My Father's Vietnam

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by Brad Parks
Editors Note; The *following article is taken from a temp assignment of Brad Parks, a senior at Dartmouth College, in February* 1996. The *course was called "The Pacific Rim" and the assignment was to interview someone who had experience in drat region.* The *interview subject was his father; Robert W Parks, who served in A Battery* 5/2 *Arty (AW)(SP) from October* 1967 *to September* 1968. *This paper won the Geography prize at Dartmouth for the* 1995-96 *school year: Brad was a general assignment news reporter for the Newark Star Ledger in New Jersey when this was written in 2009.*

From 30,000 feet, Robert Parks stared out the window of a Boeing 707 at an endless expanse of water. The Pacific spread out flatly beneath him- an immense sparkling blue blanket -before it eventually bent around the horizon and out of sight. He strained his neck, looking for some patch of anything resembling land. Thousands of square miles passed under his eyes in a single glance. He could see no land - just a great ocean that, before this day, had only existed on a map for him.

He had only been in an airplane twice. He had only gone out of the country once (to Mexico). He had never been farther north than New York State. He had never left the North American continent. He had grown up on a farm in Maryland, your basic All-American kid: Boy Scouts, meat and potatoes, bowling on Friday nights, baseball on Saturday afternoons. And as a boy, he - like most of his generation - had never heard of Vietnam. Vietnam might as well have been on Mars.

By October of 1967, however, the nation had heard of Vietnam. It had sent half a million young men there to fight Communism, the Domino Effect, and a guy named Charlie that no one could every seem to find.

But to Parks, it still might as well have been Mars. He knew nothing of its people or of its landscape. He knew precious little about what to expect: just what he could glean from the evening news, which wasn't much. Bucknell University ROTC and the United States Army had made him an officer and a gentleman and trained him how to work a tank and shoot a weapon. But they hadn't prepared him for Vietnam. Not really.

As his plane soared over the Pacific, a thousand thoughts floated through his head. He thought back to the last year, to his time spent on a military base in EI Paso, commanding a platoon of tanks. He thought back to the last month -his 30-day leave, most of which he spent with the fiancée he was leaving behind. Then he thought about the year ahead. He didn't know much about Vietnam, but he knew what the casualties had been like. Men were dying at a rate of 250 per week. There were 250 men on the airplane. He knew, statistically- speaking, that five of the guys on the plane wouldn't be coming home.

But more importantly, 245 of them were. And he was going to make damn sure he was one of them.

The plane landed at Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base, just outside of Saigon. As he disembarked onto the tarmac a wave of heat hit him that, even after a year in Texas, was unbearable. Then If something else hit him. A wave of voices, e belonging to a group of soldiers that were waiting e for a plane ride back to the States after their tour in e Vietnam. "Replacements!" they shouted merrily, maliciously. "Replacements! Replacements!" They were survivors. They were Veterans. They were going home. They had learned much -about war, about life, about themselves.

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The education of First Lieutenant Robert W. Parks was just beginning.

I am looking at a photo of a young man. He is dressed in army fatigues. He has my nose. My eyes. My short upper lip. My slightly receded hairline. He is 22 years old. I am 21. We could pass as twins. "That's me at Claymore Corner," my father says as he shows me the picture. "That's where I spent five months of my life in Vietnam." I look at the desolate, clear-cut terrain and listen to him as he shows me another picture and describes the less-than primitive conditions there. I could hack it for a few days, I tell myself. But five months? With nothing but endless days of dust and boredom? Without electricity or hot water or even toilet paper? Eating food out of cans, drinking water out of bottles and sleeping in a rat-infested hole in the ground? Under mortar attack and sniper fire and a blazing tropical sun? I can only surmise that inside this man I know as my father -a man who today complains the moment the television reception goes bad -there has to be one tough son-of-a-bitch.

Obviously, my father survived his tour of duty in Vietnam - or else I wouldn't be here to write about it. But - with the exception of a few bits and pieces, and the occasional anecdote - we have never talked about it. He and I are close by father-son standards, and can chat endlessly about politics, life, or the Baltimore Orioles' pitching staff. But he is not one for war stories. It is not that he has sheltered me or tried to hide them from me. He just never thought I was interested, and now - here I am - looking at a photo of my father at my age and feeling like I'm looking in a mirror. I'm interested; I tell him. I'm interested.

He leans back and takes a pull on his beer and tells me the story of how he came to be at this God- forsaken clump of earth called Claymore Corner.

"While I was still at base camp, the battalion commander, who was a colonel, asked me, 'You have a choice. I have openings in A Battery and B Battery! A Battery was First Infantry Division. B Battery was the Ninth Infantry Division. My good friend Fats Rooley was in the 25th, so I said, 'How about the 25th?' And he said, 'I have a full complement of officers in the 25th. I need you in A or B. Take your choice, does it matter?' A, like I said, was the First Infantry Division. I kind of wanted them, because they were the more famous division: the Big Red One, from World War I, Normandy Beach, they were in Sicily. A famous division. But I said, 'You assign me! So, he assigned me to A, partly because the battery commander had put the arm on him a little harder than the B Battery Commander."

