

A Soldier's Experience in Vietnam: Tex Howard ^[1]

Why did you enlist?

My primary reason was to first of all to get out on my own. To be my own man. I thought the Army was good place to start at that time. At least I thought it was. It wasn't until after I enlisted that I really understood what was going on. Even though I know there was a war going on at the time, but I didn't know it was going to last as long as it did or that I would be possible caught up in it. The realization of that didn't hit me until I got over to assist a unit that I was in that was preparing themselves to go to Vietnam. That's when I really became fully aware of it.

Were more men prone to be in combat if they had a specialty or did everybody have to go?

Funny you asked that. When I went through basic AIT and jump school. I say that so you'll understand how things looked to me, the best that I can. When I finished basic, everybody goes through basic, everybody when they finish basic, they get their MOS when they graduate from Basic. Everybody runs down to the bulletin board saying I wonder what I got. They have all of it on the bulletin board. Some get infantry, some get medic, some get to be engineering or whatever. During that time of Vietnam, when I went in, in August 1965, Vietnam was just getting started. I think they actually started sending troops in around 1964, early 1965. The war was getting in to be a war. Before I went in you heard about them on the news sometimes about special forces over there training the South Vietnamese how to fight to defend their country. So, I didn't really think that conventional troops were going to get involved that much. Before I got through basic they had conventional troops in there, well, probably before I went to basic but I didn't really start paying attention to the news and what was going as far as the war was concerned until I was actually in there and started hearing other older service talking about what was going on. Then it starts to sink in, you could go to combat, you could wind up being over there right out of AIT or something and you don't even know what life is all about yet. Then that's when the realization started hitting me, but I'm already in there now.

Is there any particular people you remember serving with while you were in Vietnam?

Oh yeah. There's a couple. One I don't talk about too much. There's two guys. William Gillespie was one of the squad members. By the way, by the time I got to Vietnam I was a squad leader, a sergeant, E5 and I went over there with 8 guys assigned to me. William Gillespie was one. I can't remember Sylvia's first name, I want to say Ben Sylvia but I'm not sure. But, Gillespie, he's an E4 and he got killed over there. I, I don't know I guess I was somewhat...

Well, let me ask you this, you don't want to talk about that. You were 19, you were a squad leader. How did that feel.

Yeah, well by this time I'm 21. It felt a lot of ways. It's weird, really. I can talk about it but it just takes a little time to get it together. Prior to Vietnam we trained together at Fort Campbell for 2 or 3 months. (This is Gillespie? Yes) You get close to people. You have a tendency to say things or make promises that you as an individual take very seriously. I had made some promises, if I had know then, like I know now, I would have known better than to make promises like that. No man can promise stuff like that. I promised before I left for Vietnam, Fort Campbell, the men I took, or went over with me would come back because I was going to provide that type of leadership for them. That they wouldn't have to be afraid of dying over there. But, now I realize a human being can't promise that that he can't give. Which is life and Gillespie lost his. That has been one deal, one situation that has been hard to deal with. Ever since his death. I dealt with it the best that I could but ya know it'll never leave you. No matter what you do it will always be there.

Do you want to talk about what happened around the time you were wounded?

I can, some of it. I'm trying to think how to go into it. This was like I said, the 21st of June. We was working out of a place called the Hobo Woods. That's near Chu Chi, South Vietnam. We had 1st of the 506 Airborne Infantry Battalion and we had also the 2nd 506 Airborne Infantry Battalion. On a joint operation. Search and Destroy mission. We came in contact with the enemy at about 11:00 in the day. When my squad was the lead squad for my particular company and we were the first one to come under contact. So, we started laying down the basic fire while the rest of the platoon came up on line with me and the rest of the company came up on line with the platoon. So, in the meantime we were taking fire and returning fire and until we got information from the company commander about how he wanted to assault the position or whatever. But anyway, he called us back, his squad leaders, he called all us back to brief us. We were gonna come back up and instruct our men what we had to do, and proceed in doing it. When I returned with the information from the platoon leader I found that the way I had left my squad set up had left them in position for firing on the objective. They were not positioned the way I had left them and I inquired about why they had changed positions, and why Gillespie was over there by the machine gunner. He told me the EXO, well back up, better not get into that cause it might lead into something. Well, anyway they explained to me why. But anyway, I chewed them out for changing their position. While I was discussing that with them is when this RPG rocket came in and blew up and it killed Gillespie, and wounded the machine gunner, myself, and one or two others. I'm not sure of the names, I've forgotten the names. But then they called in the medivac helicopter when they could get in there. When they could get in. Normally helicopters can't get in as long as there's firing and shooting going on. We had to wait until there come a lull in the firing and they could find a position

further back and they could get the helicopters in and get us out. It was about 30 or 40 minutes before they could get the medivacs in. So they got them in and got the wounded loaded up. We took off and went back to a field hospital, we called it, at Chu Chi.

Were you sent home after that point or did you stay in Vietnam?

I was sent to Japan. I was sent back to Chu Chi and then I spent a week in Japan and then I was sent back home.

Did you have any contact with your family before this happened?

I was writing letters like before I got wounded. Yeah I was writing letters but, uh, now after I got wounded. It might have been two or three weeks, now I can't remember. I was Chu Chi. It was awhile because I know when I got home, my mother was telling me it had been like 30 days before they actually heard from me. But uh, when I got to the hospital in Japan, I was allowed to make a phone call home and talked with them to let them know everything was alright. Uh, at the hospital there in Chu Chi the chaplain came around and was talking with the different guys in the unit that was wounded that and uh he talked with me and got my parents' address and everything and wanted to know what could he do and I told him to let my parents know that I had been wounded but I was alive and doing pretty good. And he said that he would so when they sent the Purple Heart out and the message out that I had been wounded, he had his message in there that he had talked with me so that Mama and them would know that everything was alright.

Did you understand the purpose of the Vietnam War?

I thought I did. Uh... they told me it was to help stop Communist aggression--to keep it over there instead of letting it come on into the United States, so that was my impression. The South Vietnamese wanted to be Democratic and the North Vietnamese wanted to be Communist. We were trying to keep it so North Vietnamese, you wanted to be Communists, you be Communists but don't try to enforce the South, who was suppose to be allies to the United States. Don't try to force them to be.

Did your understanding change after your service in Vietnam?

I started hearing all different rumors about why the American soldier was in Vietnam and hearing different news broadcasts and people discussing it on T. V. and I started to get the idea that maybe that wasn't the real reason why we were over there, maybe it was a political war, maybe it was a chance for the higher-ups or the rich folks so to speak to make more riches -- to get more money. That's what I started to believe. It wasn't about Communist aggression at all. It was more or less about greed for certain individuals.

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