

VIETNAM
MMMM GOOD!

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© 2014, by [Larry T. Eley](#),
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MMMM GOOD!

I am sixty-six years old. The *Lord* has been good to me. In my life I survived Vietnam, hard-times as a small building contractor, cancer, and a fall from a building that should have killed me. I have a wife and children who in all honesty I probably don't deserve. I am fortunate because I still have good health and good employment as a State Building Inspector here in central Ohio. For leisure I have a small *hobby farm*. I am blessed.

Like most Vietnam veterans, there is never a day goes by that I don't think about Vietnam. Some of it will never go away.

Frequently at social events the topic comes up, "Was anyone here in the service?" It happens a lot because now it is popular to support our troops and wave the flag. Those of us from Nam remember when it was not like that. At a party once I was asked a question by a non-veteran. Now I don't wear Vietnam on my sleeve and I try not to be the obnoxious guy telling embellished stories.

He asked, "Were you in Vietnam?"

Of course he pronounced it wrong, which was my first clue he was a non-veteran. He pronounced it the way Forrest Gump Does...well most people don't say it that way. So ya know I wondered where we were headed, and thought *here comes another 'did you kill anybody; eat burnt dead babies; burn down any villages?' type question.*

"Yes, I was there in '69 and early '70. Why do you ask?"

"Oh I was just wondering. I had an *exemption* for school--you probably hate me for that, huh?"

"No, Vietnam was a long time ago."

At that point I heard my wife's laugh in the kitchen; she and her gal friends were having a great time. I love her laugh, it is one of the reasons I married her. Before this interruption I had been planning tomorrow's hay-bailing on the upper meadow. Making a mental check list of everything to do.

Not letting go, he prompted with another question: "What was the worst thing you saw in Vietnam--*what did you do?*"

I defensivley told him I was in Crash Rescue in the Air Force, and thought that he was definitely fishing for a *killing civilians story*. He persisted, "So--*what was it like? Was it as awful as people say? Tell me something you saw that was really gross.*" I looked at him for a moment; a lot of thoughts were going through my head like a video on rewind, I could have told him about some very bad aircraft crashes, or a man I saw burned so badly I could not tell if he was human, or young girls that had been raped, or refugees picking through garbage for food, or *Spooky* at night raining red tracers, or even the terror of mortar and rocket attacks like the night of August 6th 1969, which I have written about in "[You Two Go Down That Road](#)". I could have gone on and on but I did not--he wouldn't understand at all. I set for a long moment and said nothing; I am somewhat quiet by nature so I think he thought I was ignoring him.

Then I said, "I'll tell you the grossest thing I did, okay?"

He moved to the edge of his seat with a look of great anticipation on his face. "Sure, go ahead man!"

I took a long pull from my IBC Root Beer. Then I told him the story.

It was early December 1969; I probably had about 35 days left in service. I was at North Station on shift. It was evening and C-130s were taxiing in and out, and flights of F4s were taking off. One flight came back and both planes did a victory roll meaning their tour was over or they had shot a MIG down, I am not sure.

Sgt Elliot had gone over to the Naval Facility area for ice cream, which was made at the new government sponsored

ice cream factory. What a treat but it looked crusted ice behind a tire in the winter...but we ate it anyway.

As usual Ed Thornton, my driver, and I had midnight-line. We had become closer since the F4 Crash we had been on together a week or two prior on Line Standby. My good friend Ray Kastner had long since rotated back home. Kevin O'Hara was in the tower now, and if he was not there it meant he had found a way to be down in Saigon. Harpo and Lester were tight and they were spending more time with Granny Becker. As a result I found myself hanging out with Ron Elliot and Ed Thornton since we were at North Station. Things had changed a lot.

SSgt *Third-Trimester* (we called him that because he looked very pregnant) found me and said, "Sgt *Ellery*--burn the Latrine waste... it's overflowing. We had those Vietnamese Militia stay, and it's bad, real bad, and I gotta go. *Burn Sgt Burn, now!*"

Damn! Burning the crap was gross. It usually was greenish-brown and gooey as goulash or soup. Plus, even with only 35 days left in-country he still did not know my name! I mean, how hard is *ELEY?*

The latrine at North Station was a three-sided plywood shed, about three feet wide, and with a flat roof and no door. There had been a door or a half door for a while but someone had stolen it for some unknown reason. So we turned it toward the back of the building that housed the crash trucks for minimal privacy. Hardly a time went by when you *had to go* that you were not interrupted. The latrine at one time had been painted green like our fatigues. Now three or four years later it was kind of a faded lime color.