He takes another sip of his beer, then ands, "The guy who came in behind me, a guy by the name of Lieutenant Furman, was assigned to B Battery. And he was killed three months later, standing where I would have been standing."

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The education of Bradley A. Parks was just beginning, too.

The story I'm about to tell -the story of my father's experience in Vietnam -is in some ways typical, in some ways atypical. There are many themes and situations in his narrative that can be found in just about any soldier's remembrance of the war. There are also many unique aspects of his time there. I have tried to rely almost exclusively on our interview for this story, but there are times when my own personal memories will intervene. My father also provided me with 60 of the 275 letters he wrote to my mother that he felt best summarized his Vietnam experience. I will not use them extensively or quote from them - that's another project for another time - but they did provide some valuable background that I draw on occasionally throughout this text.

After researching some of the narratives of other Vietnam veterans, I am convinced that the only statement you can make conclusively about the experience of a soldier in Vietnam is that no two experiences are entirely alike. This idea is borne out time and time again in the memoirs and personal accounts of the war's veterans, who almost uniformly tell their stories with the apology that they did not -and could not -speak for all who served. "I (do not) offer this book as a definitive description of Vietnam," wrote one GI (McDonough 1985). "That would be impossible to do. The style of the war changed from year to year, from unit to unit, from place to place. There were no typical experiences."

Another wrote, "There is no 'record' to 'set straight' because each participant in the war had his or her own perspective and perception of the conflict. It's not possible to conclude that one person's version of the war is valid and another's is not, simply because each version is the way it was for the person who lived it" (Miller 1991).

Those -who chose to write about their experiences comprise a minute percentage of the men who served. Yet there is remarkable diversity in parts of their stories -and striking similitude in others. They talked about rats, the importance of mail, the significance of DEROS (Date of Estimated Return from Overseas), the heat, the rain, and then the heat some more, their combat experience, their fear, their frustration, their bitterness, their anger, their joy, their triumphs and their failures (Clodfelter 1988, Edelman 1985, Ehrhardt 1983, Flynn 1989, Hemingway 1994, McDonough 1985, Miller, 1991, O'Brien 1987).

Dad talked about those things, too. There were times as I read these accounts that I could almost hear my father's voice saying the words on the page. For example, Michael Clodfelter, a soldier in the 10lst Airborne, named his book *Mad Minutes and Vietnam Months,* because according to him, "Vietnam was a few mad minutes of unexpected violence in the midst of weeks or even months of monotony" (1988). My father's version went something like this: "Vietnam was moments of sheer terror surrounded by months of absolute boredom." Clodfelter also relates, as my father did, that "mail call was our favorite event of the day" (1988).

Yet within this same book there are stories of drugs, violence towards civilians, rape, fragging (the murdering of one's own officers), and racial tension among the troops -all problems my father did not encounter, even though he was in combat in the same area as Clodfelter (although -and this is important -they were there during different times: Dad served from 1967-68, Clodfelter in the early 1970s). Or, consider Clodfelter's description of his return to the States: "I remained a hostage to the ghost of a small Southeast Asian country that took many forms but always whispered the same words. It spoke to me from the mutilated grayness of an old peasant murdered by my squad for the crime of being Vietnamese; from the ashes that were once a young mother clinging to her baby in the molten embrace of napalm; from the wounded eyes of children orphaned by war's deadly drama; from the splattered blood and broken dreams of men with whom war had forged a closeness beyond comradeship… It related to me a pain, a remorse, a bitterness beyond articulation. It told me that I had been lied to, that I had been used by the lie, and that I had made a liar out of myself by many times turning my face away from the disillusioning truth… I would find that I was unable to break the bonds by which Vietnam continued to psychically shackle me (1988).

My father-never one for such melodrama, or, for that matter, much subtlety - would most likely read that preceding passage and announce loudly, "Oh, that's such horse sh**.-." I could easily continue with accounts of the war to which my father would have varying reactions: some positive, some negative, some neutral. He experienced more combat than some, less than others. He saw more killing than some, less than others. Living conditions were tougher for him than some, easier than others. A review of such "literature" could drone endlessly: there are no shortage of personal remembrances on the Vietnam War, no lack of personal narratives. Yet that is not my purpose here. My goal is to look at one man's story. And as that man happens to be my father- whom I have known intimately for 21 years and love very much -I can only apologize for the resulting bias I might bring to the narrative.

Certainly, there has been broad-based recognition within the field of geography that personal narratives are a valuable vehicle through which experiences of place can be better understood (see, for example, Buttimer 1976, Entriken 1976, Ley 1985, Lowenthal 1961, Relph 1976, Than 1974 for some classic texts on the subject). Broadly considered, this school of thought is known as humanism. Although it is a diffuse epistemology, and at times ill-defined, it could perhaps best be encapsulated by Than, who calls it "an expansive view of what the human person is and can do" (1974). Or, put more simply, it is the idea that people matter. My father's views, and his particular "lifeworld" - with all its uniqueness and all its quirks - matter (Buttimer 1976). His experiences matter.

