

In Harms Way

Divine Intervention on the Battle Field
By Cordell Vail



1st Lutinent Cordell Vail, CuChi, Vietnam 1970 Captain Cordell Vail, Fort Benning, Georgia - 1971

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The author has given the Brigham Young University the right to republish the story
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Acknowledgements

This book is dedicated to my dear friend Gary Mower who gave
his life in Vietnam in 1970 as his contribution to help preserve freedom for
a people far away in a world unknown to him.



This book would not be if it were not for the faith and prayers of my dear wife Janice. I consider her as much a war veteran as I am. She did not physically go to Vietnam with me, but she was there in spirit every step of the way and was very much a part of everything happened the whole time I was in the military. This is her story as much as it is mine. I also give her thanks for thinking of the name of this book. She is my eternal best friend. As in the words of the song, truly she is "The wind beneath my wings".

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The original inspiration to write this book came from my family and friends who continually asked me to write these stories for posterity. More recently, my friend, Roan McClure who served with me in Vietnam, gave me the final encouragement to actually do it. He has a story of his own to tell that you won't want to miss reading. Without their encouragement I would probably never have taken the time to do more than tell these stories to my children over and over and over.

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INTRODUCTION

Through out history, there have been times when even members of the Church have had to go to war. In the Book of Mormon it says that Helaman the Prophet in his time had to go to war. He led 2000 stripling warriors into battle. By exceeding faith they were protected by God and brought safely home to their parents.

No one can explain why some faithful Latter-day Saints are killed in wars while others are spared. No one can explain why in our daily lives some people have great trials and fall in harms way. All we can do is to be the best we can be and learn to follow the prompting we receive from the Holy Ghost. The rest is in the hands of the Lord and His divine purposes for each of our lives.

This is a part of my Vietnam Journal. I was just one more, young Latter-day Saint, who not unlike the 2000 stripling warriors, was called to serve his country. These excerpts from my journal are evidence that in our time, if it is the Lord's will, we too can have the same blessings of protection as those in days gone by. We too can be protected as the 2000 sons of Helaman when they went into battle or as Samuel the Lamine was protected as he stood on the wall while his enemies hurled rocks and shot arrows at him. Guidance and protection are promised if we live the commandments and if it is the will of the Lord. If it is not the will of the Lord that we are protected from harm, then we must accept His will and know there must be a higher purpose in our parting. If we do not live the commandments, we have no promise.

CHAPTER 1

A MISSION OF A DIFFERENT SORT

My mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints to Finland in 1963 was a great disappointment to me because I only baptized one eight year old boy, Hannu Hakinnen. I came home feeling like a failure as a missionary. When my military assignment came I wanted to make it another religious mission also, to over come the feelings I had of not having been successful on my first mission. With much effort, my military service did become an exciting missionary experience for my wife and I. The military became an opportunity to uplift others rather than an experience of pulling me down into the ways of the world.

I was a student at BYU in 1968, when I got drafted. My bride of one month, the former Janice Lavone Richmond, had to stay home when I went to Basic Training at Fort Bliss, which is near El Paso, Texas. It was a lonely place to start married life because I had to leave my new wife behind. Becoming involved in doing missionary work helped me to combat the loneliness of being away from Janice.

Like other families, who have sons and daughters entering the military, my wife and family also faced the fears of what might lie ahead for me. There is the ever-present threat of death or dismemberment, along with the moral challenges so prevalent in military life.

Some of my family even thought that it was not possible for a young man to enter the military and not lose his moral values. One of them was so sure she bet someone \$100 that I could not come home from the military without becoming a smoker. Thankfully she lost the bet.

When I first arrived at Basic Training I discovered that most of the men in my unit were from the South. Many were African Americans. We were all apprehensive because we didn't know what to expect from the military or from each other. I discovered that most of the people from the South are very courteous and thoughtful which made our platoon a much friendlier group than it would have been otherwise.

We were told that we would all be eating together in a large room called the mess hall. Since our platoon arrived at the mess hall as a group it only took a few minutes for us to go through the chow line and be seated. All my life I had been taught to say a blessing on my food even when eating in public. I was concerned about whether or not I should bless my food with all those men around. I decided to go ahead so I bowed my head and said a silent blessing. To my great joy, when I opened my eyes, I observed that most of the men sitting at the table with

me were following my lead. Then I noticed that most of the men in the entire mess hall were also praying.

The family training and values of these “Southern Gentlemen” became apparent. I was blessed to be with a whole platoon full of such men. Later, many of them told me that he had been taught to say Grace on his food and that as a group they were all glad that I had said a prayer so they would be comfortable doing it also.

That was my introduction to military life. I knew it was going to be a challenging opportunity to serve my country and also to do some missionary work. I assumed that if I occupied my time finding fellow soldiers to teach the gospel to that my military experience could actually be something to remember rather than to be feared.

The First Presidency of the Church had given soldiers, who had temple endowments, permission to remove their garments if they felt that the garments might be mocked by other soldiers. There was one LDS man in our platoon who chose to leave his garments home and wear regular underwear. I respected his decision but decided that I would see if my men would accept my garments.

The first day there were some comments made about my unusual looking underwear, which soon turned into questions. Most of the men asked why I wore them. This question gave me the opportunity to tell them that I was an ordained minister and that my undergarments were my priesthood robes. I assumed all of them were somewhat familiar with the robes of the priest or minister at their church. I therefore compared the robes of their minister to the robes of the priesthood. After that it was easy for me to explain that we wear our Priesthood Robes under our clothes instead of on the outside. There were never any derogatory comments made about my Temple Garments in our platoon. All of the men accepted the fact that I am an ordained minister.

Our barracks was one big open room with double bunk beds lined up on both sides of the walls the full length of the room. My bunk was the first one inside the doors. One evening as we were all standing by our bunks getting undressed for bed, a soldier from the platoon upstairs came down into our room and saw me standing in my undergarments. He let out a hoot and started laughing about my funny underwear.

The young man who bunked straight across from me hurried over

to him and said, "He is our minister and those are his Priesthood Robes and don't you make fun of them." The next thing I knew the two of them were fist fighting and the last time I saw them, they were outside still fighting. I was really surprised that anyone would actually get into a fight defending my garments and 'his minister'.

Basic Training passed quickly. Talk of assignments was a constant subject. We had heard that some units were going to Germany or Korea instead of to Vietnam. As the end of the training drew near we discovered that our platoon was going to Vietnam which caused fear in the hearts of all of us. Several of the men came to my bunk, in the middle of the night, woke me up and asked me if I would pray for them and bless them as they were afraid of dying in Vietnam. I was privileged to do that many times during the next few nights before we finished training and the men who were going to Vietnam shipped out. Some of us went on to additional training sites.

