

The Bamboo Bridge ...

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Cambodia, May 1970: The Bamboo Bridge

I grew up in the fifties and sixties in a small Southeast Missouri town of about 1500 people that was very conservative. When it came time for me to become a soldier in 1969 there was very little debate in my mind what I was going to do; I became a soldier. The last thing I ever thought of doing in the service was becoming a medic, but upon graduation from Basic Training (Ft. Leonard Wood, March-May, 1969), I was sent to Medic School (Ft. Sam Houston, June-July, 1969). The vast majority of medics were sent to Vietnam immediately after graduation in those days, but for some fortunate reason I was sent to Letterman Hospital (San Francisco, August-December, 1969). I received orders to go to Vietnam in late December, 1969, and was allowed to take a month of leave (January 1970) before shipping out to Vietnam.

In early February, 1970, I arrived in Vietnam. I thought that since I had worked in a hospital back in "The World" that I would do the same over there. I was mistaken. All during my time in the Army, up to now, I had *lucked into* excellent assignments, but in Vietnam my good luck ran out. I became a Platoon Medic with Third Platoon, Alpha Company, 1st of the 12th, Fourth Infantry Division, and spending three to four weeks at a time in the jungle.

We lived in the jungle 24 hours a day and slept on the ground at night. We carried our food, water, ammo and other necessary items on our backs. Our only contact with anyone was either fighting with the enemy or talking to our base on the radio.

During my time in Vietnam I was known as *Doc* because I was a medic. During February, March, and April, I traveled those lovely Central Highlands of Vietnam with the approximately 30 men that made up Third Platoon. I learned a great deal about survival in the jungle from the men that had been there longer. Survival included fighting everything from snakes to malaria, but particularly the enemy.

We made contact with the enemy on the average of about once a week. It was usually five or ten of them against thirty or more of us. We usually had all the artillery and air support we needed, and the fire-fights were not lengthy. I did patch up a few wounded men during that time, but none were killed. After those first three months I became fairly confident in my ability to handle the situation. Since I had been promoted to Corporal at Letterman, I was eligible for Sergeant in April. I received that promotion and became the head medic of Alpha Company.

Being head medic meant that I was in charge of the three platoon medics and traveled with the Captain. Actually that made very little difference because we rarely traveled in groups larger than a platoon, but whichever platoon the Captain traveled with was about ten men larger than the others because of his additional personnel.

The Captain and his additional personnel were known as the CP and alternated spending time with each of the three platoons. I began to get a little better acquainted with the men in first and second platoon by traveling with the CP, but in early May something happened that left a lifetime memory of a man in second platoon.

During the first few days of May we were suddenly pulled out of the jungle and choppered not just to Firebase but all the way back to our main base camp. We were aware that this was a very unusual move and knew that something significant was going down. We were told nothing until a couple of days later when we loaded on a truck convoy. We were going to invade Cambodia. After all those years of never crossing the line and allowing the enemy to construct all the trails, tunnels, bunkers and protection they ever wanted and stocking up with all the supplies and ammunition they could, WE were going to invade Cambodia.

After a long hot truck ride we were loaded onto helicopters and flown over the border into Cambodia. Since this was our first mission in Cambodia, cleared landing zones were not available. The choppers had to dump us wherever there was any sort of a natural clearing. I remember being very scared on the chopper ride. When we descended for a landing the elephant grass hid the ground, so the chopper hovered while we unloaded. The door gunners were firing constant machine-gun fire at the edge of the clearing, and the chopper blades were hammering in my ears, so I didn't know if we were under fire or not. The only thing that I could think of was to get off the chopper and away from it because if it were hit, there wouldn't be a survivor within a hundred feet.

As soon as I felt the downward motion of the chopper end, I jumped into the elephant grass and fell, and fell, and fell until I finally hit the ground. I had packed an extra load of

supplies into my ruck, and when I finally hit the ground, it took me to my knees and then all the way down to the ground. I was stunned but fortunately not hurt. I looked up and saw the chopper flying away. The chopper's machine-guns and blades were still very loud, and I could hear nothing else. The elephant grass was over my head, and I could see nothing else.