And so I offer this story, for what it is worth and on its own merit: not as the gospel, not as the only truth, but as a truth. His truth.

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For a kid from Fallston, Maryland, who had only been to New York City once by the age of 18, Vietnam was at once exciting and terrifying - and very, very foreign. Within a few minutes of landing, he was thrown on to a bus with metal grates in the windows -so no one could toss a grenade through the glass - and given orders about what to do in case of an

ambush. At that point, he was dressed in khakis and had not been issued a weapon, helmet or flak jacket - three items that would become staples of his life in the field and were never more than an arm's-length away. He was scared.

The bus took him to Long Binh, where there was a replacement depot for officers. There, he bumped into two captains -both of whom already had a tour of duty under their belts - who taught this green first lieutenant his first valuable lesson: the difference between potable and non-potable water. It was a distinction his bowels would quickly learn to appreciate. Then, after a night's sleep and a day's worth of paperwork, it was take a jeep out to Bien Hoa and his battalion's base camp. But Bien Hoa would prove to be a mere pit stop. Four days later, as per his orders, he was taken to his final destination: Claymore Corner, an NDP (Night Defensive Perimeter) at the intersection of roads 1 Alpha and 2 Alpha, about 30 miles north of Saigon and 50 miles east of the Cambodian border.

This time, however, his mode of transportation was not a bus or jeep, it was a helicopter.

"Why a chopper?" he asked. "Why can't I just take a truck out?"

"Because," came the answer, "the roads aren't secure."

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Officially, it was called Red Lake 3. Or sometimes Sicily VI. Or even Thunder III. But, to the troops, it was just Claymore Corner.

If the name sounds innocuous, it's because a civilian could scarcely guess at its real meaning. Claymores were mines - big, nasty ones, and a particular favorite of the Vietcong (VC) and North Vietnamese Army (NVA). When you tripped a claymore, it would shoot out hundreds of little steel pellets at you at high velocity, and, according to my father, "cut you in half." 1 Alpha was a main North-South supply road -for both the NVA, the VC and the U.S. Army - and heavily patrolled by Uncle Sam and his men. Where it intersected with 2 Alpha, the army stationed Military Police (MP's), who would search passing pedestrians and motorists for supplies that might belong to the VC or NVA. The intersection, therefore, was important strategically and hence prime mine land. Men who had run-ins with Claymores did not frequently live to tell the tale.

Claymore Corner was just one in a series of NDP's, stationed about every two miles along 1 Alpha. Home to approximately 80 soldiers - my father's platoon of Dusters (tank like crew served weapon with dual 40mm cannons in an open turret originally designed for air defense *$_{\text{editor insert}}$) and, two infantry platoons - it was in the middle of a jungle, only all the trees and brush had been cleared away. At the edge of the NDP, a roughly-circular-shape piece of land several hundred meters in diameter, there was barb wire. And beyond that, there was Victor Charles - aka Charlie, aka the enemy.

"We knew we were being watched," Dad said. "We knew they were out there. In the village of Tan Binh (a few hundred meters from Claymore Corner) there were VC sympathizers. There were VC in the village at night."

There was, of course, sniper fire ("But for whatever reason, they were lousy shots" Dad said, "They never seemed to hit anybody. I don't think I ever heard of anyone getting killed

by sniper fire."). There would also be ground probes, where the VC would advance, fire off a few shots, then retreat. Essentially, it amounted to harassment. The VC would never muster for a full-frontal attack on Claymore Corner because of the presence of the Dusters.

"There was never an NDP hit that had Dusters on it," Dad said. "Because every other night we'd test fire (the guns). And the firepower of four Dusters banging into the trees is enough to scare the crap out of anybody. It would be suicide to attack, because it's got to be a ground attack, and they've got to cross an open field. And we'd have chewed them alive."

For the most part the battle at Claymore Corner was not against the enemy but the elements.

"The living conditions were terrible," my father said. "At least I had a cot to sleep on. The reason I did is you can carry cots on the tracks. The infantry slept on the ground. The food was lousy. It was flown out in mermite cans. It was cooked by the infantry. Breakfast was usually powdered eggs, which taste like cardboard. Lunch was C-rations. C-rations means cold and comes in a can. A- rations is what you're used to eating. B-rations is cans of fruit and stuff. That was lunch every day: C-rations. Len Carrescia (a friend of the family) once said to me, 'You know, they're not that bad.' He did his weekend warrior stuff (stateside, in the reserve army). I said, 'Try eating them everyday.' Or during the Tet Offensive, that's all we had to eat were C-rations."

Depression was also a major problem for my Dad -and this showed up more in the letters than it did in the interview. Part of it stemmed from the living conditions, but most of it was because he knew he was stuck there for a year - away from home, away from civilian life, but, most importantly, away from my mother. He missed her desperately. He was miserable.

