

Paul Scharfenkamp

**Sergeant
25th Infantry Division
U.S. Army**

**Cu Chi Base Camp
Iron Triangle
Vietnam**



Paul was drafted in December of 1965, leaving behind his parents in Carroll, Iowa. He was nineteen. His brother was also in the Army.

His Basic Training was in Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. His next station was Fort Polk, Louisiana for jungle training. Louisiana had similar conditions to what he would see in Vietnam—hot, wet, and with lots of snakes.

At the end of his training, he was in a room where there were six rows of recruits. The commander said, “Those in rows two and three, stand up. You men will be going to Vietnam.”

He flew to Vietnam on a C-140 cargo plane, and no one talked on the way. They arrived at night and it was sticky hot. He and the others on the plane were to be replacements for the 25th Infantry Division. Helicopters from the 25th picked them up and took them into the jungle, where Paul would spend the next four months.

It turned out that some of his friends were bailed out of this duty because they were able to get a different rating, or had families with influence or money. He is still angry about it.

One of the things that he discovered was that he and the other new men had been trained in the U.S. with obsolete weapons, and they were not familiar with the ones they were issued when they got to their assignment. He carried an M-79 grenade launcher, an M-16, and a .45 pistol.

At first they were also issued leather boots because there were no jungle boots available. He got size 11 ½ even though his shoe size was 9 ½. The soles came off. At times a Chinook helicopter would air-drop supplies, including clothes in a large mesh bag. The soldiers would have to sort and grab what they could.

Food was mostly C-Rations from 1947. Paul remembers only one hot meal during his tour in Vietnam. Cans of rations would be carried in a bag attached to the belt.

His unit’s attitude was to survive one day at a time. Don’t worry about clothes, ponchos or food, just your weapons and ammunition. The daily routine was to go into the bush and stay, dealing with bugs and snakes as well as the enemy. A point man would keep watch. They didn’t go into the villages; they mostly saw individual family dwellings in the mountain area. They went into only one town while he was in Vietnam.

At night, they would dig a hole so they could get as flat as possible to avoid being shot. Those on guard duty would sit back to back, and one would sleep for an hour while the other kept watch, then they would take turns.

There was no communication from home. The men would send envelopes with no letters, only grass or some local object home, just to say that they were still alive. They did get their \$90 a month, in cash.

The Viet Cong boobytrapped the jungle with different things, including “punji” stakes, usually of metal or bamboo. These were smeared with urine, feces, or poison to cause infection. Some soldiers would get stuck on purpose, just to get into a hospital where it was safe. The Viet Cong also dug tunnels and lay in wait to ambush the Americans.

In August of 1966, a reconnaissance group had spotted enemy activity and Paul’s group went out to investigate. Paul carried an M-16 and his .45 pistol. Soon they found that they were walking into an ambush.

Roberto Caldera, one of the group, had an M-16 which jammed. He borrowed a medic’s gun, which also jammed. Paul handed Roberto his .45 pistol, which saved both their lives. Right next to a foxhole full of Viet Cong, Paul was seriously wounded. Roberto used the pistol to shoot the Viet Cong, then turned his attention to Paul, who had a large hole in his shoulder which was pumping blood. Roberto shoved his fist into the hole and stopped the bleeding, then hauled him down the hill to help. If Paul had not given Roberto his .45 pistol they would both have been killed that day.

Paul was taken to a tent hospital, then to the Philippines, then Japan, and finally back to Fitzsi-

mons Army Medical Center in Aurora, Colorado. From there he wrote to Roberto, “Dear Dr. Kildare, thanks for saving my life.”

Both men, along with many others, felt that the Army had not prepared them mentally for what they would face in Vietnam, and that their weapons training, with obsolete arms, put them at a disadvantage to the well organized and well armed Viet Cong. The M-16 was known to have problems with jamming, but nothing was done to fix or replace them.

When he returned home, Paul was met with protests and was spit upon in the Omaha airport. Soldiers were told to not wear their uniforms to decrease the potential for such things but he felt he should wear his uniform with pride. Paul was subjected to Agent Orange and a buddy died from it.

Paul was awarded the Purple Heart and a “CIB”—Combat Infantry Badge.

He said he didn’t talk about his experiences in Vietnam.

**Paul Scharfenkamp (Right)
with “Dr. Kildare,”
Roberto Caldera,
In 2009**

