again sensed that the airliner in

which I was flying was beginning to slow down and start its gradual approach to a distant airport. As we broke out of the clouds, the sight was surrealistic. It was impossible but I could swear that a deep fresh blanket of snow covered the ground! As the plane began its final approach, the co-pilot announced we were landing in Alaska.

Alaska? The quiet within the plane was quickly replaced by a buzz of speculation. Had the Army changed its mind? Were we all going to be assigned to Alaska? What would life be like here and how would it compare to the dreaded Vietnam where we had all been assigned? A curious grin began to show on the face of some of these GIs. They could handle this. Would it be Alaska or Vietnam? Wow, what a choice! A few minutes later, the major who was the ranking officer onboard came on the loudspeaker and, with but a few words, crushed the momentary hope of an entire planeload of GIs.

We were ordered to remain in our seats. The major read the very short list of the lucky GIs who were to deplane. The rest of us were to remain in our seats until they had departed and their seats were filled. As these lucky few almost leapt down the aisle, they were cheered and jeered. The cold that came in through the open plane door was nothing compared to the almost frozen chill on the face of all those who boarded this plane from Alaska to Vietnam. They had faced frozen tundra and had endured cold. Now they would soon face a new fear. Instead of worrying about keeping warm and avoiding the freezing chill of Alaska, they would feel the heat of Vietnam and face the fear of bullets, rockets, mortars, booby traps, and death.

All too soon, the plane's door was closed and latched and we were taxiing down a runway again. The planeload of GIs gave an almost united groan as the plane lifted up into the dark sky and turned southwest. Hour upon deadly quiet hour, the plane flew. As we flew, the sky became clear and we could see the ocean below. Once again, I sensed the plane begin to slow down and begin its airport approach. Surprisingly as we

neared the airport, all I could see was water. Again, the voice of the co-pilot brought us to a realization of how totally unpredictable our lives as GIs would be. We were landing in Guam! The process was the same as Alaska. A few lucky GIs got off the plane and a few unlucky ones got on the plane. This stop was very short and once more, we were off into the skies heading toward Vietnam. There were to be no more unexpected landings.

CHAPTER 2

## Welcome to Vietnam

**T**he next time the plane descended, it was the fastest landing I had ever experienced in a large jet. The angle of descent was steep enough that nearly all the GIs held onto the seatback in front of them. The pilot reversed the plane's jet thrusters, braked hard, and swiftly turned the plane at the end of the runway. Welcome to Vietnam!

Here on the tarmac of Tan Son Nhut airport and with a depth of emotion that we could sense even through the sound system, each member of the flight crew came on and wished us good luck, God speed, and a safe return home. The flight attendants did all they could to remain calm and smile knowing that soon we would begin to face the realities of war in this country called Vietnam.

Before us, crowding and eagerly waiting to board the plane we had just left, was a horde of bedraggled GIs. At that time, most GIs only stayed in Vietnam one year. Only one year of war, one year of combat had changed these GIs. They all had a faraway look in their eyes; they seemed stunned, sullen, and unusually quiet. Occasionally, one would yell out encouragement. As we neared the terminal building, we could hear them. "Keep your head low." "Good luck newbies." One sang out louder than the

others, "Watch your backside, and protect your buddies. With their help and a lot of luck, you'll make it home in one piece."

Now it was our turn. We walked past those who had served before us. We looked down with fear as they looked up with anticipation at the plane that would "take them back to the world." I could see a few with wounds, some on crutches, and a few in wheelchairs. They were going home and I was going into I knew not what and facing dangers of which I had no real awareness. Even the best military training in the world doesn't really prepare anyone to face the horrors of war. Would I be brave enough? Would I have the leadership skills I needed in combat? Would I lose fellow soldiers? Would I be wounded? Would I survive to stand like those tired GIs before me awaiting my flight home to freedom? Or would my number be called resulting in a return trip home in a flag-draped coffin?