While falling to the ground I had lost my sense of direction and had no idea where to go, so I pushed my M-16 in front of me at the ready and started moving in the direction that I thought was closest to the tree line. The clearing was big enough to unload several choppers at a time, so the elephant grass was full of Americans. Within a moment I found some of our other men and we moved together. Moving together meant staying spread out as much as possible because groups were good targets for grenades and automatic weapons. We managed to organize under the jungle canopy away from the elephant grass and soon the rest of our company had been unloaded.

It turned out that the door-gunners fire was only precautionary and there was no immediate combat to deal with. We did not travel in separate platoon units but as a whole company due to the nature of the mission and territory. We spent several days in Cambodia, and most of that time we did not encounter strong resistance.

Fire-fights were more frequent and severe than we had been experiencing in Vietnam, but still we had no one killed. This situation continued for a couple of weeks until one day at midday we were suddenly moved by chopper. Another Company had found a significant cache of enemy supplies nearby: and it was going to be another day before the large choppers could get in to haul it out. We were moved to that location to help guard the cache overnight.

When we were flying into the LZ, things were uneventful because the area had already been secured. I remember on our approach to the LZ seeing some grass roofs through the jungle and thinking that must be where the cache is. Not long after landing, our Captain was on the radio with the base telling them about sighting the hootches and requesting permission to check them out. It was only about an hour after noon, and there seemed to be plenty of time for a short walk over to the hootches. Most of the North Vietnamese had moved out after the American unit moved in because even with the advantages the border had provided them, they were still no match for our artillery and air power. We all thought that we would, as usual, find the hootches abandoned.

The Captain received permission to investigate the hootches and return to our original guarding assignment later in the day. So we began moving in that direction and before long we found a trail. Following trails was against standard operating procedure because it only set you up as a sniper target. Because we were sure that with all the American

activity in the area there wasn't any significant enemy presence, and because we were in a hurry to accomplish our mission, we elected to follow the trail.

We were moving cautiously and well spread out and soon the small trail joined a much larger trail that headed in the direction of the hootches. I thought that it was very strange because I had never seen a trail large enough for trucks out in the jungle. We started moving through the trees alongside the trail for some protection but not like we should have.

We had moved along the larger trail for only fifteen or twenty minutes and a sniper opened fire on the point man. The point man was killed instantly, and the two men just behind him were wounded. Second platoon was on point, and their platoon medic applied immediate aid to the wounded. When the sniper opened fire, we had all taken cover among the trees, and I shared a very large tree with a man named Rivera from second platoon who said to me, "Doc, I have only 26 days left in my tour, and I really don't need this."

After the firefight was over the CP moved up to the second platoon leaders location. I checked the bandages of the wounded and tagged the body of the man that had been killed. His name was *Leroy Wallace*. I had never known him well, but I remembered what a good-natured man he was. The Captain wanted to pursue the sniper, so we sent a squad back to the LZ with the wounded and Leroy's Body.

Soon we rounded a bend in the trail, and I looked down a hill at a creek with a bamboo bridge. Between the bend and the bridge were several fifty-gallon fuel drums that we were ordered to empty. Men were punching holes in the drums, and I thought that it was dangerous for us to be making all that noise. I knew also that any enemy in the area was well aware of our position and didn't think much more of it.

For some reason my attention was attracted by that bamboo bridge. I momentarily forgot about everything else and walked down the trail to the bridge until I was standing on it. I was fascinated by that bridge. It was a very heavy bridge that appeared strong enough for large trucks, but it had been built entirely by hand using only large bamboo, vines and other materials from the jungle.

Suddenly I realized that I had gone farther than the point man and I was in a spot where no American had yet been. In a flash I realized that we had received sniper fire only fifteen minutes ago and Leroy was dead. I realized that I was very likely to be in the sights of a sniper at that very moment. Due to the cleared area around the bridge it was likely that I was in the focal point of a major ambush. It was possible that I was in the sights of a large number of enemy guns that were only waiting for more men to move

into the kill zone. I became very frightened and immediately moved back up the hill past second platoon.