Inside there was a pencil on a string. The walls and ceiling had all kinds of imaginable things written, and oh yes *graphic art*. I'll skip the descriptions of the art, but mostly the sayings were about how much time the sitter had left or what he thought of his NCO. The funniest saying was, "Careful you are sitting on yesterday's C-rations."

In addition to the outhouse we had a three-sided plywood shower with a tank of some kind up top. Once a couple of girl USO entertainers used the facility, everyone volunteered to carry water that night.

"Go get some diesel, Ed, from the 530 B and I will get the hook." In order to burn you had to hook a long rod in a hole in the barrel and pull it gently down a wooden ramp. I say *gently* so you did not get poop sloshed and splashed on you.

When I hooked the rod I heard, "*Yo Numa Ten Gi Numa ten.*" As I looked in the box a Mamasan was squatting on the board with the hole in it that allowed waste to fall into the barrel.

"Sorry Mamasan," I said--meaning, *not really*.

When she left I pulled the barrel out. It was full to the max. Sometimes guys would throw up at this stage I tried to look away while I told Ed to pour the diesel in on top of the ghoulish-gunk. Neither of us smoked so we borrowed some matches from Ron Elliot's cigar box.

"Torch it Ed--*torch it.*" Then Ed said, "It looks like the chili they used to serve at Junior High school."

"Did you eat it Ed? Where did you go to school?"

Without waiting for an answer I said, "No it looks like the Pea soup that *old lady* Hayes used to make when we would bale hay for them." Pea soup and Liverwurst sandwiches and foul tasting lemonade made from iron water. "Yeah it's her Pea soup."

"No...it looks like my aunt Nina's Goulash."

Now I know in the movie "Platoon" that Taylor and Crawford and King are put on Latrine duty and spend the afternoon smoking a joint as Jefferson Airplane is singing "White Rabbit" all afternoon long. I can't hear that song now without thinking of Nam, but on that day, at that moment, both Ed and I started to hum a current jingle commercial: "*MMMM Good---MMMM Good... That's what Campbell's soup is MMMM GOOD!*"

The more we sang the more we laughed. Plus we made up more gross descriptions of the contents of the barrel.

Soon Kevin O'Hara came by; he had just got back from Saigon on a C-130 hop. Kevin was Irish; actually he had immigrated to the USA from Ireland with his Parents when he was, as he said, a "Wee Lad."

"What's up, Eel?" *He never called anybody by their name.* "What's so funny--? Oh damn that stinks--what did you put in there?"

"We are making chili, Kevin...want some?"

Kevin complained, "I spend three days down in civilization and I gotta come back to this?" Then he took a big sniff and said, "No Lads--I tell ya it's a bad batch of *O'Rayley's Irish Corn Beef Stew*...that's what it is for sure.

At that point we looked up at the billowing black column of smoke.

Off to the south a medevac Huey was banking to the left hard and heading for the landing pad at the hospital.

Softly I said a quick prayer, "*Godspeed Huey—Godspeed.*"

We stood there a while, making bad jokes like three junior high kids, not one of us was over 21, at any given time if an aircraft crashed we were three of the people who would be out there putting our life on the line to rescue the crew. Kids barely out of high school with immense responsibility.

I hung the rod up and we went and had some ice cream, and Kevin told us about Saigon and the pretty girls he had seen.

As I finished the story at the party my audience-of-one had a glazed over look in his eyes like he was unconscious. He was sunk very deep in the big overstuffed chair. His wife came over and he said, "Uh Larry was in the Nam," saying *Nam* like it rhymed with spam.

She looked at me indifferently and said *they are playing pinochle in the living room.* He catapulted out of the chair faster than a back-seater ejecting out of an F-4.

I probably did not give him what he wanted. Why should I have? What would it have proven? I think he was looking for some reason to vindicate and justify to himself that it was not *really* cowardice that he didn't go to *Spam*. He headed for the card game without a *by your leave*. Well, he did ask me what was the grossest thing ever I saw.

I got another cold IBC and resumed thinking about the fact I was going to make hay the next day, and realized for the thousandth time it was always a mistake to talk about Vietnam to anyone who *wasn't there*.



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