In the military, being an officer has its advantages. Most of the soldiers on my plane were enlisted men and even with the rank of private first class or specialist, they had few privileges. They were all ordered into a briefing area to begin that tried and true military tradition of "hurry up and wait." Of course, none of them was too eager to get on to their assignment. For most of them, they would be in a combat unit in a few days, under enemy fire, and facing death the very day they arrive at their units. However, as an officer, I was "asked" to join the other officers who had come in on the flight before mine. The GIs assigned to "process our paperwork" were friendly and respectful. In a little under an hour, all the officers were ushered to an air-conditioned bus and taken to our officer's barracks.

As we got off the bus, we could see sandbagged "bunkers" scattered around the area. No doubt, this was just a bit of overzealous caution of the military. Certainly, here in the middle of this large Air Force Base well inside the city of Saigon, we would be safe. In the barracks, we were assigned a bunk, given a footlocker, and shown the mess hall. Every morning, we were to report to the headquarters building and see if our

assignment orders had been posted. As evening approached, some of us went off to the officer's mess club for some great grub. After the long flight and wolfing down a steak, I was ready to catch up on some much-needed rest. Moments after falling onto the bunk — perhaps even before fully laying down — I was sound asleep.



*Barracks where incoming and outgoing GI stayed awaiting orders or transportation back to the USA. Note: sandbags only go part way up the sides.*

The confusion, sirens, noise, explosions, dark, these new surroundings — I awoke and, for a moment, I forgot where I was. Then reality came home in the form of another explosion that sounded like it was just outside. What should I do? I grabbed my brightly shined combat boots, ran, and fell confused into to the nearest sandbag-covered bunker. As quickly as they had started, the explosions stopped. As I would learn later, the silence after incoming rounds always rings hollow. But now, we carefully walked back to our barracks and fell trembling onto the bunks. Sometime in the night, sleep returned and the sound of revile being played over a

loudspeaker woke us up. A quick shave, a cold shower, and I was off to the mess hall.

Outside the barracks, I had my first taste of war and it was horrible. Before me, the realization of last night came into view. Only two barracks away, mortar rounds had come through the roof. While only one officer was killed, three had very serious wounds. One night in Vietnam, one infantry officer died, two infantry officers would never lead in combat but after medical treatment would be on the way to months of rehabilitation in a stateside military hospital. In a flash, in the dead of the night, they had faced the hell of war and lost. One life was snuffed out and four purple hearts were “earned.”

I can't remember what was served in the mess hall. I can't remember much that happened that day. I know that when I arrived at the headquarters building, my orders were not posted. The clerk I talked with said, “Sir, just relax, take it easy, read a book, go to a movie, or rest up. Your orders will come soon.” How do you entertain yourself on a huge military fortress in the middle of Vietnam? I wandered around, and roamed too close to the fence line. Suddenly, a very angry and excited German Shepard guard dog and the huge military policeman (MP) who handled him startled me. I listened as the guard explained how last night in that area of the compound three Viet Cong sappers had slipped through the tangled wire perimeter with satchel charges of explosives. Their success meant that tomorrow one more of America's best who had, no doubt, been in Vietnam just a few days would begin his flight home in a flag-draped coffin.

The MP went on to explain that these sappers, one of whom had been wounded and captured as he tried to get back through perimeter, went to pre-targeted buildings. They would quietly open a door of one building, throw in their explosive charge, and quickly and silently run between buildings throwing their second satchel charge. Then, in the confusion of the explosions and death they had left behind, running in the shadows, they would race to escape to try again the next night.

The night before, as I huddled in a bunker thinking the exploding mortar rounds near me killed officers, these sappers they were killing other GIs. That night, they killed four and wounded seven GIs who were asleep in their barracks and disrupted one of the communication bunkers.

The MP explained that here in this “secure base,” sappers all too often succeeded. However, their wily ways much more often caused significant death on fire support bases out away from Saigon. He explained that far more often than was reported in the press, good GIs died because their comrades on guard duty failed them. Instead of vigilance, they slept or succumbed to the blurred perceptions and dulled senses of marijuana. Now in the stifling heat of Vietnam and in the humidity so high that you could almost see it in the air, I was chilled to the bone.



