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LZ Baldy, Quy Nhon, Latre Vietnam

L Z Baldy

I'm a veteran of the Vietnam War. In 1967, I was a thirty-four-year-old medical doctor, practicing family medicine in Slater, where I'd been in a two-man partnership with Dr. Wayne Severson for nine years.

I was in the Army Medical Corps. I'm an MD. I was drafted. The military needed doctors. The war was vastly unpopular; not very many potential recruits were happy about it. However, there were a good many volunteers for Vietnam. The hook was that volunteers had some choice of training and assignments, while the draftees mostly wound up a riflemen Infantry. My service time went from September 1967 to June, 1969.

I was ordered to report to Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio, Texas on September 10, 1967. I had a month's training before my assignment. The training covered military protocol, and the mission of the Medical Corps physicians in Vietnam. Rank was determined by the number of years out from medical school, and I was one of the oldest physician draftees in the group. As such, I got to drill our group of about forty or so individuals in marching maneuvers and military formations. Only a few hours were spent at this, and it seemed to me to be a total waste of time, but I felt powerful.

After San Antonio, I was sent to El Paso, Texas to be on the staff of William Beaumont Military Hospital, near Fort Bliss in El Paso. Then in May, 1968, I was sent to Vietnam. For six months I was part of a clearing station at a place called LZ Baldy [Landing Zone Baldy], a member of a three-doctor team receiving casualties and treating illnesses. We had a dentist, laboratory personnel, aides of various sorts, and a little thirty bed facility in a tent where we could keep patients for up to three days if we thought they could be returned to duty within that time. If not, they were evacuated to a large military hospital in Da Nang. As a ranking medical officer, I became the commander.

There was hardly a day when we didn't see war casualties, a lot of them Vietnam civilians. At that phase of the war, in 1968, a good deal of the North Vietnamese effort in the area seemed to be directed against that part of the civilian population thought to be siding too cozily with the Americans.

After that, I was assigned to Army hospitals in Quy Nhon and Latre, mostly providing medical care for the support personnel in the area. I had the opportunity to extend my tour in Vietnam for a few weeks, to put myself within three months of the end of my two-year hitch and get an early discharge rather than being sent to another duty station for what would be less than three months. So I took the extension, and eventually left Vietnam on June 16, 1969.

I saw Napalm used just once to burn off jungles just outside our perimeter, I believe. It was very spectacular. Agent Orange probably was used around LZ Baldy. There was a lot of defoliation that had been done.

The Tet Offensive took place at the end of January and early February, 1968, and I didn't reach Vietnam until May of that year. So I didn't experience Tet, though I had conversations with some who did. I was a part of the Americal Division which was the unit in which the My Lai massacre occurred, but that was in a different brigade, the 198th. I was in the 196th. The war slowly wound down over several years after I left the Army. And the way it ended, with the U.S. abandoning the South Vietnamese, I felt was disgraceful, but not to be avoided, because the war was such an awful idea to begin with in the first place.

Our medical unit had a Jeep, complete with driver. Big John, two hundred and twenty-two pounds of bone and muscles from the streets of Detroit. I somehow felt more secure when Big John was along. I had been issued an early version of the M-16 rifle. The Brigade had established a dumping area by bulldozing away part of a small hill, leaving a steep, raw slope where the hill had been. This dump had an unlimited supply of empty beer cans, and I had an unlimited supply of cartridges. One of my pleasures was to take the M-16 out to the dump, toss beer cans up near the top of the slope, and shoot at them as they rolled down. Not many beer cans escaped. The rumor that we lost the war because I shot away all the cartridges is unfounded.

The HU1 Huey helicopters used for medical evacuations were a large part of life. They were code named "Dust-off," because true enough, they kicked up a lot of dust. We had a helipad just outside of the aid station, which had been generously oiled down. Even so, there was a disagreeable amount of loose dust left around the edges. A Huey was kept ready to go from the helipad, and one of my least favorite recollections was hearing it start to wind up for takeoff in the middle of the night. That sound meant that we would be receiving clientele shortly. We took all comers, American and Vietnamese military, civilians, and infrequently a Cong. The number of accidental injuries of military personnel surprised me. I saw three individuals who were struck by helicopter blades that they walked into. Inadvertent gunshot wounds and vehicle accidents also occurred.