Also towards the end of our basic training, we had a big inspection by the Lieutenant in charge of our platoon. We were all nervous because we were just privates, the lowest rank in the Army, and he was a very important officer. The Lieutenant started his inspection going down the row of lockers, beds and footlockers, which were all in order and spit shined. He started with me because I was the first one inside the doors. I passed inspection.

Then he moved from bed to bed, making comments and giving gigs (demerits) for things he found wrong. There were about 15 of the double-bunk beds on each side of the building. I can still hear his voice, in my mind, when he got clear down to the other end of the barracks and yelled out, "What is this Book of Mormon doing in every locker?" I could not help but laugh to my self as I realized that I had talked about the church to each man in my platoon. I had given every one of them a Book of Mormon which the men put away in their lockers and where the Lieutenant saw them.

We all laughed and the Lieutenant didn't say any more about it. He didn't give any extra demerits to anyone for having an unauthorized book in his locker because every man had one. I could not hear what the last private, who was being inspected, told the Lieutenant. I can only assume he mentioned that their minister had given the books to them.

I spent many an hour discussing the Bible and it's doctrines with the men in my platoon as we waited in lines or sat under trees taking breaks from training. Many of them started carrying the little pocket size Army Bibles which the Chaplain had passed out. I would see them reading their Bibles while on breaks. Maybe because of the fear of dying they were starting to cram for their finals.

I have no way of knowing how many of those men died in Vietnam but I know some did. I have often wondered whether or not any of them ever joined the LDS church because of the talks we had. I hope and pray that some of them joined us. I know that none of them can ever look back and say that I did not give them the chance to know about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I explained it the best way I knew how, under the circumstances, every chance I got.



E2 Vail got his 1st military haircut at Ft. Bliss Texas, June 1968



Janice pinning on 2nd lieutenant bars after OCS graduation Ft. Benning, GA

CHAPTER 2

NO MATTER WHAT

Following Basic Training I was assigned to go to Advanced Infantry Training (AIT) in Ft. Dix, New Jersey. I had many similar missionary experiences at the AIT which I am not putting in this journal. While I was attending that school my wife was able to come to Philadelphia to stay near me and I could see her on week-ends. It was like a second honeymoon for us. We had a lot of fun together and learned to love Philadelphia and the good people there. One very kind couple even let my wife stay with them at no charge.

After I graduated from AIT, I applied to become an officer. I decided since I was going to go to Vietnam I wanted to be responsible for my own life and the lives of those around me rather than be dependent on someone else. My application was accepted. I was sent to Officer's Candidate School (OCS) at Ft. Benning, Georgia for 6 months of intense officers training.

In Officer Candidate School they teach the formality of life in the military as an officer. One of those formalities is to join in a toast at the beginning of a formal dinner when dignitaries are there. We had several of those occasions when the General came to eat with us. Those dinners were important occasions in our training. When the meal begins, everyone stands up and raises his or her glass, filled with wine, while the General makes a toast.

When we were told what would happen at the dinners, I realized that toasting would include drinking the wine. Something had to be done so my wife and I would not be embarrassed in front of the General when we failed to drink the wine.

I decided to go to the dinning hall after the tables had been set up and find the nameplates for my wife and myself. (Nameplates were used so that the General would know the name of each person attending.) I found our nameplates and turned our wineglasses upside down so the cooks would not fill them with wine. I had seen that done in a restaurant with coffee cups so I assumed it would work for wineglasses too.

When my wife and I arrived at the dinner we were surprised to discover our wineglasses were filled with milk. After that whenever we went to formal dinners our glasses were always filled with milk. We never learned who did that for us but we were most grateful.

From that experience, I realized that people soon noticed that we did not drink and they respected our decision. I do not remember anyone ever pressuring us to drink; they in fact, expected us not to drink.

On the last night of Officers Candidate School we had a big party in the mess hall. Since we were only cadets, we still had to do what the Tactical Training Officer (TAC Officer) in charge of us asked or ordered us to do.

Married men were allowed to bring their wives to this last social party. Every one was laughing, having a good time and most of those in attendance were drinking beer. Right in the middle of the party my TAC Officer signaled to me to come to his table. It was not a request, it was an order. I excused myself from my wife and friends and made my way through the tables and people to the back of the room where he was sitting. My TAC Officer handed me his empty beer mug and ordered me to go re-fill it for him.

I knew, as soon as he handed his mug to me, what he was trying to do. He knew that if I walked all the way to the front of the room with an empty beer mug and then all the way back with the full beer mug most people would see me and think I had finally given in. They would think that I was going to have a beer on the last night to celebrate. I prayed, in my mind, and asked the Lord what I should do. Immediately I had an impression and with it came my answer.

Sure enough, as I made my way through the tables to the front of the room where the beer kegs were, people all around were looking at me and whispering to the person next to them. I filled the beer mug and then made my way back again to where my TAC Officer was waiting. As I walked to the back of the room even more people started watching me and the room began to get quiet

When I got to the TAC Officer's table I held the beer mug high in the air so every one could see it and waved it around. Then I sat the mug down on the table in front of him, saluted him; and then walked back to my table. Everyone applauded. That was a riveting witness to me of the influence and respect others will have for you if you exercise the power of doing what is right, no matter what.

CHAPTER 3

LEARNING HOW

One of my favorite stories in the Book Of Mormon, for as long as I can remember, were the stories of Nephi and his being guided by the spirit to do things. I loved those stories because they depict how a person can be guided by the spirit if they will listen. I came to believe that we as members of the church can receive similar guidance in our lives if we will seek after the experience. Reading about Nephi gave me hope that I could learn to listen to the spirit just as he did.

As I tried to learn to do that, I soon began to realize that Nephi did not learn to listen to the spirit in just one day. I could see that he had spent his whole life trying to learn to listen and obey. It became obvious to me that when the Lord told Nephi to slay Laban, it was not the first time Nephi had ever had a prompting from the Spirit of the Lord. I could see that he had already learned to follow the promptings by trial and error just like I was trying to learn to do. He had practiced for years before that day.

When I had experiences where I failed to listen or would hear the prompting but would argue with the feeling I would sometimes also think about the point in the story where Nephi still seemed to have the inclination, just like me, to sometimes argue with the feeling. He was trying to talk the Lord out of what he was being prompted to do even when he realized it was from the Lord.