*Guard station where Lieutenant Powell met and talked with an MP.*

With nothing else to do and wanting to get the information I had just learned off my mind, I returned to the barracks and located a stack of paperback books that had been left behind by other officers awaiting their orders. I tried a few games of pool, but lost so badly that I lost interest. I even found a nearby chapel and as I entered, I met one of the Chaplin's assistants. He was busy with paperwork but stopped what he was doing

and showed me where I could sit to meditate and pray. What could have been an uneventful day brought me only fear of what the night might bring.

As the night before, there were sirens, explosions, and officers running to the bunkers. I learned afterwards that these bunkers could protect us from shrapnel, and could withstand a mortar shell, but they could not withstand enemy artillery and they certainly were not safe from enemy sappers who could penetrate our fences — our “defensive wall” — almost at will. The sappers were very effective because they were dedicated to kill and maim as many GIs as they could in a short time. They knew it was not likely they would make it out alive, but if they could, they did. The next night, they would sneak in to kill and maim all the GIs they could. Even today, decades later, our military and police forces have so little that they can do to protect us from fanatics willing to die to carry out their mission to kill and maim.

Decades after my time in Vietnam, even as a combat veteran, I will never understand how quickly we humans go to war to settle our differences. I don't understand how going into another country and killing those who live there will create trust in Americans and freedom for those whose country we have invaded. I know that in some cases, war must be fought. In some cases, a superior force has crushed their weak neighbors, and they are marching to conquer and enforce their will on the world. I know that we can and must defend our loved ones and our homeland. However, it is beyond me how decades after I served in Vietnam, thousands of GIs and millions of others are being killed in the name of religion?

While I waited in this base camp for my combat orders, day after day and night after night, the routine was the same. The explosions might be nearby or they might be across the base camp. Of course, every night, there was the sound of our own “outgoing” artillery firing on some unseen enemy. Only later would I learn how our radar system could pinpoint the spot from which mortar rounds had been fired and, within seconds,

return fire was on its way to the spot from which the mortar rounds were launched.

Every night, sometimes once and sometimes two, three, or four times, we would awaken to the sirens, move with haste and some fear into the nearest bunker, wait out four or five mortar barrages, and return to the barracks. In the bunkers and with explosions going off outside, there was no rank, there were no designation of "officer: or "enlisted." We were all GIs huddling in fear and praying that no one we knew would be hurt. Every time we would leave the bunker, we would look for damage in our area and tend to any who were wounded. I was lucky; the mortar shells that came in silently but killed with their deadly explosions never fell on my barracks or near me again while in this base camp. Even these almost sleepless nights helped prepare me for the endless nights and the horror of "incoming" I would soon experience at another base camp further out into Vietnam.

After six days "in country," everything changed. When I arrived at the headquarters building, my orders were posted on the bulletin board. My orders had arrived. I was not assigned to a headquarters company; I was not assigned to a logistics center. I was not assigned to process incoming or homebound GIs. I was assigned to B Company 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Mechanized Infantry Brigade of the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. I was going to be an infantry platoon leader in a combat zone. As I stepped inside and picked up the triplicate copies of my orders and turned to depart, the clerk simply said, "Good luck, sir."

Good luck? Good luck would have been an administrative assignment, a desk job, or even working as an assistant hospital administrator – not an infantry platoon leader. Yes, I had been trained for that role, but there was no way I could see a combat assignment as good luck. Later, as my yearlong taste of war wore on, I would know how very lucky this assignment was. However, it was now time to once again cram all my

possessions into the large, olive drab, Army-issue canvas bag and head “upcountry.”

Now with that bag on my back and almost ready to step out the door to a whole different experience of war, I paused. Setting down that olive drab bag, I picked up a pen, sat on a



*Lieutenant Powell just after he received His “in country” orders and before heading “up country” to Tay Ninh.*

bunk bed, and wrote a note of welcome and wished for all who would follow me in the barracks. I wished for them protection from harm and a gracious acceptance of the duties, fears, and horrors they would soon face. Then, not knowing if I was writing a wish I would never myself realize, I finished the note and wished them a safe return to family and friends back in “the world.”