Letter of Commendation"

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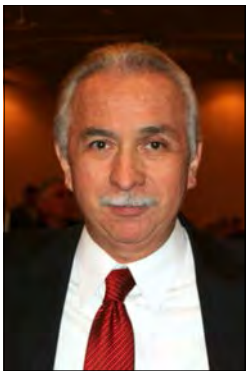
3rd SPS, BIen Hoa AB, 1968-1969

Ernest Govea, 1969

Ernest, age 18, 1968

About nine months into my tour of duty in Vietnam, several other guys and I were transferred from Security to Law Enforcement. I had mixed feelings about it, not that my feelings were relevant. Orders were orders. I was still only nineteen, but some nine months in an environment where violence was the norm had made me hard, tough and mean. As it turned out, these were traits I would need to survive in LE.



Ernest, 2010

There were some real positives to the transfer. I moved into a different hut much further away from the runway, which meant less noise to keep me awake during the day while trying to get badly needed sleep. I also got my own "room" that is, someone before me had put up some plywood around his bunk and hung a sheet of plastic in a crude doorway, so I actually had some privacy. In my hut on the Security side I had lived in an open bay, just rows of bunks. On the negative side, I left a lot of my old buds, guys with whom I had formed a bond of brotherhood, although I would still see them around.

My first night at guardmount, I showed up looking more like a Security troop then an LE troop. I had two bandoliers of M-16 ammo across my chest, normal for Security troops. Tech Sergeant Weeks, our flight commander told me to take them off. I soon learned that while Security troops had one enemy, the Viet Cong combined with the North Vietnamese Army; in Law Enforcement, we had two enemies, one was the VC/NVA and the other were those GIs who were drunk, whacked out, or just out of control from stress and other mentally debilitating inflictions.

A few nights after starting in LE, and while waiting for guardmount to start, I was made aware that the perils posed by enemy number two could be of consequence. I noticed what appeared to be a fresh bite mark on the wrist of another security policeman. I asked him if it was a bite mark and he replied that it was. "What happened?" I asked. "Oh," he said, "We went over to the Apollo Club to run some guys out of there." The Apollo Club was a building that passed for a bar and was off-limits to GIs, but a few would sneak over there once in a while. It was our job to run them off or apprehend them. "This guy latched onto my wrist," he said. "He just wouldn't let go even though we were beating him on his back with our clubs." "When did it happen?" I asked. "Oh, about five months ago" he said. I couldn't believe it. Five months later, this SP still had a bite mark on his wrist. And it looked like it had happened yesterday.

A month or two later, I was working the gate that lead from the air base to the small 5th Special Forces camp at the south east corner of the base. The perimeter road went by about one hundred feet away and another road peeled out from it to the gate I was working and into the Special Forces camp. This gate was favored by many GIs because once they got through they could get into the town of Bien Hoa and visit bars there. Doing so was strictly prohibited without a pass and getting a pass was just about impossible as the danger to GIs was considered to be too high. There was another gate on the south side of the Special Forces camp that was manned by Vietnamese and what I was told were Cambodian mercenaries. They were dark skinned like Cambodians, so I had no reason to disbelieve it, but these guys spoke little English and would let any Americans in or out at anytime, no questions asked and

no pass was required. Consequently, we were always being approached by GIs wanting to get through the gate and who were often quite creative in coming up with stories about why they needed to get through. We were supposed to apprehend anyone who tried to get through without a pass, so when we turned them away, we were doing them a favor.

Once, a couple of airmen approached me at that gate. One had a smile on his face and was obviously the guy with the story, but the other guy wore a deep frown. I smelled trouble, and unsnapped the strap on my .38 holster as they approached, and kept my hand on the pistol grip. Living in an environment where violence was a routine occurrence had also taught me to be cautious. As they approached, I kept my hand on the pistol grip ready to pull the weapon out.

When they got up to me, the guy with a frown said "You can take your hand off your gun; if we were going to jump you we'd have done it by now." "Oh yeah?" I said keeping my hand on the pistol grip, "Let's see." The other guy said something to make light of the first guy's comments and started giving me their preplanned story about how they had to get into the Special Forces camp to catch a helicopter. But the moment was ruined by our hostile exchange and I stopped him in mid sentence. I told him I didn't believe him, and they could either beat it or I could place them under apprehension. His smile disappeared and was replaced with a frown. They turned around and walked away muttering less than flattering comments about me.