It became evident to me very early in my life that there is a difference between feeling the prompting and learning to listen to the prompting and then to follow the prompting that I received. I am certain that every person who has ever felt the promptings of the Spirit of the Lord telling them to do something has had the experience from time to time that they argued and wondered why the prompting came. Talking to others help me understand it was not just me who had trouble learning the lesson of listening and then obeying.

I have cherished having the Gift of the Holy Ghost ever since I received it after my baptism. The main lesson that I finally learned by experience is that a prompting from the Holy Ghost is never wrong. How can we knowing that then still find it hard to listen and then to obey? I cannot answer that. I like everyone else, after years of trying, am still am trying to learn the lesson. Thankfully, sometimes we obey anyway.

We do not often talk in terms of practicing when it comes to learning to listen to the promptings of the Holy Ghost. We often talk about listening, but not how to listen. I learned after years of trying that it

does take practice.

The accounts that follow in this journal where I was able to follow the prompting of the Spirit did not start in Vietnam when I was in danger. The ability to hear and follow a prompting from the Holy Spirit came after years of deliberate practice on my part. Over the years, the more I tried to practice, the easier it was to listen and follow the promptings. No one is perfect but I came to believe that it is something that we can all learn to do.

When I learned that Nephi was only about 16 years old in the beginning of the Book of Mormon, I decided as a teenager myself, that I would make the whole focus of my life the attaining of the ability to listen to that sacred prompting voiced within me and to learn to obey the Spirit no matter what. Years later, because I had practiced, it made it easier to listen in Vietnam.

We each have the same challenge to learn that we need to magnify this gift we have. It does not just come. Listening is hard to learn. It is usually contrary to what we would normally do. That is why we argue. The Lord can see what we are about to do and warns us because we have already made up our minds what we want to do. The hard part for us is to yield to His will and His warning when we want to do otherwise. To this day it is still hard for me to listen sometimes. It seems to be a lesson we have to continue to learn all our lives.

Have you ever asked yourself how you can practice feeling something? You do not hear a feeling; you feel it inside you. When you feel it, you know exactly what it is. After you feel it then you have to decide if you want to follow it. In the Book of Mormon, Nephi said to his brothers: "but ye were past feeling, that ye could not feel His words". (1st Nephi 17:45) Isn't that interesting he would say, "feel His words"?

Here is just one of many examples of something I did one time to try to learn to learn to listen and to follow that inner voice within me. I share this story only to help you see that I am just like anyone else. I had to learn to listen and obey by practical experiences.

At one time, I had a little Ford Falcon. The engine was so simple that a person could almost take it apart with a pair of pliers and a screwdriver. However, many mechanics told me that I should never mess with the carburetor.

One day I decided to tear the carburetor of my car, apart. I decided that I would pray and ask the Lord to teach me how to take it apart and put it back together. Why? Did I want to fix the carburetor? No, it was not broken. I did it to try to create an opportunity for me to do something that was very difficult and complex to do, thus forcing me to listen to the feeling inside of me. I knew it would give me an opportunity to practice. It was not for any other reason

The impressions of the Spirit came into my mind and showed me how to do it. The answer came so clear and simple. I felt the impression to just take it apart piece by piece and lay each piece out on the sidewalk in the exact order that i took it apart even making notes as to which way the washers or parts faced (up or down) when I took them off.

I took the engine all apart. I laid all the tiny parts out on the sidewalk in front of our house where I was working on the car and then I put it all back together. The car started right up. It was a thrilling experience for me to feel that teaching voice inside me telling me what to do and how to do it. I know it is not a new lesson. Many other people have learned the technique of laying things out in order when they took something apart, so they know what order to put it back together again. The importance of this story is not that I learned something new that I did not know before, but rather how I learned it. Learning to follow that feeling that day and many other times in my life was invaluable to me in Vietnam. It has continued to be on many other occasions in my life since then.

CHAPTER 4

FEELING BY PRAYER

No one wants to go to war. Some times we have to do what we have to do. When we are required to do certain things, the Lord often blesses us to use the powers within us to be able to stand in holy places in times of danger. In Vietnam my life and the lives of all of the men in my platoon were spared, on many occasions, because I was blessed to receive and to hear promptings from the Holy Spirit. From time to time those promptings came to warn us of danger and even instructed us what to do to save our lives.

Most of us, who trained together in Basic Training at Fort Bliss, Texas, Advanced Infantry Training at Fort Dix, New Jersey, and Officers Candidate School at Fort Benning Georgia, ended up going to Vietnam.

After I completed Officers Candidate School I became a 2nd Lieutenant and stayed at Fort Benning for one year as an instructor in the Communications Department. I taught radio communications to other Officer Candidate School cadets and also to other officers on their way to Vietnam. The school was at the Ft. Benning Infantry School in Columbus, Georgia.

The Army would not allow me to transfer from being in the Infantry to becoming a Signal Corps Officer (believe me I tried). Normally a Signal Corps Officer would not be out on the front lines in a war like an Infantry Officer would be. That was my reason for trying to switch. If you are working in the Signal Corps as a teacher then I figured they would let me switch permanently over to where I should have been to be teaching such high level radio communications to other officers. They would not allow me to change. I continued to be an Infantry Officer teaching Signal Corps classes to other Infantry Officers.

Little did I know what the effect of being only a “stand-in-Communications Officer” at Fort Benning would have on my assignments later in Vietnam. After the year of teaching at Fort Benning I received my orders to report for duty in January of 1970, to Vietnam.

Janice and I decided we would go back to my home in Hyde Park, Utah to visit my parents for a few days before I was to leave for Vietnam. While there it was decided that Janice would stay in Utah with my family while I was in basic training.

During my visit I asked my Bishop, Earl M. Daines, to give me a blessing. In my blessing, Bishop Daines gave me the same promise that King Mosiah gave to his sons in the Book of Mormon. He promised me that I would be like the sons of King Mosiah in that I could not be killed while I served in the military. That blessing is surely one of the reasons that I am able to write this journal now and my wife is not a widow. There were many times when I and all of my men could have been killed had we not been protected by divine intervention.

While there at my parent’s home, my wife and I talked about how we were going to cope with the experience of being apart for a year. We decided that we would like to continue our practice of having family prayer together every day even though we were physically apart. It had already become our habit to get up every morning at 5 A.M. and take time to pray and study together. We had a great desire for our prayers together to continue. We did not need to be physically together to do

that.

As we looked at a little world globe, which showed us the time zones around the world, we discovered that it would be night in Vietnam when it was morning in Utah. So we decided to continue to have our prayer time together at 5:00 A.M. Utah time which would be 8:00 P.M. in Vietnam. I had seen many movies of past wars where all the soldiers were in fox holes at night so that seemed like such an easy and wonderful plan.