As I moved back up the hill the men of second platoon were beginning to put on their rucks and move downhill. Rivera asked, "Doc what in the hell are you doing up here?" I said, "I don't know," as I quickly walked back to the CP. As soon as I got to the CP and put my ruck back on, I turned and looked back down the hill at the bridge. The point man, Tom Petela, and the backup, Rivera, were crossing the bridge and a few of other men were in the clearing next to the bridge. At that instant the whole world came apart.

The fire of hundreds of SKS and AK47 rifles along with machine-guns and rockets exploded all at once. I saw the men on the bridge and in the clearing go down as I dived behind the nearest tree. Bullets were going by me so thick that there barely seemed to be any pause between them. I had been shot at before, but I had never noticed how loud they were when they split the air around my ears. I later described the sound as "atomic powered hornets" to a friend of mine.

The bullets were hitting the tree in front of me and the ground around me like the rain of the hardest monsoon. I could hear the men by the bridge screaming for a medic, and every time I started to get out from behind the tree another volley of bullets hammered into the wood and dirt. I knew that a machine-gunner had his sights on me, and I was going nowhere alive. I saw the Captain behind another tree nearby on the radio calling for artillery and air support. I knew that we were so far from the base back in Vietnam that the response time would be long. At that time I knew that any time was way too much. I could see the NVA moving through the trees on our flanks and began to fire on them the best I could along with the other men in my area.

I could not expose any part of myself to the machine-gunner in front of me, but I could fire to the sides. It was difficult to tell which NVA you hit and which ones you missed because the trees and smoke were thick, but we managed to keep most of them from moving around us.

About that time another NVA fired a B40 rocket at my tree and missed, which probably saved my life. A B40 rocket would have destroyed the whole tree and me with it. The rocket hit the ground behind me and the only injuries I had were very minor, but my ears were ringing for days and days from the noise.

I knew the NVA were surrounding us on three sides and as soon as they cut off the trail behind, us we would all be killed. After fighting for what seemed to be forever the artillery finally started landing. The FO (Forward Observer for artillery) had them

dropping shells so close to us that a lot of the shrapnel was flying around our own men. We knew that this was the only chance for survival and didn't mind.

The artillery slowed down the NVA firing a little, so I left my tree and headed downhill to help the wounded. As soon as I came out from behind the tree, that machine-gun opened up and those "hornets" were flying everywhere. I had dropped my ruck to gain agility, and I ran through those trees as hard and fast as I possibly could. Soon I heard one of our sergeants yelling at me, so I dropped behind another tree near him and stopped. He began to reprimand me for risking my life saying, "We have a lot of wounded men that are going to need you as soon as the air strikes drive these NVA back and you can't help anyone if you are dead." I then stayed behind that second tree while the bombers hammered the NVA out of our area. Soon, it became dark.

We began moving back out on the trail in the dark and let the bombs and artillery follow us out while we carried the wounded. The second platoon medic and I carried a man we called *Duke* back down the trail. He had a severe wound on his lower leg and in the dark it looked to me like his foot and boot were only attached by a piece of his pants. We carried him back a few hundred feet and I stopped to check the bandages. The second platoon medic had stopped the bleeding and that was enough to keep him alive until we got to a more secure area. Duke was in immense pain and his screams during the trip back to the LZ were more horrible to me than the sound of the machine-gun bullets had been. I wanted to stop and give him some morphine, but the advancing artillery did not allow us any time. I also had to check him over for head and abdomen wounds. I was trained to not give morphine to people with those types of wounds.

Once we were back at the LZ, I took a flashlight and checked Duke over thoroughly, found he had no other significant wounds, and gave him a shot of morphine. I found that there was some muscle connecting his foot to his leg and with the second platoon medic built a splint and improved the bandage. Duke had lost a lot of blood, so I stuck a needle in his arm and gave him some blood substitute fluids called *serum albumin* that I had in the field. About that time the monsoons began.