On this particular day, at around midnight, I saw a couple of guys coming toward me. They were Army troops from the 145th Combat Aviation Battalion stationed at Bien Hoa Air Base. In addition to providing support to local Army troops, they also protected the base against ground attack and had been instrumental in fighting off large ground assaults against the base during Tet of '68 and February of '69. Watching their UH-1B Huey Gunships pouring fire from their miniguns down on VC positions around the air base was a common sight at night and they had fired many rockets and M-60 rounds at the VC/NVA over my head on the east perimeter in February.

These two guys both approached me with smiles. They were friendly and open and honest about where they wanted to go and what they wanted to do. I said "Yeah, but if you get picked up by the Army MPs, they're going to want to know how you got off base then its going to be my neck." "Nawww…" They said, "We're not going to get caught." I told them I didn't care to take that chance. I knew I could do a pretty good job of getting myself into trouble and didn't need any help from anyone else.

At one point, one of them pulled a pack of Kools out of his breast pocket and asked me if I had a light. At the time, I used to puff on Wild Wood cigars at night to help pass the time, so I took out my cigarette lighter and lit his cigarette. What if they went out somewhere else, could they come back in through this gate later, they asked. "No" I said, if they did that, I would have to apprehend them. About 70 feet away, half a dozen shirtless Green Beret officers were sitting around a picnic table drinking beer and shooting the breeze. One of the guys at my gate said, "He doesn't want to let us through because those officers are over there, if we come back later he'll let us through." They turned and started walking away and as they did, I said, "No, you're definitely not going out this gate and you're definitely not coming in this gate."

After a while I forgot about them. The officers who were drinking beer went to bed and bats that lived nearby came out and flew circles several feet over my head. Being a young, macho guy, I never registered any reaction, but inside they gave me the creeps. Even though my childhood seemed decades ago, it was not that far back, and the bats always reminded me of the bloodsucking vampire in the movie "Dracula." But there was something I dreaded more than the bats.

I wondered if the Vietnamese Army troops were going to come out and fire their artillery piece about 100 feet away. It was so black at night, you couldn't see them. Your only warnings were some dull clanging sounds that came from the weapon as they loaded it, then KABOOM!!

It would fire off. It was so loud, that no matter how well I braced myself for the next round, it always shook me physically. You could hear the round piercing through the air as it streaked over the air base toward its target but it went so far out you never heard it explode. After 5 or 6 rounds, they would retire and our nerves could settle down once again. There is no doubt the whole base was awakened by that monster.

From the town of Bien Hoa, right outside the base, I heard a burst of fire from an automatic weapon, and saw a stream of tracers streak across the sky. It was the Vietnamese "Popular Forces," teenagers with M-2 automatic carbines. They were kids even younger than us, but like us, they enjoyed cranking off rounds once in a while. They were also undisciplined and seeing their tracers in the night sky was not uncommon. Their job was to patrol the streets at night. In reality, they were no match for the VC. The night sky was packed with stars, and being on duty every night made shooting stars a common sight.

I wondered when an SP patrol would come around with some coffee. They were probably still busy rounding up unruly drunks and locking them in our cells. I thought about practicing my quick draw to pass the time, but the perimeter road was too close. No telling when TSgt. Weeks might come around. I, and a few other SPs who grew up on cowboy movies, used to practice quick drawing our revolvers. Some of us bored SPs with plenty of nothing-to-do time got to be pretty fast. Our skills remained secret however, as quick drawing loaded firearms was taboo. I didn't know that one day my secret skill would save my skin.

At about 1:30 AM, a three-quarter ton truck from the 145th Combat Aviation Battalion came pulling up to my post. "What on earth is he doing here?" I wondered. I could see the driver was an Army Security Forces troop. They had a small section of the perimeter where they manned a couple of bunkers at night to provide their own perimeter protection. We didn't have much contact with them and even though they sort of looked and acted like MPs with their SF armbands, they had no powers of arrest or even to detain. Now, this vehicle came pulling up to my post like it had business there. I walked over to the cab where the driver, a skinny young guy just looked at me. In the passenger seat was another troop, and even though he had his cap pulled down over his eyes pretending to be asleep, I could see he was one of the two guys who had been at my post earlier asking me to let them go through the gate.

I shined my flashlight in his face to be sure then said, "Alright, get your ID cards out." I was placing them under apprehension. The vehicle was for transporting small numbers of troops and had a canvas cover on the back. I went to the back and looked inside. There were four guys in there all pretending to be asleep. One of them was the other troop who had been at my gate earlier.