When I got to Vietnam I was surprised to learn that this war was not like the wars I had seen on TV and in movies. In Vietnam there was almost no fighting during the day, in most places. That was the time when we all slept.

As soon as darkness fell many of the people in the villages around where we had been sleeping in the day time would dress in black pajamas and go out into the fields or jungle and become our enemies. They were called the Vietcong. They were not North Vietnamese soldiers who were the regular enemy. They were local people who were sympathizers with the North Vietnam Army and would help them fight the war in the local area. A few of them truly did want to fight against us and became leaders of the Vietcong. I guess you could call them patriots, but we learned that many of the people only joined in the fighting against the U.S. Soldiers because the North Vietnamese soldiers threatened to kill their families if they did not help them. Sadly, that seems to be the case in many countries ruled by Tierney.

The local village people who became Vietcong soldiers at night would return the next morning and turn back into our barber or shoe-shine lady again. This was just the opposite of what I had expected.

The first night I had to go out on an ambush patrol, I totally forgot about the promise I had made to Janice about our praying together because the things I had expected to happen in the night were happening in the day and vice versa. This was the Vietnam War and by 8 o'clock at night I was in the process of leading my men out into the dark on an ambush patrol, which was very dangerous and where we could all be killed or injured at every turn.

That first night as I started to walk out into the darkness, Janice and my home in Utah were far from my mind. My only thoughts were about me walking out of the base camp into the dark leading my men

who were lined up behind me. I had to be focused on staying alive and keeping all of my men alive. I can tell you I was praying but I was not thinking about home.

Each night as I walked along in the dark, I had a sensation of peace come over me. It lasted for 10 or 15 minutes. I did not pay much attention to it at first because of the fear I had in what I was doing on the ambush patrol. But I distinctly remember that feeling the very first night I was out there. Gradually I began to notice that when it got to be somewhere between 7:55 and 8:10 P.M. I would have that same peaceful sensation come over me. It was a feeling so strong and so identifiable each night that I realized Janice was praying for me and for my men. I could feel it as clearly as if she was right beside me bringing me feelings of peace, love and safety.

After a couple of weeks of experiencing the peaceful feelings every night as we walked out on patrol, I had an unusual experience. That night, as I felt the sensation of my wife's prayers for us, I stopped like I had started to do every night to look at my watch to see what time she got up. As I stood there silently in the dark, looking at the fluorescent dials on my watch, I was startled by my platoon Sergeant, who walked over to me and asked, "Lieutenant Vail, why do you look at your watch every night at eight o'clock?" I was amazed that he had noticed because we never left the base camp at the same time. (You never do the same thing at the same time every day when you know the enemy is watching you.) Because he had noticed and asked me about it, I shared with him the reason I knew it was somewhere around eight o'clock. He seemed to be very comforted to know that my wife was praying for us and that I could actually feel her prayers.

Once I recognized my feelings came from Janice's prayers for me and for my men, when I felt that feeling come then I started praying with her, as best I could, under the circumstances, while leading my men along in the dark.

When I returned home from Vietnam my father told me that he had made a covenant with the Lord when I left. He told the Lord that if He would bring me back home safely, he would attend the temple every day. My father was faithful to his promise to the Lord.

My mother and several of my friends have told me that from time to time while I was in Vietnam, they would have 'feelings' that I was in

great danger so they would immediately go somewhere alone and offer special prayers for my safety and the safety of my men. I am grateful that the Lord was willing to hear and answer the prayers of faith from my family and friends. I assume that is a part of the reason that I was privileged to come back home and also to have had the experiences I have recorded here.

I know that there are many righteous men and women who went to Vietnam and who did not come back alive. Many of them had parents, spouses, family and friends who fervently prayed for them. Many of them received priesthood blessings before they went. I can not tell you why some of us were spared and some of were not. I can tell you that I will be eternally grateful to the Lord that He did allow me to return home. I am also very grateful for the faith of my wife, family and friends who did pray for me and give me comfort and courage to go on while I was there. My coming home was only by divine intervention. For some, that was not to be their divine destiny. We can only trust the Lord and in His infinite wisdom as to the reasons why. As one of our hymns states, "Someday we'll understand."

CHAPTER 5

ALMOST KILLED

I had too many experiences, in Vietnam to relate them all in this journal; however I will record some of the most significant ones with the hope that they will help to build the faith of my wife, children, family and friends in times to come. These experiences have helped me realize that it was only by divine intervention that I was allowed to come back home. I feel that I was greatly blessed to have had the blessing I received from my Bishop and all the prayers on my behalf. If it were not for them, things might have been different for me. It is possible that I would not have come back home alive like so many of my friends who were killed there.

I have a very vivid memory of Vietnam about one of the very few times we were ever engaged in a battle during the daytime. I was assigned to the 25th Infantry Division and we were stationed on the border of Cambodia at Cu Chi. Our job, as a part of that Division, was to keep the North Vietnamese from bringing food down the Ho Chi Min Trail into Vietnam. Cu Chi is a place along the Cambodian border where a part of Cambodia protrudes way out into Vietnam many miles. It is called the Parrot's Beak because it is shaped like a huge parrot's beak. If the enemy could come down the trail and up into the Parrot's Beak it would

allow them stay in Cambodia for several miles before crossing over into South Vietnam. Once they crossed the border into South Vietnam then they were in enemy territory. The longer they could delay that, the easier it was for them to move the food south from North Vietnam.

The food-carrying activities took place under the cover of darkness so that we could not see them crossing into Vietnam. From time to time, however, we had a few patrols on the border during the day just to make sure the enemy knew we were there and also for our own safety.

During the day the enemy would hide in the bamboo hedgerows along the way. Bamboo hedgerows are as much as 100 feet wide and some times as much as a mile long.

They run in long rows down through the open rice paddies to create a windbreak for the farmer's crops in the field. Some of them are large enough for a small army of men to hide in. They were very useful for us and for the enemy to hide in. We all slept in them during the day because they protected us from being seen.

For political reasons, we were not allowed to get closer than one mile to the Cambodian border. One day our sister platoon got too close to the border during a rare day time patrol. Because they had crossed over the no trespass zone, the enemy started to shoot mortars at them. Since the entire platoon was under fire no one could move even to get away from the mortar fire. Any movement across the open ground was sure death.

