

## **A Few Things I Learned in Vietnam**

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Bien Hoa Air Base, USAF, 3rd Security Police Squadron,  
Nov 1968 to Nov 1969

### *A Few Things I Learned in Vietnam*

1. People who neither know you nor hate you will try to kill you.
2. You can be made to kill people whom you neither know nor hate.
3. You can go for a whole year with just a few hours' sleep per day, sometimes, just one or two.
4. You don't have to change your socks every day, even if they're wet.
5. You don't need to eat three meals every day.
6. You don't have to change your underwear every day.
7. Using that white powder in the little green can won't make your jungle rot go away, but it will help keep it from spreading.
8. You can go a whole year showering in non-potable, brown water that smells bad when it's available.
9. Using a toilet that has been used by a few other guys and not flushed for lack of water, is something to which you eventually become accustomed... sort of.
10. The night sky is packed with stars, and every night there are lots of shooting stars.
11. Some nights are so dark that men's faces are just shadowy figures, except when lit up by their cigarette drags.
12. When you're at war and have just turned nineteen, and your locker is filled with fatigues, combat boots, a flak vest, a helmet, an M-16 rifle, lots of ammo, cigars and a bottle of whiskey you can feel pretty grown up.
13. Driving an M113, Armored Personnel Carrier with a cigar in your mouth can make you feel really macho.
14. In spite of it all, there are funny things that happen in war and some things can be quite pleasurable. At times you can feel entirely carefree.
15. Chinese soup is really tasty even when you find big green flies in it.
16. In the big scheme of things a leak in the ceiling over your bunk is but a minor annoyance.
17. If you stand next to a large spotlight shining out on the perimeter, you'll be struck swarms of rice bugs flying toward it.
18. When you're alone out on the perimeter in a tower or bunker all night, the hours drag on without end.
19. Rats, rats, rats everywhere.
20. Rats and mice are in your locker and will chew right through your fatigue shirt to eat that C-rations candy bar you left in your breast pocket. You'll only make that mistake once.
21. Sitting in a dark bunker at night out on the perimeter, rats are bold enough to run across your legs.
22. If you're not careful dismantling a sandbag bunker, you can be stung by a scorpion.

23. When conducting a sweep outside the base, and you step into what looks a foot of water, you may sink up to your waist and you'll need your buddies to pull you out by your M-16. It will also amuse them.
24. C-rations are much better than chow hall food especially if you heat them and use Tabasco sauce.
25. Thanksgiving and Christmas in a war zone aren't really Thanksgiving and Christmas.
26. Your birthday will pass without notice unless you say something, and after you do it will pass without notice.
27. In spite of all the training and talk of war you don't fully realize you might be killed until the moment arrives when you're faced with that possibility.
28. Empty casings being ejected from your buddy's rifles are really hot and will burn you really bad.
29. Never touch your rifle barrel after you've emptied a clip.
30. Being drunk during a rocket attack increases your chances of being killed.
31. Being inside a gasoline powered M113, loaded with ammo, flares and hand grenades during a rocket attack, makes you a candidate for becoming a crispy critter.
32. Sometimes a buddy will throw a grenade short and nearly kill you.
33. Being in a skirmish line with helicopters flying overhead firing rockets and M-60 machine guns at the enemy in front of you is really exciting.
34. When feeding ammo into a .50 cal. or M-60 machinegun, you can feel vibrations going through your brain and the noise will permanently damage your hearing.
35. When enemy 122 mm and 107mm rockets are exploding around you, you can't really tell which is which, nor do you care much.
36. When you're running for a bunker and rockets are exploding around you, you ask yourself, "Am I going to make it?" And you answer yourself with, "I don't know."
37. Guys killed and wounded by friendly fire are just a normal part of war.
38. The first time you are faced with killing a man you hesitate for a moment.
39. It doesn't matter how well trained you are, or how brave you are, or what unit you're with, a rocket can still find you, and turn you into bloody chunks of burned meat.
40. Even while taking a shower you can be killed by a mortar.
41. Hot metal from exploding rockets and mortars don't care much where they hit you or what they do to your face and body.
42. For the rest of my life, I will inwardly scoff at people who tell me that this and that are dangerous!
43. Sometimes a rocket will fall short of its target and kill a lone individual out there.
44. Guys would be alive today if they had run for a bunker when rockets started coming in.
45. Watching over the dead body of a twenty-year old soldier, a mother's son, lying in a large pool of dark, thick, red blood, will make you mourn for him the rest of your life.
46. The sight of dead American troops will profoundly affect you even if you never knew them while they were alive.
47. When after a rocket attack, you and other men are scrambling to load ammo onto trucks and you lift a 120 lb. box of M-60 ammo by yourself, you're likely to give yourself a hernia.

48. Medical care in military hospitals in Vietnam was no frills, but those doctors and nurses were really wonderful people. Some military hospitals took in Vietnamese civilians and gave them good medical care.
49. There are a hundred ways to get burned in combat.
50. Guys who experience really bitter fighting don't care to go back into it.
51. The enemy soldier whom you think is dead may only be wounded and will try to kill you when you come near or run past him.
52. If you grab your rifle barrel to change a magazine during a firefight, you won't know your hand is badly burned until it's all over and you smell burnt flesh.
53. Charlie always aims his B-40 rockets at the front of M113s. That way he hits the driver or the engine or both. Either way, it comes to a stop. If the driver survives, he'll be badly burned over most of his body.
54. Some guys were so badly burned they had patches over their eyes and had to be spoon fed and walked to the latrine by the medics. It was a long, slow, agonizing walk to the latrine.
55. The trick is to figure out where the enemy is so you can kill them, but not let them know where you are because then they'll kill you.
56. A guy's personal appearance may make him a candidate for a recruiting poster, but he'll still shoot himself in the foot with a .45 caliber pistol to avoid going into combat.
57. Troops who were badly burned, were kept doped up for days, to dull the pain. They were not even aware when nurses came and spread a white cream over their burns.
58. Lots of civilians including small children are killed, burned and maimed in war.
59. You can't extinguish napalm you can only let it burn out.
60. Napalm leaves really ugly scars on people—if they survive it.
61. War hardens your heart so that a child badly burned by napalm is hardly worth a second glance.
62. Sometimes a pretty little girl will lose both arms in war.
63. A pretty girl who is badly maimed can still look pretty.
64. When you've had a hernia operation and you're surrounded by guys who were badly wounded you feel like all you have is a scratch.
65. A loud sharp sound close by is followed by an abrupt silence, then moments later, a long ringing sound. Later, you develop a continuous and permanent ringing in your ears, and hearing loss.
66. Hearing protection was a subject that was never even discussed. We're all hard of hearing now.
67. Extreme exhaustion and fatigue are some of the worst things you will experience in war, but never again will you experience them to that degree.
68. Just as a man dying of thirst can think only of water, so a man overcome with exhaustion can think only of sleep.
69. Extremely weariness and fatigue drive away fear of death, for death promises rest and soothing peace.
70. In a place where men busy themselves with killing, burning and maiming other men, shooting and killing 44 dogs in three days is unremarkable.

71. So many of us sent to Vietnam were pitifully young and naive.
72. The experience of war changes you forever.
73. Some who give little receive many accolades and some who give much are ignored and forgotten.
74. Reflecting on what you and your buddies endured, brings a lump to the throat and tears to the eyes.
75. In 1969, 9,249 American troops were killed in Vietnam. There are 8,760 hours in a year.
76. Very few Americans including family members will ever care about your service in Vietnam; fewer will care about what you endured.

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