Compared to that, the living conditions were more of an annoyance. He could take a shower if he wanted - by filling up a pouch of water that had a spout at the bottom and standing underneath it as the water poured out. The "latrine" was essentially a hole in the ground with a box over it. You sat on the box and you did your business. There were no walls in this latrine - it was out in the open. Every couple of days they would bum the refuse. His home, his "hooch," was a dug-out hole in the ground, surrounded by sandbags, that he shared with some rats.

"Rats were a constant problem," he said. "I had one in my hooch at Claymore Corner. Jesus, that son-of-a-bitch, I couldn't get rid of him."

To this day Dad harbors a special dislike for rats.

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If he had to describe his experience at Claymore Corner in one word, my father would most likely choose, "boredom." It wasn't the "hail of steel" he had expected from watching the nightly news. Most days passed slowly and uneventfully.

The missions and movements changed during his five months in the field. But they essentially came in two varieties. First were the "search and destroy" missions, where

infantry fanned out along a road, one every ten feet, and slowly moved along it, looking for signs of VC or their supplies. Riding behind the troops in a Duster, Dad's job was to provide support should they be ambushed or engaged in a firefight. For the most part, however, "search and destroy" was somewhat of a misnomer: they found little and destroyed even less.

The second duty was “outposting” roads, which was what they did whenever a convoy came through.

"It's the responsibility of the home team to make sure (the convoys) get through safely," he explained. "Our NDP had maybe a two-mile stretch of road that we had to protect. The next NDP had their two miles to protect. And what we did was, we'd go down the road and pull the Duster off the road. Each day was different: you never put the track in the same place twice because of mines. So if you're here today, you move it 100 yards down the road tomorrow and then maybe back, but mix it up. And there was infantry out in front of us. And that was where the boredom set in. Because we would go out at daybreak. And we would come in for dinner. And most of the time we just sat there all day - in fact almost all the time.

"I read constantly. There would be one guy on guard to keep his eyes open. But otherwise, I just sat there. It was boredom. It was just flat boredom. Just nothing to do. Sometimes in the morning we'd go out and clean the track up a little bit and do a little routine maintenance. And lunch would come and we would have lunch."

It wasn't entirely benign, however. The VC were still out there. There were occasional skirmishes, and my father did see men killed. One time, he was outposting a road, when some VC snuck up on two guys who were supposed to be paying attention - but weren't - and tossed a grenade on them, killing them. Another time, his patrol unit bumped into a VC squad and in the ensuing firefight a sergeant - who made the mistake of standing up to make sure his troops were in position - took a bullet in the chest. Another time an armored personnel carrier driver took a rocket- propelled grenade in the stomach. And so it went. One here, two more there, then another...

"We lost 58,000 guys in Vietnam," Dad said, "one and two at a time."

Dad certainly had his chances. "One time, I was sitting in my hooch," he remembered. "We had just gotten (to Claymore Corner), and at this point we hadn't dug in yet, so I had a tent, which was slowly being torn to shreds. And I was sitting writing a letter to your mother, and a .45 caliber bullet went through the tent. I was sitting there writing, and it passed right about here (he gestures a foot above his head). I could see where it came in the tent and where it exited the tent."

For the most part, though, such "excitement" was few and far between. Days came and days went. At night, they would close up Claymore Corner, and, as my Dad put it, "circle the wagons" - or, more accurately, station the Dusters at the perimeter of the NDP. And although that probably should have made him feel safe, it did not. He spent many a sleepless night at Claymore Corner, armed to the teeth, waiting for an enemy that often never materialized.

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Morale was always a factor, and on a daily basis, no two issues were more important to morale than mail and DEROS. "I bitched about the mail in almost every letter, I'd make a comment 'I got two letters today!,' "he said, "It was so important. It was so important, the mail was just critical. I bitched and moaned about those bureaucrats that were just sitting on my mail. They were safe in the base camp and I'm out here and I don't get any mail."

"What was the other thing I was going to mention? Oh, countdown to your DEROS - Date of estimated Return from Overseas. It was literally that. You knew exactly how many days you had left, certainly in the last 100 days: got 42 days, I got 72 days, You know exactly -Oh! I got ten months to go! And you could see it in the letters as it got shorter, was horribly depressing to be in Vietnam in early November in a place like Claymore Corner to realize that you're not going to come home until late next year, And I had 310 days, it says in one of the letters, that's all the GI's talked about because in most wars -Korea, World War II, you were in for the duration, You know: 'When this War is over, son, you can get out and generally you stayed with your unit In Vietnam, it was constant rotation. And that was a morale factor, knowing that you were going to get out. It was good for morale. If I had to stay for the duration, I would have been there until 1975. So you're constantly aware of the duration -of it getting shorter, everyone else is saying the same thing, 'Hey, 02 days today!' So, it was always on your mind: lack of mail and how many days you have to go."

The times when my father got the most emotional during our interview was when he talked about going home, And, in a lot of ways, those *TWO* things - mail from my mother and the knowledge that he would eventually be able to go home -were what sustained him throughout the year and kept him going.