My company commander called me on the radio and told me to wake up all of my men and get them into battle gear. He ordered me to move out to the border to help defend our sister platoon. The fire-fight that was raging was a couple of miles away from us across open rice paddies and through several rows of bamboo hedgerow trees that were so long we could not see around them.

My men and I stood up in the bamboo hedgerow where we had been sleeping and began to look around. We couldn't see where our sister platoon had come under fire because of the hedgerows between us. We could only see the smoke rising from the mortar shells that were being fired at them. We didn't even know whether or not any of the men were still alive.

We quickly put on our heavy battle gear and started marching in a

long horizontal column over the dry rice paddy toward the first hedge row that was about a half mile in front of us. I told my men to spread out about 20 feet apart, shoulder to shoulder, so if we took fire ourselves we would not all be hit at the same time.

We walked for about 15 or 20 minutes and the closer we got the more we could hear the mortar fire picking up out in front of us. We were about half way to the hedgerow walking across open rice paddies when my company commander called me again and told me to get my men to start running. He wanted us to move out on the double to where the fire fight was raging.

The Army had devised a small radio speaker that fit into each helmet so that all the soldiers in the platoon could hear what was being said to their platoon leader. That way they knew what they were supposed to do without my having to shout new orders to them in the middle of a battle. Having received the order to start running I gave that command to my men.

It was not easy to run carrying all our battle gear. We each had a heavy steel helmet, lots of gear plus a weapon. In addition each man had to help carry some of the machine gun ammunition so we had enough to last. We looked like Poncho Villa with the belts of machine gun ammo across our chests. Everyone heard the company commander's orders so when I gave them the move out signal they started a dog trot (running similar to a slow jog) picking up their pace.

Each man in the platoon knew exactly what the company commander had just ordered me to do. Once the Platoon Leader had received instructions then the Company Commander expected him to use his best judgment in executing the orders. If the situation changed the Platoon Leader would be expected to do what ever was necessary to protect the men in the platoon. As we started to jog I had a very clear impression, in my mind, to stop. It was not a loud voice. It was just an impression in my mind instructing me to stop my platoon.

In obedience to the impression I immediately gave the signal to all my men to hit the dirt. Having been with me for a few weeks already I can assure you that when I told them to get down they had learned to get down no matter what. They knew that if the situation changed we were expected to do what was best to protect ourselves.

We all hit the dirt causing a huge cloud of dust as we literally dove into the ground. As we landed we heard the loud booming sound of artillery being fired from our own fire base which was far behind us. We all knew that sound very well. It was our own men firing 155 artillery shells from the Jackson Firebase into the firefight in front of us. Within seconds the rice paddy, about 100 feet in front of us, went up in a brilliant plumb of white phosphorus smoke and fire.

When the military fires artillery from a new location they always fire one white phosphorus marker-round first to see where the gun is aimed, because it gives off a huge plume of white smoke that can be seen for miles. That allows them to see where the gun is actually aimed. Then the Artillery Officer calls the ones who asked for the artillery support on the radio and asks them to tell him what adjustments are needed from where the smoke goes up to where they want the actual rounds of ammunition to land on the enemy target. The white phosphorus round is not intended to hit anyone. It is just a marker round. However if white phosphorus gets on the human body, it doesn't just burn the skin, it will burn a hole right through the whole body.

If we had kept jogging ahead as ordered we would have been exactly at the location where the marker round landed. Because we stopped when we did, all of the white phosphorus went up into the air and came down about 20 or 30 feet in front of us. No one was injured.

We all laid there in the dirt stunned at what had just happened. We were almost killed by friendly fire. Then I heard an emotionally shaky voice on the radio, the company commander's voice. Everyone could tell that he was terrified. He said, "Lt. Vail, Lt. Vail, where are you?" I stood up, took my radio headset in hand, and answered, "I am here. We are OK". The company commander explained that they had a new artillery officer and he had just put that first marker round 1000 yards too close to us and because of his mistake, it would have landed right on top of us." I told him that we had stopped moving and that we were all OK. Then he replied, in a relieved voice, "Well then get going again".

Hearing our orders we stood up ready to start moving again. As we did so all my men stared at me. My platoon sergeant came walking over to me and asked, "Lt. Vail, how did you know that?" I replied, "God told me." He then smiled and said, "Well keep it up." I knew what he meant and I knew that all my men felt the same way.

We started moving out with gratitude in our hearts. No more was said about it but every one knew that only by the grace of God and the impression that He sent to us by way of the Holy Spirit, we were all still alive.



Lt. Vail won the Bronze Star in Vietnam, a U.S. military decoration awarded for heroic or meritorious service

CHAPTER 6

EVEN AS SAMUEL THE LAMANITE

Nightly ambush patrols were A way of life in the Vietnam war. They were dangerous operations and we had to be very careful. There were things that we did to help protect ourselves from the enemy. One of them was splitting up our patrol into two parts. Before we left the fire-base in the dark, my sergeant would position himself in the middle of the platoon and then when we were about half way to our destination he would break off with half of the men behind him and go in another direction. That way we had two patrols out at the same time but any one from the village following us would not know where the first patrol was. It allowed us to protect each other in the dark.

The Vietcong often sent children, from the village, to follow us at night. The children would try to discover where our ambush patrol was hiding and then run back to the village to tell their leaders where we

were. The children did not realize that they had only followed the last half of the platoon so they only knew where half of us were hiding. This tactic worked to our advantage in case one or the other patrol got into trouble with the enemy.

When we got into our location for the night we would get down behind a rice paddy dike and lay there all night waiting to make sure no enemy got past us. Lucky for us the rice paddies were dry in the area where we were. We thought Vietnam would be warm at night but when we got wet in the rice paddies we got very cold.

One night my half of the platoon was laying in the dark in front of a very long bamboo hedgerow. My platoon sergeant was way down at the other end of the hedgerow where he could see on both sides of it, probably 800 yards or more away from where I was with my men.

After we were in position we radioed back to the base camp and reported to the company commander we were in position. Then all night long helicopters with night seeing devices flew over head looking at the trails around us to see if there was any enemy movement in our area. When they saw something they would shoot at them from the air.

As a protection for us, we had night seeing devices so we could see almost as good as if we were looking through field glasses in the day time. The more the moon was out the better the device worked. Very dark moonless nights were very frightening because we could not see anything at all.

Every night we hoped the enemy would go a different way so that we would not have to deal with them. We were willing to fight if we needed to but none of us wanted to fight with the enemy soldiers. Also we didn't like the helicopters flying above us because if they were there for a long time we knew they had spotted something. They were like owls after mice in the night. When they saw enemy troops they would swoop down after them.

