



Free Fire Zone: SAND BAGS

We Lived. They Died.

by **Michael Diaz**

PHAN RANG - LA

April 1969-April 1970

SAND BAGS

So, there I was a Sergeant of Police at the LAPD Wilshire Division on the roof looking North toward Hollywood and crying my eyes out! I was so mad, sad, and upset. The real kicker was that I had absolutely NO CONTROL of the situation. I was in full uniform, the supervisor of 40 some field officers possessing the powers granted to a sworn police officer of the LAPD and yet there I was on the roof of the station, crying! It was 1992 and 4 F-16s were swooping down over a Gulf I parade which was in progress down Hollywood blvd. Oh, and get this, they were allowing Westmoreland and Vietnam vets to march in the parade, at the rear, but none the less in THEIR PARADE. God I was beside myself. Do I have to explain to you that FEELING?

The FEELING actually started when the *Flying Tiger 707* bringing me back to the world had to make an emergency landing at Seattle-Tacoma airport (SETAC) because of a blown main gear tire whose pieces were picked up on the runway back a Yakota AFB, Japan. Well we landed and no one got seriously killed so off we went to a "no steak" dinner (McCord AFB or Fort Lewis, I can't remember who told us that one) homecoming. Because of the diversion to SETAC we would be starting our 30 day leaves 2 hours earlier. Before we could initiate the task of getting a military stand-by flight home, we found ourselves in a "debriefing" room with an Army guy telling us to keep a "low profile." Well I understood that! Getting shot at a few of times at the beach gate on Phan Rang's North East perimeter makes a believer of filling those sand bags to the max and then "low profiling behind the bulging, blessed things! But I digress. He went on to tell us how unpopular we were in this part of the world (home?) and how we should not display any war ribbons or acknowledge the fact that we had been in the NAM. That was my welcome home from war. Hooray for our side!

I got a ride on a *United 727* to Los Angeles and found myself at a window seat separated from a middle aged female passenger by the empty middle seat. After about 20 minutes in the air I ordered a scotch and soda, I turned 21 in the Nam, but got asked for ID anyway. Not having eaten for a while the go-juice hit me like it was meant to do. The lady was talking to the stewardess but my mind was on seeing my family at Los Angeles International Airport (LAX). The stewardess got my attention when she plunked another plastic cup of go-juice on my tray. Before I could say anything she nodded toward my air companion and then left. The woman asked if I was coming back from the war but before I could answer her, I saw the *sand bags going up* in the empty middle seat. Heck, she looked innocent enough and there was something in her eyes that said, "*Please answer the question,*" so I told her "Yes." She lifted her glass of red something and asked that I join her in toasting her son, who was "NOT" coming back.

My mind raced back to the night at LAX when I left for the Nam. An Army guy walked off the plane as we were boarding the TWA flight to SETAC and told an older man and a teenage girl, "I'm not going." I still don't know why, but the image played in my head for a couple of seconds.

I did not know what to say, so I just took a long drink from the cup. She said, "Thank you" and until we said "good by" at LAX, we did not speak again.

A substantial number of family members met me as I walked from the plane and they had a big sign that read, "WELCOME HOME SERGEANT DIAZ." Holy smokes didn't they know that we were deep in Indian country and they were blowing my *no ribbons shut my mouth cover?* Throw them some sand bags!

Little did I know that 22 years later THAT sign, my family, the Air Force and two police departments would be the

only ones who positively acknowledged my return from the NAM. I was being assigned to the 63 rd Military Airlift Wing, SPS, at Norton AFB in San Bernardino, California. I was home, but not the same home I had left. The FEELING started to run deep the more I ventured around in, "the world." I went to an apartment complex in the city of Upland, about 22 miles from Norton, to apply for an apartment and found myself sitting next to a guy who had short hair too. He looked *military* so I figured I was going to have competition for the one available apartment. He asked if I was military and I said, "Air Force." He asked if I had returned from the war and not seeing any sand bags I told him that I had. I asked him and he said "Navy, back from North Korea." I was talking to a U.S.S. Pueblo guy, don't know which one and don't even know if he was telling me the truth. I never found out, but I just put the application back on the manager's desk and humbly left the place.

The next apartment manager was not real nice. He didn't like the military in any form and said so. Vietnam veterans were out of control, crazy, drug addicted and on short fuses. He said other things, but this is what I related to my father, a WWII veteran who served in the Pacific. The "WELCOME HOME FROM THE GREATEST WAR" veteran who was proud to have served, and still removed tags from anything "made in Japan" said what I began to truly believe, "Just because you served in Vietnam doesn't mean life or anyone owes you a living." I can talk about his parenting ways, but I am, after all preaching to the choir, the children of the depression era kids, you know. So I shut up like all the other guys at Norton and did not talk about the Nam to anyone but them.

In November 1971, three months after my discharge, I joined the Ontario Police Department. I got "extra points" for being a veteran and Hispanic and got hired with 6 other guys beating out 350+ applicants. Ain't bragging, its' just part of my story. In 1973 I was eye balling the LAPD, took the test, got the same "extra points" and joined the "Marine Corps" of Law Enforcement. About 90% of the class was Nam vets and we quietly talked about the war. No one cried telling stories of the bad stuff, we were young. The same stories today are probably slightly distorted because of the distance from the events and we do cry, just take a look at Randy Cunningham, the first Navy Ace of the war. When he was young and telling his story, he used his hands like aviators do and he displayed a lot of the John Wayne, "do or die" syndrome. Today the same stories bring tears to the man's eyes.

