

Jackie Carver's Story

My name is Jackie Carver...



I was drafted into the United States Army in 1967. I went to basic training at Fort Benning, Georgia, and from there I went to Fort Polk, Louisiana, for AIT. I trained on a 105 recoilless rifle. After I finished, I got about 30 days at home, and then I reported to Fort Lewis, Washington, where I processed out for Vietnam.

After a long flight, I landed at Cam Ranh Bay. There was a sign there that said, "Welcome to hell," and it was pretty accurate. From there I went to a replacement unit for three or four days, and then they sent me to Phan Rang. That

is where I was assigned to a weapon system I did not know anything about—a quad .50-caliber machine gun. I met my sergeant and the other two men with him, and after a few days around the base, we went out on convoy.

On January 12, 1968, we were riding along with the ocean on our left and the mountains on our right when a self-detonated land mine went off. It blew me off the truck, wounded all four of us on it, and tore the truck up. We fired over 10,000 rounds of .50-caliber ammunition before we started running low, and then the jets came in dropping napalm. The truck was in bad shape, but they got it rolling again and towed us to a MACV camp. We stayed there a couple of days while the medic sewed us up and treated our wounds. When the convoy came back through, they picked us up and took us back to Phan Rang.

A few days later, our sergeant told us to get our gear and throw it on the truck. We went to the air base, loaded onto a C-130, and flew north to Da Nang. I climbed up on top of the truck and slept during the flight. I figured if something happened, I would not know it anyway.

At Da Nang, we joined up with the 1st Air Cavalry and convoyed with them to Quang Tri, about 15 or 20 kilometers below the DMZ. The DMZ was supposed to be off limits because it was a neutral zone. Then the Tet Offensive started at the end of January. By that time, the men I had come over with had finished their tours and gone home, and there I was, a PFC, in charge of a very expensive piece of equipment.

A captain told me we were going on a mission because there were thousands of North Vietnamese soldiers in Quang Tri, and we were going in to clear them out. I thought to myself, "I am never going to make it out of this country." They showed me where we were going, turned the truck around, and backed it through the streets with infantry on both sides and helicopters overhead. In about eight hours, we cleared the town. I had been told to fire at anything that moved or anywhere we thought fire was coming from, and that is what we did.

After that, the cavalry would ask me to go on missions with them, and I never turned them down. It was better than sitting around base camp pulling guard duty. I did not have a sergeant, a lieutenant, or even know who my commanding officer was. I was just with the cavalry, and it felt like they had put me there and forgotten about me.

Later on, we were on a landing zone called Betty. The cavalry named their landing zones and base camps after women—Nancy, Jane, Betty, and names like that. They put my quad .50 on the perimeter. One infantryman told me, "In about 30 minutes, we are going to start taking mortar fire." Sure enough, he was right. It happened every night.



I could see the muzzle flash from the mortar across the rice paddies, near the jungle. The infantry had to ask permission to fire, but I did not. I opened up with all four guns in that direction. After about 1,000 rounds, there was a big explosion. The next day, a patrol found out that the mortar had been set up in the steeple of a church, and we had blown it up. An officer came out and started to get on me about it, and I told him I had done it to protect his men. My goal was simple: stay alive and keep the two men with me alive.

Later, I was asked to go on a mission inside the DMZ. Before we got on a Chinook, an officer took our dog tags and identification. He told us that if we were captured, we were on our own, because

we were not supposed to be there. They dropped us on a mountain looking over another mountain and told us to fire anywhere we saw smoke.

The North Vietnamese had caves up there with big guns mounted on rails. When they fired, we fired back at the smoke with our .50-calibers. We cut the jungle away around those cave entrances. We stayed there a couple of weeks, and finally they quit firing. We never saw the guns, but we figured we had damaged them or knocked them out.

After that, we went on Operation Pegasus to help relieve Khe Sanh. The Marines had been surrounded there, and supplies could not get in or out very well. We turned the truck around and backed down the road, using the quad .50s to clear mines and keep fire down. Once the route was opened, the cavalry helped secure the area.

I later went to LZ Jane, which was a small landing zone where infantry units rotated in and out of the field. One night, around 1:30 or 2:00 in the morning, trip flares started going off. The enemy was trying to overrun us, and I guess they did not know that quad .50 was there. We fired until we only had about 3,000 rounds left. The next morning, the body count was mostly done by counting weapons, because the firepower had torn the bodies apart.