Once they had fired on something we would have to get up and go investigate. Going out into the dark to see what they had shot at was very dangerous so naturally we did not like having them around.

When you fire your weapon in the dark, the bullets can be seen as

they leave your gun and go to where you are shooting because the military puts what is called a phosphorus tracer on every 5th bullet. So when a gun is fired at night the bullets leave a stream of red tracing phosphorus that can be seen burning as the bullet goes flying through the air. That way the soldiers can see where they are shooting in the dark.

Allied forces use red tracers, the Soviet supported forces use green tracers. I guess it is something like what happened in the Civil War where they had a gentleman's agreement using different colored tracers on the ammunition. At least that way everyone knows who is shooting at whom in the dark. The intention, of course, is so that you don't shoot your own men.

As we lay there, I was praying no one would show up (I did that every night). To our great disappointment, the helicopters did fly over and started shooting out in front of us on the other side of the hedgerow. They even brought in a fixed wing aircraft that had mini guns mounted in the side windows. A mini gun is round with six rotating barrels that turn so fast that they can fire 1800 rounds of ammunition a minute. That puts one bullet in every square foot of a foot ball field with each burst.

As we listened to the whining sound of the mini guns shooting their bursts of ammunition over and over for about 5 minutes, it began to look like the fourth of July at BYU Stadium. As all those tracer laced bullets came streaming down from the aircraft in a blaze of red streamers it was almost unbelievable.

It was a spectacular sight to see all the bullets coming down from those mini guns, thousands of bullets per minute shooting from each gun. It was also very frightening as we realized where those bullets were going and what they were doing. With all that firing going on in front of us, we knew we were eventually going to have to get up in the dark and go over to where all that firepower was aimed. All the tracers we saw were red. We did not see any green ones going back up, from the enemy towards the helicopters like we normally would have seen in a fire fight at night. We could only hope that the guns had done their job and there would be no one left to shoot back at us when we moved through to the enemy side of the hedgerow.

When the helicopter gun ships were done with their work the company commander called me on the radio and told me to take my men and go through the hedgerow to see what was out there on the other side where the helicopters had been shooting.

Being a NEW green lieutenant, at that time, I made a very serious mistake. I did not want to walk in the total darkness and it was too dark to use our night seeing devices. I made the decision to call back to the fire base on the radio and ask them to put a flare up so we could see where we were going. Since there had not been any return enemy fire at the helicopters, I assumed there would not be anyone left alive over there to shoot back at us. I would not have asked for the flare if I had known someone was still over there.

The artillery people did what I asked and shot up a huge flare that lit up the whole area like a mall parking lot at night. (These flares are like the flares you see out on the highway at night when the police are at the scene of accidents) The only difference is that they are fired off way up into the air and come back down on a little parachute. That action makes the light last a long time and everything within a large surrounding area is so lit up that it is almost like standing under a set of huge street-lights in the dark.

My platoon sergeant told me, the next day, he could not believe I would put up a flare and then take all my men and walk right into the light so we were standing up like a bunch of sitting ducks waiting to be shot. He did not realize that I thought there was no one over there because there was no return fire at the helicopters. However he knew there were enemy troops there because he had seen things we had not seen.

As we started forward I asked all my men to come up in a straight line along side of me. Instead they all stayed in a V shaped line behind me. I assumed the reason they would not do what I asked was because of several times we had almost been killed in previous battles. It was apparent that they had come to believe that if they stayed behind me they would not get hurt.

I kept signaling to them with my arm to come up along side me in a straight line. Because of the flare above us they could clearly see my signals but I could not get them to do anything but stay in a V behind me like a flock of geese flying along. They were only willing to come out just far enough so each man could fire his gun straight ahead and not hit me but still feel like he was behind me. That night I certainly learned why the infantry has the motto "Follow Me". They were only willing to go if they could follow along behind me. As the leader I had to go first.

As we started walking towards the hedgerow, I asked each man to fire all the weapons they had including our 90 MM shoulder held artillery

piece. I decided that if there was anyone over on the other side of the hedgerow I wanted to scare them bad enough with our fire power that they would get up and run away before we saw them. Normally I would be side by side with the guns that were going off. Because I was out in front of all of the guns that night, the noise was so loud that I permanently lost much of my hearing. To this day I can still hear the ringing in my ears from that night.

We walked for about 50 yards straight towards the hedgerow and firing all our weapons through hedgerow over into the rice paddy on the other side where the helicopters had been firing. When we finally got close to the hedgerow to go into it to pass through to the other side I had a very strong impression to turn left and not go through it.

Because the company commander was not actually there with us I had the option to change the orders he had given us to some degree if I felt it was not safe for us to do what he had told us to do so long as it did not endanger other platoons or the rest of the company. If there was not time to call in and ask for permission we just had to make a command decision on the spot and call in later. This was one of those times I felt I needed to do something different than exactly what he told us to do.

The impression to not go through the hedgerow was very strong. When we arrived in front of the hedgerow I signaled for all the men to stop shooting their guns. I then signaled for them to turn left and go up the hedgerow not into it. They immediately obeyed my orders.

The flare went out and we walked up along side the hedgerow about 500 yards but did not go through it. We found a new place to hide, called in our new position to the Company Commander and stayed there until daylight. There was no further action that night.

The danger we had been in did not become evident until the next morning when my platoon sergeant came back into our base camp with his half of the platoon. He arrived a little later than we did because his group was further down the hedgerow all night. He came right up to me in the base camp and told me that what he had witnessed the night before was the most amazing thing that he had ever seen in his life.

I said that I didn't know what he meant. He explained that because he was clear down to the end of the hedgerow he could see on both sides of it. He saw what the helicopters were shooting at. When he watched as the flare went up he thought I was crazy. I asked him why.

He told me that when I put up the flare and made all my men get up and start walking right towards the hedgerow he thought we were all dead men for sure and he was too far away to be able to help us. He said that as soon as we started shooting our guns through the hedgerow all those red tracers from our bullets started going from our guns right through the hedgerow out into the field where the helicopters had been firing. He added that the enemy soldiers, who remained, were still very much alive. When we started shooting at them they put their 50 caliber machine gun up on the rice paddy brume and started shooting back at us.

He continued that he was horrified when he saw them start to shoot at us as we were all standing up walking right into the fire of their machine gun. The green tracers from the enemy bullets coming out of the machine gun started streaming into the hedgerow right towards us.

He fully expected to see every one of us fall. However to his amazement every bullet from their machine gun stopped in the hedgerow. Not one green tracer bullet passed through the bamboo. He told us he could see all of the red tracers coming from our guns going right through the trees and landing all around the machine gun. He said he just could not understand how the machine gun bullets were all stopping in the hedgerow.