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As the initial shock --and depression - of Claymore Corner began to wear off, the "Holidays" were quickly upon my father. Thanksgiving came about a month after he arrived, and, at first it felt like Turkey Day - Army-style - wouldn't be that bad after all. According to a menu he received, Thanksgiving Dinner would include, "Shrimp cocktail, Crackers, Roast Turkey, Turkey gravy, Cornbread Dressing, Cranberry Sauce, Mashed Potatoes, Glazed Sweet Potatoes, Buttered Mixed Vegetables, Assorted Crisp Relishes, Hot Rolls, Butter, Fruit Cake, Mincemeat Pie, Pumpkin Pie w/Whipped Topping, Assorted Nuts, Assorted Candy, Assorted Fresh Fruits, Tea w/ lemon, Milk," Dad provided me a photocopy of the menu, complete with his interpretation of the day's events: This is crap!! At Claymore Corner, we had turkey, mashed potatoes and corn served out of mermite containers. I don't know who got the rest of this stuff." Plus, it was monsoon season, so, "By the time I got back to my hooch, it was raining sheets, and my whole plate was like a sea of rainwater," that was Thanksgiving." Christmas was scarcely better. "Christmas was just a day," he said, "It didn't feel like Christmas, it felt like August" Still, they sang a Christmas Carol, which went something like this: "Mines in the roadway, Claymores in the grass, you can take your Merry Christmas card and shove it up your ass," That was Christmas.

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January brought changes to Vietnam, 1968 would turn out to be the bloodiest year of the war, in terms of American casualties, and at Claymore Corner, as elsewhere, action picked up. There were more troops movements, more exercises, more orders from headquarters, more general confusion (and General confusion). Something was happening.

"Toward the end of the month; we were called to go about five miles down the road and put up a temporary Night Defensive Perimeter," he remembered. So that is what we did: we left Claymore Corner, we left a few troops there, and left with the Dusters. We were joined by the Quarter Cav, which is the First Division's Armored Unit. And we literally had tanks, armored personnel carriers and Dusters around this thing. It was so heavily armed it was like, 'Jesus Christ, what is this'? Fort Knox or something? We could have stood off a whole division."

"I never knew what the purpose of that was. Except that afternoon, the captain who was in charge of that mess called us in and said, 'We are going to plan an exercise that takes us to Saigon.' And I thought it was a joke: Oh, we're going to go to the bar girls and the hookers and the drunks!" Because Saigon was secure. Why the hell would we go to Saigon? So we planned it. How we were going to do it. When we were going move out. We said, 'And tomorrow morning, you'll leave first, and Dusters you'll be this part of it and the troops will come along and the troops will ride on the tanks.' We spent a couple hours planning how we were going to move all these people -what route we're going to take, who should be the lead, all this stuff. The next morning the order was canceled. I've always suspected that somebody knew something was going to happen in Saigon. Because two weeks later, it did: the Tet Offensive."

Ironically, being out in the field - where the combat usually was - was a relatively safe place during the Tet Offensive. Because the VC and the NVA didn't care about the boonies, they were after Saigon and the major cities. The action in the boonies was mainly efforts by the VC to cut off supply lines to and from Saigon: some blown up bridges, some supply trucks ambushed. And, of course, there were always mines at good old Claymore Corner.

But mostly the guys seeing the action during Tet were the ones not in the field: the base camp warriors. Dad took some small delight in this fact. In Vietnam - particularly for the troops in the field - there was a major distinction made between troops in combat and troops back at the base camp. There were 500,000 troops in Vietnam, 400,000 of which were in support roles behind the lines. The remaining 100,000 in combat were very aware of the fact that they were in the minority. They referred to those 400,000 troops as REMs: Rear Echelon Mother Fu@#***!

"There was a lot of resentment of the REMs and the base camp warriors," Dad said. "There were just so many people in support staff sitting back on their fat asses in base camp that if you were in the field, you just resent the heck out of it."

Nevertheless, the troops in the field kept a wary eye on Tet, wondering if and when they would be called into battle. That never happened. But Tet was a major turning point in the War - not because of what it did in Vietnam, but because of what it did back home.

Dad recalled, "The Tet Offensive, to me, was a big victory for the American troops. We killed 17,000 of the enemy. I mean that is significant. And we only lost a few hundred of our own. 17,000 NVA and VC dead. Yeah, they did capture Hue for a while, but they didn't capture any city, they didn't keep it certainly. They lost 17,000 men, we beat their ass. It was a military victory. And then I was incredulous when I read where people in the states were saying it was a big psychological victory for the North Vietnamese Army."

It was the first of many times my father would be baffled by his country's reactions to and perceptions of Vietnam.

By March, once-green First Lieutenant Parks was now a battle-hardened veteran. He had been shot at and mortared. He had dodged mines. He had avoided bullets. But, with the exception of a few scrapes and bruises, he had managed to remain unscathed -a fairly impressive feat considering that 75 percent of his platoon had Purple Hearts.

But his time was coming.