In 1975 I was assigned to Central Division, (down town) and was walking a foot beat with a classmate of mine. Steve was an ex Army Nam LRRP and as tuff as they come. We got to interact with the first Vietnam refugees who had been displaced from the South and it was very interesting. One incident that stands out in my mind was a Vietnamese gentleman who approached us and said that he had been duped by a store advertising an item, but had been given another item of lesser value, boxed in the container that showed the advertised item. All was going well until the "victim" told us that he was not to be treated this way because he was a "high classed" Vietnamese. Steve picked the guy up by his shirt and the guy grabbed Steve's wrist to hang on for the ride up to eye level. I won't repeat what Steve told him, but what would you have said? Did I mention that Steve was tough? That was the last time that I can remember the NAM being "up front" in my mind, like most of you, I put it in a closet somewhere. Remember what my dad said?

Please *fast forward* to 1991. So now Gulf War I commanders are talking, "no Vietnam this" and "no Vietnam that", remember? They actually wanted to win this one. Well, they did, they were allowed to and there was no Johnson or McNamara to hand them a bite of the poop sandwich. Then they came home (welcomed) in uniform, with ribbons, folks waving at them with all their fingers, no sand bags and now they get a parade, with "us" allowed to march in the back. Heck, if I was going to march behind as an "afterthought." Oh we have a legacy, we showed them how NOT to fight a war. The anti war protesters learned something too.

Please fast forward to Gulf War II, 2002. I am now assigned to Hollywood Division where we get our share of protests, marches and the like. So I am working a major protest as the Adjutant to the Divisional Commanding Officer and can pretty much go where we want. We were at the corner of Hollywood and Highland; they held the Academy awards there on the 28th of February, 2005. But I digress again. I see a female with gray hair, maybe my age holding up a sign and taking pictures. She was dressed, almost like she must have looked in the sixties as a protester. Now I am a 55 year old "Sergeant Pig" but she doesn't say that, she "*looks that.*" I figure what the heck and say the following; "You know this is quite unique to me." She says, "What is?" So I tell here where I was when this sort of thing was going on in the sixties. By the way, I missed the sixties, I graduated high school in 1966 and then went into the USAF in 1967, do the math. She says, and I quote because the words went right through me, vest and all, she says, "We did that wrong back then, we attacked you guys, not the war like we should have. We are doing that now." So, let me get this straight; a generation of military men and women were sacrificed by the government and the "folks back home" took it out on them, remember "*baby killers*" and the jerk apartment manager? But today, they are attacking the war/government and leaving the troops alone. I told you about our legacy and the protesters learning something. Who paid the price? We are an exclusive club of "brothers in arms." I recently heard a talk show where serving in the military was the subject. Some guy called in and started lamenting the fact that "someone had to take my place" during the NAM war and that "someone" might have gotten killed, HELLO!!

I'll finish with this; I have been in uniform since I was 19. I have carried a weapon every day of my adult working life; I will be 57 this year. I am in the twilight of my Law Enforcement career with retirement just three years away. When several incidents on the LAPD caused us to go through periods of really bad press, guys would ask me, "You don't have to be here, are you going to retire?" My response was, "When I left Vietnam, we were winning and we lost that one. I ain't leaving here until we are winning again. My late aunt, God rests her soul, used to tell me in Spanish. "You are always looking for trouble or something wrong, that is your job, but what will you do when it is over, if you survive?" I / we are survivors. We are brothers, sons and friends who in my opinion are the second greatest generation who took up arms, WWII being the greatest. We will never have full closure; we will never get our home coming parade and not everyone will agree why we went there in the first place. We meet on the street and say, "welcome home" to each other. We see a NAM decal on the back of a guy's car and if he looks old enough, we give each other the thumbs up. Some of us have gone back to the NAM to revisit our youth, 58,000 never made it home physically and some mentally.

How will our NAM experiences come back to us in our minds and hearts now that we are retiring and have the time to really think this through? When I hear a NAM vet say, "I've been back 30 something years, what is he really saying, what did he leave there, what is missing?" Most vets from other wars don't make that statement, why? I can still smell the country, the war. I can dream it in color—*don't tell me no*. When the sun hits me just right I am at the beach gate or the main gate with the Korean MPs. I can go back there anytime I want. I can't remember where the car keys are, or why I left the Watch Commander's office and went to the front desk, but I remember the Nam and the 20 year old kid who went there. Do I feel sorry for him, admire him, mourn him or try and comfort him? I'll know soon because that Army briefer and his words of caution "DON'T MEAN NOTHING" now. And I don't give a darn about the SAND BAGS.

When we who served are all gone, to a man and woman, what will generations of military and civilians say about us?

I am no writer, and the only time I put pin to paper is when I have to write a report so please be easy on the grammar, punctuation and structure. WELCOME HOME!

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