To understand the significance of this story you would need to know what a 50 caliber machine gun is. It is the kind of machine gun you see mounted on top of a tank, or it has a little cart with wheels on it so it can be moved around by 2 or 3 men. It is not something one man can just carry around. It is a very large gun. Each bullet is about the size of a man's thumb and when fired it can go right through a normal one-foot thick tree and keep on going.

The second thing that you need to understand is that the hedgerows there are not made up of trees. They are made up of bamboo. Bamboo is not a tree. Bamboo is like a broom stick in size and about 10 to 20 feet tall. A narrow hedgerow of bamboo like that one was could not stop the bullet from any gun let alone a stream of 50 caliber machine gun bullets which could cut their way right through a house. By divine intervention every 50 caliber bullet was stopped before it could pass through the hedgerow and hit us. We were shielded from its fire. None of our bullets were stopped. They all passed right through to the other side where my platoon sergeant could see them flying all around in the field on the other side of the hedgerow.

The next day, during day light hours, the company commander sent us back down to the area to investigate what had happened and what was left there. The only things we found of interest were empty shell casings from the ammunition that had been fired out in the dry rice paddy and inside the hedge row we found it to be totally filled with butterfly bombs.

Butterfly bombs are little cluster bombs that the military shoots out of artillery shells or drops from B52 bombers. They are like little hand grenades. However because they are dropped from the air and are not supposed to go off until someone touches them they have what looks like butterfly wings attached. As hundreds of them fall down from the sky into a hedgerow they do not explode, instead they fall to the ground in the bushes and hedgerows where they then arm themselves to explode. Then they just sit waiting for someone or something to come along and touch or bump them. Then they go off. That is what they are supposed to do. They are intended to be like a booby trap waiting for its prey. Once in place, anything that bumps them (including us) causes a huge explosion. Each one is just as powerful as a normal hand grenade and will kill everyone and everything around it when it goes off.

If we had crossed through the hedgerow that night, even with the flare light, we would not have seen the butterfly bombs in the darkened bushes. Had we gone on into the hedgerow even if the machine gun had not harmed us, the butterfly bombs would have. It is such a miracle that none of the bullets flying into that hedgerow the night before hit any of them and set them off. Even by the flying shrapnel of one of them going off near us, we would have been at least seriously wounded if not killed.

After my platoon sergeant told me what he had witnessed, I was humbled to realize that I and my men had received the exact same kind of protection as Samuel the Lamanite had received in the Book Of Mormon when he stood on the wall while the men below shot arrows and slung rocks at him. I was more grateful than I had ever been before that we had been shielded from the fire of the enemy. I was so thankful that I had been prompted to not go through the hedgerow.



Convoy heading out of Cu Chi Vietnam to Jackson Fire Base. 1st Lt. Vail was at the head of the convoy.

CHAPTER 7

MY GREATEST FEAR

One of my greatest fears when going to Vietnam was not that I would be killed. Because of my bishop's blessing I was confident that I would not be killed if I would continue to follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit and live a righteous life.

My greatest fear was that of being captured by the enemy. I had seen a lot of movies about war and prisoners of war and the torture and hardships they went through. I was very afraid that I might be captured and have to live in a prison camp.

There were a few times that I came very close to becoming a prisoner of war. One of those times was during a daytime assignment. One of the rare duties we had during the day was burning the hedgerows, which was a nice break in routine. We got to light those huge bamboo hedgerows on fire and watch them burn. We felt a lot safer once they were gone because the enemy used them to hide from us and our radar at night. Without the hedgerows in the way our radar could see their movements out across the rice paddies for miles and miles.

On that particular occasion I had a long bamboo pole, with, an oil soaked sack on the end of it, which I set on fire to use as a torch. I walked along the hedgerow sticking the torch into it, every so often, to get the fires started. That day I was so focused on what I was doing that I was

not paying any attention to where my men were. We always stayed very close together for everyone's safety.

Suddenly I realized that I was a very long way from my men and in spot where they could not see me. As I was standing alone at the end of the hedgerow I had a distinct feeling that I should stop. I felt I was being watched by enemy soldiers inside the thicket I was about to burn. I dropped the torch and backed up very slowly with my weapon in my hands pointing into the hedgerow. I knew I had to get back to where my men were. This was one of the strongest promptings I ever had. I felt that if I went any further I would be captured.

I was surprised as I dropped the torch pulled my gun up and started to step backwards, to hear my platoon sergeant yelling my name. He was a long way down the hedgerow running towards the area where I was. He kept calling out, "Lt. Vail, Lt Vail". His action and the noises he was making were probably the reason why the enemy soldiers decided to stay hidden and not come after me. After all they had no idea how many men I had with me ready to fight.

This is another of those occasions when we all realized that the Lord had mercy on us and allowed two of us to receive impressions to get one of us out of a very dangerous spot.

I grew to really appreciate and depend on that young platoon sergeant. This was just one of many times when he proved himself to be valiant and loyal in protecting his fellow soldiers. We became very good friends. Although not members of the same church we certainly were of the same Heavenly Kingdom. I am very sorry that I did not keep track of him after the War. I do not even remember his name now and have often wished I could contact him. I would like to find him again if for no other reason than to just thank him.

CHAPTER 8

BIG EXPLOSIONS

The enemy soldiers were very clever. They would hide in the thick hedgerows where we could not see them with our radar. They also used the hedgerows to support tunnels that they would dig underneath. The roots of the plants would keep the tunnels from caving in. It also made a very convenient place for them to enter and exit the tunnels without our being able to see them even in the daytime. We burned the hedgerows so

they could not use them to hide from us.

My men and I had no experience with explosives so we were assigned an Explosive Ordinance Specialist to work with us. We learned a lot about blasting caps and C-4 detonation chords that are used as fuses to set off the explosives. It was very dangerous work and there were a few times we almost blew up ourselves along with the enemy soldiers.

Usually we used what were called Bangalore Torpedoes. One kind of Bangalore Torpedo was simply a tube about 2 inches in diameter and several feet long. They were originally developed during World War II to clear mine fields or to push under barbed wire entanglements to clear the battlefield so that the soldiers could go on through.

In Vietnam we used them the same way to clear away thick hedgerows and tunnels. They would link together like a snake and could be pushed into the hedgerow or thick brush like a long stick. Next we put a blasting cap in one end and when it went off it would blow up 50 or 60 feet of hedgerow and sometimes a hidden tunnel under it at the same time.