Of all the dangers my father faced at Claymore, the mortar fire was probably the worst. You can duck bullets, and you can sidestep mines. But there is virtually nothing you can do about having a mortar blow up in your face. And the mortar attack was more of a constant thing. The VC had a gun on the other side of Tan Binh, the village near Claymore Corner, and they would lob mortars over the village and into the NDP.

"They like to hit us during chow," he said. "Because that's when they could get us in a group, in the chow line. And what we used to do is - there was a mortar attack, and we'd go man our tracks - in case they followed it up with anything."

On March 23, he was waiting in the chow line when a mortar attack hit. Like usual, he ran toward his track, only this time, he didn't make it there. A few steps into his dash, a mortar hit the ground in front of him and blew up, sending shrapnel into his face. He went down. He knew he had been hit and could see the blood and feel the pain. He was shaking, so he rolled into his sergeant's hooch, where he waited out the mortar attack.

Despite the blood - there was lots of it - the wound was not a serious one. A piece of the mortar had struck him just below his left eye and lodged itself there. He picked out some of it, and then went to the medic, who picked out the rest of it and stitched him up. He would receive a Purple Heart for his injury. He still bears a small scar today.

"If it had been a bigger piece, it could have taken my head off, or penetrated my skull," he said. "If it had been higher it would have hit me in the eye and blinded me."

"I was lucky."

I was lucky, too.

Certainly, incidents like that did not make him fond of the VC or the NVA, in fact he called them "gooks" on more than one occasion. But his disdain for them came not because they were Vietnamese or because they were Asian; it came simply from the fact that they were trying to kill him, something he did not appreciate.

Otherwise, my Dad had a real fondness for the Vietnamese people, especially the children. In Tan Binh, he befriended a little Vietnamese boy. He used to give the little boy chocolate bars. One day, the little boy gave him some bananas in return.

"The kids were sweet," he said. "They were just so nice - they were sweet. The people of Vietnam are wonderful people. They loved us -well, I don't know if they loved us, but we treated them differently than the French did. We tried to do things for them. We had an outpost at the intersection of 1 Alpha and 2 Alpha. ...at that outpost, we used to have a medic, and the kids knew that's where they could be treated... There were a lot of infections. There were rat bites. And these kids would get these infections. You get, you know, a cut on your leg or something and you go wash it with soap and water and maybe a little Mercurochrome or alcohol or something? But they didn't have that stuff. So these kids would cut themselves playing or whatever and get these infections - and these infections, they were disgusting. So we would put a medic out there. And sometimes they found some real diseases. It would be like, 'Ahh, this woman has TB.' They would come out and we treated them. That was a gathering point, so that's how you would mix with the people."

Another time he was outposting a bridge when an old Vietnamese man, a papasan, invited him and his platoon sergeant into his house.

"They used to call us 'daui' which in Vietnamese really means captain. But they called all officers daui, they called majors daui, they called lieutenants daui. And I was obviously the chief of this little gathering," Dad said. "And this old papasan invites me in with my platoon sergeant. And he looks at me, and he brings out this bottle of rice alcohol. It was supposedly rice wine, but this stuff was really strong, it could really knock your socks off."

"And he kept saying, 'Ahh, this special. My home. Daui. Daui.' So he gets out these little earthen shot glasses. And he poured one for me and one for my platoon sergeant and one for himself. And I said, 'I'm not going to drink this stuff until he does. For all I know he's VC and he's trying to poison us.' But he said, 'Ahh! To Americaner!' And down he quaffed it. And so we downed it too. And that was fun. Because you felt so good."

And never, in the entire time he was there, did my father witness - or even hear of - soldiers intentionally hurting civilians. Accidents happened. One time, one of the tanks in his platoon lobbed a Duster shell into the nearby village. A few civilians were hurt; none were killed. But he never torched up a village, he never fired on civilians. Of all the misconceptions about Vietnam, it is the stereotype of the "drug-crazed baby killer, shooting up villages and raping women" that upsets him the most. His Vietnam was not like that.

After five months in the boonies at Claymore Corner - longer than any other officer in his battalion - the orders finally came for him to go back to base camp. And it came in the form of a promotion: he was named his battery's executive officer (XO), which made him second in command (to the captain) of his unit. He was finally one of the REMs. But it did not bother him in the least to be joining the ranks of the base camp warrior for whom he had previously held so much resentment

"I paid my dues," he said. And so he joined the paperwork war and began fighting Army bureaucrats instead of VC. Sometimes, that was more frustrating.

"The job of the XO is to supervise the mess hall, the motor pool, and the supply shack, plus do all the administrative of the unit," Dad said. "I used to call myself the English professor, because I wrote all the time. I was always writing. It was either recommendations for awards, recommendations for promotion, or reports required by the battalion. The bureaucracy was incredible, the bull we went through."

There was still danger, however. The base camp was mortared on occasion -mostly because of the helicopters in the middle of the base ("The gooks hated helicopters," Dad said). He also made trips to the field every few weeks, mostly to prove to his troops that - unlike the previous XO, who never ventured into the field - he had not turned chicken since becoming an REM. One of those trips to the field was almost his last.