I banged my flashlight on the tailgate of the truck and said, "Alright, you guys get your ID cards out." I unsnapped the strap on my holster and went back to the cab. Reaching inside I turned the ignition switch off. The driver, who by now had put the vehicle in reverse, asked "What is this, a (expletive) restricted area?" He popped the clutch, causing the vehicle to lurch back, the large side view mirror nearly hitting my nose as it jerked past me. Suddenly, one of the guys in the back started climbing out. "HEY!!!" I shouted, "STAY IN THE TRUCK!!!" "I need some light to find my ID card." He said. "You've got light right here," I said, and shined my light on his wallet.

I walked to the back of the truck and held my flashlight on his wallet while he looked for his ID card. Suddenly, the guy who had been in the passenger seat in the cab came around the back corner of the vehicle. At the same time, the Security Forces troop got out of the cab and started walking toward me. The steady look in their eyes told me that at best, they meant to incapacitate me and make their escape. At worst…who knows?

I took a step or two back and whipped out my Smith & Wesson, Model 15, Combat Masterpiece, and cocked the hammer, all in less than a second. In an instant, the situation had changed and the Army troops froze in their tracks. For a moment I thought about shooting the guy from the passenger side in the face. I didn't think I would be faulted. The look of quiet

resignation in his eyes seemed to indicate he knew what I was thinking and he stood there looking at the bullets in the cylinder of my revolver, waiting for my decision and his fate. But too much time passed. It would be inappropriate to shoot him now.The Security Forces troop was watching all this from the side. From where he was standing, he could see the nasty looking firing pin sticking up from the hammer like a viper's fang. Not wanting him to feel left out I turned the weapon and aimed it at him. As I held it on him, I readjusted my hold on the grip, causing his lower jaw to slowly fall open and his eyes to open wider. It was now the other troop's turn to see the viper's fang sticking up. They both knew that with the hammer cocked the trigger was a "hair trigger" that is, very little pressure on the trigger would cause the weapon to fire sending a bullet into the young soldier's chest. They didn't move a muscle. I then turned the weapon back to the first troop and held it. He was the one I trusted least. The look in my eyes told them they were both facing death.

After a few moments, I walked over to the gate shack and called the Law Enforcement desk from my radio. "Be advised," I said, "I have six individuals under apprehension for trying to leave the base without passes." I then gently released the hammer into the down position and dropped the weapon into my holster.

To my amazement the troop I had nearly shot in the face took a cigarette out of his pack of Kools and asked me if I had a light. I wondered if he was foolish enough to think he could disarm me if he got close enough. "No," I said in an angry tone "I don't have a light." "Aw, man" he said, and put his cigarette back in his pack. The Security Forces troop had a Colt .45 Auto in a holster with the big flap over it hanging from his hip. I looked down at it then looked at him. I didn't want to disarm him in a war zone. Besides, he and I both knew there was no way he could get that clunky thing out of his holster quicker than I could whip my pistol out and have it pointed at his face, hammer cocked. He didn't care to risk that a second time, and there was no question in his mind as to what I might do.

A few minutes later, two jeeps with two SPs in each pulled up. Staff Sgt. Phillips got out and took charge. He collected all their ID cards and told the troop standing, to get in the back of the truck. He then told the Security Forces troop that he was to follow his jeep and that the other jeep would be following behind him. "Do you understand my instructions?" he asked. "Yes sir," the soldier said obediently. Pretty soon, the little convoy was on its way and I returned to trying to find ways to stay awake the rest of the night.

Later, Phillips told me the two guys who first approached me had been in trouble with their commander before, and were going to do hard time at Long Binh Jail. Jail time in Vietnam was "bad time" and would not count toward completing their tour. Whatever amount of time they had left to serve in Vietnam when they went to jail, they would have that same amount of time left to serve when they got out of jail and they would probably do six months in jail. I didn't give it much thought I didn't really care what happened to them.

I never told anyone I had drawn my weapon on a couple of American troops, nearly shooting one of them. It's not that I didn't want to tell anyone, I just never thought it worthy of mention. In war, things that might otherwise be remarkable are passed over with little notice, and in this place where men busied themselves with the daily task of killing, burning and maiming other men, my little incident was soon forgotten by all including me.

Consequently, I was surprised a few days later when I received a Letter of Commendation from the Base Commander. With it was a letter from Lt. Col. Bernard H. Fowle, Commander of the 3rd Combat Security Police Squadron. It, too, commended me on my apprehension of the six men. I don't remember how the letters were presented to me which implies it was without fanfare. They were probably just handed to me at guardmount.

Some twenty-five years later, I found the letters crumpled up in a battered suitcase, along with other things from my Air Force days. And after reading the letters I retrieved the incident from the deepest recesses of my memory, where many, many years before, I had carefully stored everything that was Vietnam and where it remained all these years. undisturbed.