Dustoff was standing by, but they could not fly in monsoon rains. So there I was with my three other medics and about thirty wounded men. About a dozen of them were serious and five were critical. I made the rounds checking all the wounded as fast as I could and assigned a man to each of the most seriously wounded with instructions to call me if certain things happened. It must have been about eight in the evening by the time I had everything organized, and it ended up being two in the morning before the choppers could get in through the rain.

I kept making my trips from one wounded man to the next and on two occasions almost lost a man to shock. The first, *Luther "Bear" Edwards*, a good friend of mine from third platoon was simple enough. Every time we popped an ammonia capsule under his nose he would wake up and start cussing us out.

The one that I came closest to losing was Duke. I knew that all his blood loss was reason to be extra careful about shock, so I kept a close watch on him. The morphine had killed his pain and for a while every time I came by to check on him, he was laughing and singing and telling me about all the things he was going to do when he got back home. I started getting to know him better and felt that we were becoming good friends. I knew that the morphine was pretty strong, and he probably wouldn't remember much the next day. It made me feel good to know that we were keeping him alive so that he would have another day.

The monsoons persisted so long that late in the night Duke started having pain again and asking for another shot of morphine. He had not shown any signs of shock so after a while I gave him another shot. The other men seemed to be pretty well stabilized, so I stayed with Duke to make sure he did not go into shock and die. Later on he started getting high from the morphine again and wanted to sleep. Since I didn't have any electronic monitors in the jungle the only way, I could be sure he wouldn't die in shock was to keep him awake.

As time went on Duke was getting harder and harder to keep awake, and I was getting very scared and started yelling at him and cussing at him to keep him awake. This worked for a while but soon he began losing consciousness again, and I was so scared for his life that as a last resort I called him, cussing him to stir him up. That did stir him up, and he got so mad that he was then wide awake and cussing me. Soon after that the rain stopped, and the choppers came in to get the wounded men. I put Duke on the first one and never saw him again.

The next day they took the remaining men of Alpha Company back to base camp and let the South Vietnamese clean up the mess at the hootches. I explained to the other men in the unit that what I had said to Duke was only to be sure Duke stayed alive. They all understood, and I found that I was respected by all of the men in the company. I could not explain anything to Duke because he was gone in the hospital and on his way home.

A few weeks later Duke sent a letter to one of his friends in second platoon and told them that his doctor said that the good work by his field medics kept him from losing his leg. This was spread among the Company, and the men started calling me "the best damned medic Alpha Company ever had" and I appreciated that.

I finished my time in Vietnam without any more men killed or seriously wounded and came home to go to college. I became a "closet veteran" because I did not talk about the war very much and kept it all inside for years and years.

In 1993, I joined the *Vietnam Veterans of America* and found a spot in their newsletter to place ads looking for old army buddies. I sent in an ad asking men of my old unit to call or write me, and it took about six months to get printed. The memory of my experience with Duke was on my mind all through the years and I wanted to talk to him and explain to him why I had been so rough to him. I hoped that he was still alive and that someday I could talk to him. I felt like the odds of finding Duke were probably impossible.

One day in late 1993, I received my first phone call in response to my ad. The man on the line said, "My name is *Londell Thompson*, and I was with second platoon until I got hit in Cambodia in May of 1970." I was momentarily lost in a cloud of memories. I only remembered that second platoon had a lot of guys wounded in Cambodia, and I didn't know them very well.

Then Thompson said, "They used to call me Duke," I just about fell over. It was Duke. I started yelling into the telephone, and he must have thought I was nuts. Duke didn't remember much of anything beyond the first shock of being wounded, and he didn't even remember any medics working on him other than the second platoon medic. I did finally get a chance to tell him my story and get a twenty-three-year weight off my chest, and he only thought that it was funny. He just laughed and said, "You don't have anything to apologize for, you saved my life and I thank you for that."

We have been able to talk numerous times on the telephone since then and have gradually been able to locate a few of the other men that were there with us at the Bamboo Bridge. We have also located the Wallace, Rivera and Petela families. It has been good for all of us to become acquainted and it is my goal to find as many of the others that were there as possible.

My reason for writing this story and trying to get it published or noticed by the public is to help locate and hopefully bring some comfort to those other Veterans and their families.