"I had to go to Battalion Headquarters, which was maybe 15 or 20 miles away," he remembered. "I'm in a Jeep. And it was like, I'm not on an operation, I'm just doing some paperwork. It was a morning. And the village outside of us, the village of Phu Loi, had roadblocks. The VC overnight had pulled brush at one end of the village and brush at the other end of the village. And the engineers are out there, and I pull up and say, "What's going on?" And they say, "Oh, we just got a road block." And they're sweeping all along and there were no booby traps on them, so they pulled them aside. So they pull the road block away and I go through the village, and I get to the other side and there were two Dusters. And of course, what they're doing is, they didn't have any engineers with them, so they made the Vietnamese move them. They'd say, 'Hey, you guys, you saw them put them there, so you know if they're safe. Move them.' So, I met up with the Dusters and I waved, and they went straight on through the village in a big hurry.

"I got down to a check point, and I made a right turn, and I'm maybe a mile or two out of the village. And I pass five 5-ton dump trucks going the same way as the Dusters. And when the five dump trucks got to the village, they were ambushed. So, what that meant was, they decided I wasn't worth it. There was a VC squad with a .50 caliber machine gun. And when I went through, it's sort of like, - they're looking for convoy stuff, they want to f@#! up the convoy. So when I went through, I was small potatoes. When the Dusters went through, you don't go after two big tanks with a .50 caliber machine gun. But when the dump trucks came, that's just what they were looking for. And they shot them up and killed the drivers."

But although there was still danger, there was a level of comfort at the base camp well beyond what he had experienced at Claymore Corner. There were still rats, and the showers were still cold. But he got three hot meals a day. He could drink beer at night There was electricity. There was even a television- not that he could understand much of what was going on.

And he was that much closer to home. During the last 100 days, the countdown to DEROS intensified. Every day was one less day. In his letters to my mother, there is an increased self-assuredness - even a buoyancy - that was largely missing from earlier letters. There is humor. There is talk of the future - not in vague, unspecific terms of "We'll be together

some day," but of job applications and marriage plans. The difference between this confident first lieutenant and the frightened, depressed, miserable one that came to Vietnam nearly a year earlier was remarkable. Like the Simon and Garfunkel song that was quickly becoming popular, he was... *Homeward Bound*.

With two weeks to go, he was invited to a going-away party for the colonel, the battalion commander, at headquarters. Although my father had sworn he would not leave base camp for any reason during the last month - why risk it? - he decided to go. He had a blast. There was music, dancing and singing.

"We were all about to get out, and it was wonderful," Dad said. "We had a band, and remember that song by the Animals: 'We got to get out of this place...' And we played that and played that I can still see the colonel dancing. He was a pretty straight guy, but he was singing 'We got to get out of this place...' and getting half shit-faced."

Shortly before he was scheduled to leave, my father was rated as the top XO in his battalion. He was offered the rank of captain and command of A Battery -but, of course, it meant he would have to stay in Vietnam.

"Now this is a plum if you're going to be a career guy," Dad explained. "The reason is you need command combat experience on your record. We were the best battery in the battalion - I'm not bragging, we were. We saw the most action, we were the best run. And since it is seeing the most action, you put your best people in it, certainly to be the commander of it. So, I was flattered.

“However, there was no way I was taking it. So, I was very nice, I said, No sir, I'm a reserve officer as you know. I'm going home. I've already written to some companies about employment. And I've got better opportunities, certainly in terms of pay. And I'm really looking forward to civilian life.” Translation: He had to get out of that place.

And so, finally, my father was heading home - to his fiancé and to the life they had planned together in a year's worth of letters. He was moved from base camp back to Long Binh. After more paperwork and more of the Army bureaucracy he had grown to detest, there was nothing left to do but wait around. His flight was delayed all day. Finally, he and 250 other homeward-bound vets assembled on the tarmac at Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base, waiting for the plane that would take them home. The plane landed, and off came fresh troops, just as scared and green as my father had been the year before. My father and 250 other fellow GIs burst forth with a joyous, throaty yell, "Replacements, Replacements, Replacements"

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First Lieutenant Robert W. Parks was coming home.

His homecoming was, in many ways, joyous. It was wonderful for him to see my mother again. It was wonderful to be back in the civilian life of hot showers, flush toilets and no rats. And he quickly went about the business of finding a job and planning a wedding.

But it was also bittersweet. "What kind of hurt was the indifference," he said. "Nobody cared. You know, where in previous wars, there was the hero's welcome, the tickertape

parades, you were respected? There was none of that. You remember the Gulf War? When that ended, the guys were treated like heroes. We were treated with indifference. There was nothing to be proud of to say, 'I'm a Vietnam vet.' You see those World War II vets - God, those guys are still bragging about that war, and it's been over for fifty years. It was just, 'OK, it's over, it's done with.' Yeah, I know deep inside I served my country, I did what I was asked to do."

"And part of the problem was, people just didn't understand. They didn't understand what I had been through. One of the things your mother said is that (while I was in Vietnam) people wouldn't ask about me. They were afraid to ask about me: 'How's he doing?' I said, "Wait a minute, in your letters, you said people were asking about me." And she said, 'I lied just to make you feel better.' People didn't ask. They were afraid to ask."

