

Steve Ransom
First Sergeant
Ground Radar Specialist
Battery I
29th Artillery SLT
U.S. Army
Tan Son Nhut AB
Retired Iowa Army National Guard



I enlisted in the Army over Christmas break of my senior year in high school, 1965. My buddy and I went down by bus from Spencer to Des Moines. Spent two days down there being vaccinated and taking tests, and all kinds of stuff. Then, after two days we got on the bus and went back there to northwest Iowa, Primghar. We were on a twenty day delay plan, which means we got to finish high school before we had to report. They put us on an airplane to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. I was in the old World War II barracks with coal-fired furnaces. We always ran out of hot water for our showers.

I wasn't drafted, but I still probably would have joined the military, just for the experience. You never know, you might want to make it a career, and eventually I did. I retired from the National Guard of Iowa. I was seventeen when I enlisted. I turned eighteen at the end of Basic Training. My dad was all right about me enlisting, but my mom wasn't really happy about my enlistment as a high school senior. She wasn't going to sign the enlistment papers, so I said, "Well, that's okay, when I graduate from high school, I'll join the Marines." Dad said, "You sign! You sign right now! My son's not going to be cannon fodder!" He was at Iwo Jima in World War II. He knew about what Marines did and what the Army did at Iwo Jima. The ship he was on got sunk.

After Basic I went to New Jersey, Fort Monmouth. It used to be what they called the home of the Signal Corps. I was there for about nine months. Then I got sent to Michigan, at Selfridge Air Force Base.

I was trained at Fort Monmouth on the smallest radar the Army has. It's back-packable. So what do they do but send me to Selfridge Air Force Base, to work on high power acquisition radar, which is

the biggest radar the Army has. Forty-foot parabolic antenna, electronic cabinets as big as this library. Talk about being lost! It's like having a bicycle repairman working on Mac trucks. So, after being there some months I put in a volunteer request to go to Vietnam, because I wanted to work in what I was trained to work in—ground surveillance radar. Not air defense radar.

I didn't really want to work on ground radar, I didn't want this all-new air radar system. I was trained on the smallest radars the Army has. Two men could pile it in a Jeep, take it out, set it up, and operate it. Then I went to where they have missiles and nuclear arms! The cabinetry was bigger than this building, with all the cabinets there for the electronics—I was TOTALLY LOST! I did what I could, and got sent to another battery, B Battery, which had a different radar, to start learning all over again. You can't believe the electronics that go with radar.

I flew over to Vietnam on a commercial airliner out of California and landed in Saigon, at Tan Son Nhut Air Base. Before I was sent, I had requested to go to another battery and I didn't hear anything about it, so I put in another 1049. I got my rear end chewed out for that. You're not supposed to put in a second one before you've heard about the first. Well, how come I haven't heard from the first? Sometimes it pays to get mouthy. I said to the officer, "It's been dragging on so long, how would I know? These guys don't tell me anything, so I put in another request." He said, "You sure want to get out of here in a hurry, don't you?" I said, "Yeah, I do! I want to get back to something I know how to do." When I actually did get my orders for Vietnam, this gruff old platoon sergeant, he takes my orders and throws them at me. Hits me in the chest and says, "I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY!" I said, "My orders for Vietnam! YA-

HOO!" And that jerk wouldn't release me from duty until midnight.

I landed in Saigon, in early April of '68 and '69. I had two tours. And of course I got put into something entirely different from what I was trained in, searchlights with a hundred and twenty-five candle power, and infrared sensors. The searchlights were in a Jeep, but later were up on a tower. Talk about a place that draws lead! I was awarded a "Killer Flag" for body count. It was called "The Red Pennant of Courage" that you fly from your antenna of your Jeep, or your "Track" Duster, or your Quad 50, or whatever vehicle you're assigned to.

I lost two Jeeps to mortars and 107 millimeter rockets. In a Base Camp, the berm is sandbagged all around. So if you get a round that lands there, then the shrapnel comes up and gets the radiator and the back part of the searchlight and everything. So I had two Jeeps knocked out of action. But I wasn't in them, I was laying down beside 'em! After the first one was wrecked, the First Sergeant comes out and looks at the second one and says, "Here's the Jeep. Put the searchlights on it. What am I gonna do with you, Ransom?" I said, "Send me to Vung Tao." He said, "I'm not sending you to Vung Tao!" It was the best In Country R and R place for RVN and American soldiers and for the Viet Cong. I was the only guy who lost two Jeeps in enemy action.

The searchlight Jeep had a rig mounted on the back. It would light up an area of white light at a thousand meters, a hundred and twenty-five meters wide, bigger than a football field. First we'd monitor with infrared binoculars which the enemy can't see, and when we made contact we'd hit them with white light. For a few seconds the enemy is frozen in position, and that's when you want to do your shooting

I had my little portable radio sitting on the berm one night and we got contact. We saw the rockets launched. And as I went into action with the searchlight to illuminate where it was coming from, I knocked the radio over. And Magic Carpet Ride by Steppenwolf was playing. Blaring on the radio! Well, they knew we were there! Anyway, after the action was all done, I retrieved my radio and turned it down to a low volume. One of the guys in the bunker next to us, an infantry guy, came out and said, "That was so cool! You guys went into action with Magic Carpet Ride!!" Like we planned it! Like "Good morning, Vietnam!"

There were rubber plantations nearby. Every

time we blew up a rubber tree, we paid for it. The house girls that took care of the barracks, you know they dusted and cleaned, and made your bunks. That was a program for having the Vietnamese get paid for labor and that would help stabilize the economy. Plus you pick up a lot of intelligence from the Vietnamese. There were kids that had coolers on their bikes with ice cream to sell. And the kids would tell us, "You no sleep tonight. No sleep tonight." They're telling us we're going to get attacked. It pays off to listen to the kids.

During the daytime, we weren't under anybody's chain of command. That was only at night. Some of us were in a "Door Gunner for a Day" program for a while, until the First Sergeant caught us. The 17th Air Cav had a shortage of door gunners for a while, so they started this program where men from different units could be trained and fly as a door gunner, because the crews weren't getting enough rest. Helicopters were going in and out all the time. They had a little shooting range set up with fifty-five gallon barrels. You learn that when you're sweeping in on an enemy in a helicopter, the way you lead the enemy is different than what you would think. We would get the lag with the machine gun and the helicopter. We had about three flights before the First Sergeant found out. And he was madder than hell. The politest thing he said was, "Are you insane?"

Then my First Sergeant told me I was due to go home. I tried to stay longer, but he said "Your combat exposure is too much. You're running against the odds now." I had two tours in Vietnam, back to back. A tour of duty is a year. But I had a year and nine months.

Going home, I flew into a suburb of San Francisco, Oakland Military Base. They kept us on the plane until it turned midnight to make sure that everybody hit the 120 day term, so nobody got screwed. I could see all these GIs in line, all in their dress green uniforms, and this girl dressed like a hippie came up and spit on this guy in uniform. I went and got a towel and wetted it and wiped the spit off of this guy's back. He said, "What's going on?" I said, "That girl over there just spit on you. She's a dope." I went after her. She saw me coming and took off. She had to take off her shoes to run away. She was going to spit on me, and I said, "If you spit on me, I'm going to knock you out!" And then she took off running.