In addition to the helipad, there was an airstrip for fixed wing aircraft running near to the establishment where I slept. On the other side of that was a 105-millimeter Howitzer battery that would fire missions during the night. But sometimes I took a nap during the day. No air conditioning. I had arranged a fan to blow over me through the mosquito netting during the night, or the day as well if I was trying to sleep.

By the time I arrived, the war in the area had settled down to guerilla activity by the local Viet Cong, mostly directed against civilians, without large scale operations against military units. Our U.S. forces had largely dug in on fire support bases, with fixed encampments surrounded by heavily guarded and mined perimeters that did not invite attack. For the medical units, this meant a stable position with no necessity for moving around to follow all over the front. A state of affairs that I was thankful for.

After Quy Nhon, I was sent to a hospital in Nha Trang. Both Quy Nhon and Nha Trang were right on the seashore of the South China Sea. Nha Trang had a beautiful beach, white sand that stretched for miles. I had rooms in an old villa left by the French, just a couple of blocks from the

A Huey HU1
"Dust-off"

beach. The villa came complete with a Mama-san to do cleaning, washing, and ironing. We didn't see Bob Hope, but Ann-Margaret was at the height of her career and visited us at LZ Baldy. Also, at one point a troupe of dancers, all female, came from Australia to perform something approximating the Hula, but without grass skirts. They wore bikinis. Both parts.

My worst fright of the war came when I was in Nha Trang. I had been named acting commander at the hospital while the real regular Army commander was gone for R and R. The duties weren't all that demanding, often just signing papers that came across the desk two or three times a day. On a shelf right next to the desk were a couple of stacks of JAMA, the Journal of the American Medical Association. Thick, heavy piles, covered with dust. I placed my steel helmet on these and started to work through them, picking out articles that interested me. I was doing this, or maybe dozing, when there was a tremendous crash and vast clouds of dust. My first thought was a rocket attack, but as I came fully awake, I realized that it was likely the fall of the shelf, helmet, magazines, and all as it collapsed on the floor. The shelf had been massively infiltrated with termites.

There was a time where I was close enough to hear the guns go off, and close enough to see the streams of fire rain down from Puff, the Magic Dragon. And on one occasion, I remember several bullets came sailing in past the aid station—I think they'd been fired way off in the distance and were on their way down. One of them hit our Jeep. But nobody was shooting at us. I was quite safe. The helicopters were a marvel. If there was anything I would have liked to bring back, it was a Huey. But I couldn't fit it in a duffel bag.

All this came to an end for me on June 15th, 1969, when I rode in the back of a truck to Beek Air Base on Cam Ranh Bay. In a few hours I left Vietnam. Once in Tacoma, it only took a day or so to process my discharge. Th last thing the Army did before handing me my papers was to give me a pair of new combat boots. They must have had a boot overrun somewhere. I never wore them.

I saw no combat. It was all interesting, treating the Vietnamese military and civilians along with U.S. troops, and seeing many conditions I had not encountered before or since. Various types of VD, for example.

In Vietnam, I had worn a simple cloth insignia sewed on the collar of my uniform. But I had to wear the other proper badge of rank, silver oak leaves, to be discharged. I wore them for about thirty minutes during the discharge ritual, then took them off and haven't worn them since. I was a captain at the time I was drafted and left as a Lieutenant Colonel.

I put on civilian clothes immediately and couldn't be easily identified as a Vietnam returnee. No one approached me at any time, pro or con about Vietnam service.

One of the things I remember about Vietnam was the heat. It was intense through the summer, 113 degrees on the beach at Chu Lai when I arrived. We often worked with nothing on but olive-green dyed underpants and thongs for our feet. I was issued a field jacket equipped with a hood that must have been made with Alaska in mind. I never wore it in Vietnam, and eventually brought it home with me. I still have it, very ragged now, but warm enough for the worst Iowa winters.

Also, I remember the sheets of rain and the mud during the monsoon. Our Jeep was equipped with four-wheel drive, my first experience with that. We never got stuck.

I certainly haven't forgotten Vietnam. I think about it every day.

LZ Baldy Bunker