"The point of all this is that the Welcome Home was not a 'Welcome Home!' It was sort of like, 'Oh, you're home.' I was bitter. Remember the Iran Hostages, when they came home, all the yellow ribbons around the old oak tree and all that bull? I was bitter about that. It was like, wait a minute, I came home too. But there was none of that for me. Why for them? They weren't fighting. They were just in prison for a year. I was in prison for a year, it was just a different kind of prison."

And Vietnam was a different kind of war. To be sure, the man that returned from Vietnam was different from the one who had gone over the year before. He was more mature. More contemplative. More emotional. More grateful for his life back in the States. His eyes had, in a sense, been opened. His perspective on life had changed.

"This sounds overly dramatic," he said. "But there's something about being 22 and 23 and facing death every day... a 22-year-old thinks they're immortal. I found out I wasn't. You don't think you can die when you're young - but in Vietnam they did."

But even as the bitterness and resentment lingered, readjustment came quickly.

"It didn't take your mother and I long to get back to normal. You know, you worry about when you've been apart will I have changed? You know, a drug- crazed baby killer? Will I be so messed up I can't function nomally? But there was none of that in our relationship, it was almost like the year hadn't happened. I was anxious to get on with my life. It was over. It is time for me to get married, get a job, and get on with my life. I don't remember us having any problem at all."

"The only fallout I ever had was, well, a couple times I hit the ground. One time was when we were driving with Papa (his father-in-law) on the Merritt Parkway, and Taipan (father-in-Law's dog) had to get out for a pee. And there must have been some squirrel shooting in the woods, 'pop pop' because I hit the ground. I didn't even think about it."

"And another time I was in Los Angeles when I was taking Office Products Training (with IBM), it was a backfire, same damn thing. And I was with a guy - one of my fellow classmates. He said, 'What the hell are you doing?' And I said, 'I stumbled."

"The only other thing I had a problem with is I used to have nightmares. It was a recurring nightmare. And it was always that I was at Claymore Corner and we were being overrun.

That never happened in real life, but obviously it bothered me a lot, and that I would be shooting at the VC and they wouldn't fall down. They just kept coming."

The nightmares have faded. But the memories still linger.

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On January 13, 1997, my father -now 51 years old and the father of two sons who have never had to go to war - will fly over that same Pacific Ocean headed for Vietnam. He vowed once that he would return to Claymore Corner and the village of Tan Binh. He has said for a long time he would go back with my mother. In a few months, he will make good on both those vows.

"I want to see it -it's open now," he said. "I want to go back before I'm at Claymore Corner, and a bunch of school teachers from Iowa pull up in a tour bus and they get out and say, 'Oh? What's this place? I wonder what happened here?' So, I want to get back before it gets that way. And there are a lot of Veterans who feel that way. Some guys say they'll never go back. But I want to go back. I want to see it, I don't know what it's going to look like. I'm sure it will be very emotional. I want to see Phu Loi again; I want to see what happened to the base -I spent half my tour there. And I want to see the people. They're wonderful people, they really are. Plus, now I think we have the opportunity to do with dollars what we couldn't do with bullets. I think we can help rebuild that country with hospitals, with improvement, I know we can."

It is by far the most outward gesture of remembrance he has made in the nearly 30 years since he left Vietnam. When my hometown, Ridgefield, Connecticut, has a parade on Memorial Day and the town's veterans proudly walk, in full uniform, behind the Veterans of Foreign Wars flag, my father does not march. When the Vietnam War Memorial was dedicated - an effort he had helped through fundraising and a personal donation - and thousands of his fellow veterans paraded through the streets of Washington, he did not join them. When the city of New York held a ticker-tape parade for Vietnam veterans in the early 1990s, he chose not to attend. His remembrances are more personal.

"I probably should have gone, he said. And I thought, 'Good, the guys who need to go do that can.' But I didn't really need to. I didn't feel like I needed to. If it had been important to me, I probably would have gone. But I'm glad that the city of New York did a ticker-tape parade for Vietnam vets. I feel personally good about that, even though I didn't participate."

I can remember when the Vietnam Wall was first dedicated on November 13, 1982. I was just a little boy then, eight years old. I can remember sitting staring at this long, black wall with all these names on it. There were a lot of speeches. But mostly, I remember it because it was the first time I ever saw my father cry.

"I think the Wall- that's what I call it, the Wall- I think it is wonderful," he said. "I think it has done more to heal the wounds of that war, for the veterans, for their families, for the families of people who didn't come back It was great to see the guys marching. It was just a wonderful day."

He has visited the Wall several times since then -any time he is in Washington and has a spare minute. He likes it most when he is alone with the Wall and his thoughts. A few days before I wrote this paper, my father returned to the Vietnam Wall again. He searched along the cold, dark stone until he found Lieutenant James Furman.

He looked up at the name on the wall, and he said a silent prayer.

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