Before that, I had gone through Hue City. It had been a beautiful city before the Tet Offensive, but afterward it was torn up pretty bad, including the Citadel, which had supposedly been off limits.

In April, an officer told me we had another mission. We took the guns off the truck, loaded ammunition into slings, and flew into the A Shau Valley. I was one of the first Americans to set foot there since the French. That valley belonged to the North Vietnamese. It was one of their rest areas.

A Chinook dropped the three of us down in the valley, but the fog kept the other helicopters from landing. So we spent the night there by ourselves. We set up a little perimeter in that tall elephant grass and listened to movement around us all night. I did not even light a cigarette.

At daybreak, a radio call came in asking for the quad .50 in the valley. I told them, "You left us here all night." When an officer finally landed, he gave me the call sign "Peashooter," and from then on that is what I was known as. When the helicopters came over the mountains, we fired into the hillsides to keep enemy machine guns from shooting at them. We used red smoke to mark where we were so our own aircraft would not shoot at us. The helicopters came in without taking fire, and we stayed in the valley for about three weeks.

Later, we moved to LZ Nancy and then to Wonder Beach, a white-sand beach that the Marines had used first. That is where I had the unusual experience of shooting down a Russian helicopter. I was told not to talk about it, and I kept it to myself for many years. As far as I know, I may have been the only quad .50 crew over there to shoot down a helicopter or an airplane.

A captain asked me if I could bring it down, and I told him I could. When it came up over the sand dune, I put it in the sights and fired. It went down burning.

A couple of months later, the cavalry moved south to Tay Ninh. We convoyed to Da Nang, loaded onto a ship, and went to Saigon. The ship's captain wanted my quad .50 on the bow with the guns pointed forward. I

told him if he wanted to fire the guns, I wanted my crew to get some decent food, because we had been eating field rations. He told the galley to feed us whatever we wanted, day or night.

Later, I asked for 10 gallons of vanilla ice cream and shared it with the men on the ship, because a lot of them had taken care of us during those months. We went up the Saigon River, unloaded in Saigon, and convoyed on to Tay Ninh.

By then, my time in Vietnam was about over, but my departure date came and went while I was still there. We were guarding a bridge that the enemy had been trying to blow up, firing up and down the river to keep sampans away.

Around December 18, a little helicopter landed, and a colonel got out asking for me by name. He said I was supposed to be home already. He took me to Cam Ranh Bay and personally made sure my paperwork was stamped and that I got put on a plane.



I was not exactly dressed for travel. My fatigue shirt and pants were cut off, and I was wearing Ho Chi Minh sandals made from Jeep tires and inner tubes. In Hawaii, the MPs pulled me off the plane because I had not gone through quarantine at Cam Ranh Bay. So I had to stay there three days before I could keep going home.

I got to Fort Lewis, Washington, just before Christmas. A lieutenant there told me something was wrong with my paperwork because the Army owed me more than \$3,000. I told him I had not been paid since the previous December, before I left for Vietnam. Money did not mean much over there. I just wanted to do my job and get out alive.

What I want you to understand is that rank is not everything. Most of the time I was there, I was a PFC in charge of a gun without a sergeant, an officer, or anybody else telling me what I could or could not do. I made decisions on my own, and my main job was to keep myself and the two men with me alive.

Years later, when I updated my DD214, I found out I had been awarded a Silver Star, two Bronze Stars with “V” devices, and two Purple Hearts. Most of that happened while I was still a PFC. So whether you are a PFC, a Specialist, or an E-5, if you do your job and do it right, you can make a difference.

I hope none of you ever have to go to war, but I appreciate your service. Millions served in that war so others could have the freedom to live the way they choose. Always remember to watch your fellow soldiers’ backs, and they will watch yours.

Gentlemen, again, thank you for your time, thank you for your service, thank you for your team's service.



Written by Richard Burmood, NDQSA web editor 1 July 2026

Based on an audio file recorded in May 2023 during a talk by National Dusters, Quads & Searchlights Association members, Luke Clark, Richard Russell, David McCray, and Jackie Carver with young Air Defense soldiers at Fort Sill, Oklahoma