The second type of Bangalore Torpedo was the one that we called "Super Torpedo". It was 5 or 6 times as big around and about 6 feet long. They were super powerful and even the ordinance specialist was very nervous working with them. They were so powerful that we were not supposed to link them together because it would create too huge of an explosion.

My men and I found a long tunnel under a hedgerow that was too big to be blown up with just the normal Bangalore Torpedo. Being impatient and wanting to get our work done we went back to the base camp and brought a whole jeep pickup truck load of the "Super Torpedo's" to the site. We put about 20 of them end to end. We did not connect them together, but we did link them together with C-4 detonation chord so they would all go off at the same time and blow up the entire hedgerow and the tunnel underneath in one giant blast. We were kind of excited to set it off just to see how big of an explosion it would create. We created one long chain about 40 feet long. I knew it was going to be a really big explosion so I took my men way back away from the explosive site for safety. Then we set it off.

As we stood there watching the explosion --- all of the sudden it

was like we were seeing one of those movies from the 1950's where they showed the explosion of an atomic bomb. When Atomic Bombs went off there was a series of shock waves in the dust on the ground that came along the ground like little waves of water past the cameras. As we stood there we saw those little dust waves come all the way to us and on past where we were standing. It looked like we were in an actual atomic bomb blast. When I saw those dust shock waves going past us and felt MY pant legs flapping from the concussion I knew we were way too close to the explosion. I yelled to my men to run away from the blast area. We all ran away as fast as we could. Now there were also boulders coming down around us as big as our head that we had to dodge. That day we were almost killed by our inexperience and foolishness. Our lives were spared but not because we were impressed of the danger. We were only spared by the mercy of the Lord in not allowing any of the boulders coming down around us to hit or crush any of us. After that I tried to be more careful and follow explosive ordinance instructions exactly.

Later that same day we were burning more of the hedgerows that had not already been blown up. I was about 50 feet from my men. they had been spread out along the hedgerow for about one hundred yards so we could get as much of it burning at one time as we could.

I looked over towards where my men were and noticed that there was a little gully or trail between us. It looked something like a Jeep path. I began to walk down through it to get back over closer to my men.

As I started down the path I had a very strong impression to not walk there. Because of that impression I stopped and turned my long bamboo pole fire torch over the grass right there and started it burning.

As the grass and weeds started to burn I quickly backed away. The grasses burned with an intense heat over where the little tire tracks were and then an anti-tank land mine exploded right in the tire track path. IT was a huge explosion big enough to stop a tank. It was in the very part of the jeep path that I had been walking on. If I had not listened to the prompting, I would most surely have stepped on the mine and been severely wounded.

The ending of these two stories turned out the same. The reason for our protection was the same, divine intervention. The reason the incidents happened were not the same. One was carelessness on my part and the Lord had to intervene to protect us from ourselves. The other was His

intervention when I could not have known of the danger any other way. I am grateful for what ever reason for the protection that came in both instances.

CHAPTER 9

FRIENDLY FIRE

There were many times and so many experiences where my men and I nearly died. Another time was when we were coming back into the base camp from an ambush patrol in a helicopter. My platoon had been out on daytime patrols.

As the helicopter came near the base camp the standard procedure was to stop all artillery fire from going out until the helicopters had all landed. That day as we got near the base camp, still about 1000 feet up, we heard a horrible loud thundering and squealing noise that was louder than a freight train. We could tell that something had gone right over the top of and very close to our helicopter.

We were shocked to realize that it was the sound of an out going artillery shell. We had almost been hit by "friendly fire" from our own artillery guns in the base camp. The sound of artillery fire has a very distinctive sound and we had heard it many times before. Normally it was a sound coming from a long way off and very high in the air as it went over us.

This time it was different. The sound was so close that we could not hear anything else. This time the artillery shell sounded like it went right through our helicopter. It came so close to the helicopter that it caused us to lose the lift from the rotor blades. The helicopter dipped sharply down to the right and started to fall out of the sky from the concussion caused as the shell passed over us.

We all thought we had been hit. Thankfully the pilot got control of the helicopter again and landed it safely. Later on we learned that someone in the base camp did not get the message that we were coming in to land and they fired the 155 artillery shell right over the top of us because they did not know we were there.

During wartime there seems to always be some friendly fire accidents caused by communications errors between the troops. One group does not know where the other group is or assumes them to be the

enemy. It is a very tragic thing for us to lose soldiers who are shot by our own soldiers but sometimes it just happens. This day my men and I almost became a statistic in the annals of the military, "a platoon of soldiers who died from friendly fire". Once again we were very grateful for the divine intervention on our behalf.



Lt. Vail waiting to go out on a day time reconnaissance flight before a nightly ambush patrol
CHAPTER 10

KIT CARSON SCOUTS

When the enemy soldiers surrendered, if they were not hostile they were retrained and used as guides for our side. Each of the platoons in our area had a North Vietnamese defector with us as a guide. They were men who had been in that area with the North Vietnamese army just a few months before so they knew where mines were planted and they would avoid those areas as we walked along. They also knew where the tunnels were and where their soldiers were hiding and would show us.

The men who had surrendered and willingly came over to our side were called "Kit Carson Scouts" after the old Pioneer and Indian days. Most of them could not speak English. Even though my "Kit Carson Scout" could not speak English we were able to communicate quite well, especially when we were starting to go somewhere that was very

dangerous. He had no trouble at all communicating to us not to go in that direction.

From time to time we would be near another platoon that had a "Kit Carson Scout" who did speak English. When that happened, I would have their scout interpret for me which allowed me to actually communicate with my guide more clearly. I got to know him quite well that way. He talked about his family who still lived in North Vietnam. He said he was married and had several children and that he had been gone to war for almost seven years. In all that time he had never been home. His seven years made my one year tour of duty seem short. He even showed me the picture of his family that he carried with him.

The emotional part of the war became even more difficult for me once I got to know him that well because I soon realized that he was just like me. He did not want to be in a war. He went to war because his government sent him, just as my government sent me to war. He did not want to kill any one anymore than I did. He did not want to be away from his family anymore than I did.

When he went with my platoon on patrols at night, I realized that the people we were looking for and we were potentially going to shoot, were his friends who had not defected yet. Most of them, most surely, were just like him. How could I shoot at one of them if they were just like him and just like me? That made me much more aware of the enemy and who they were. It made me fully realize that it was not the men we were fighting but a way of life they represented.

My scout had never seen any modern conveniences, so in the day time when we went to the big base camp's commissary he was allowed to go with us. He was astounded at all the things he saw for sale. He very quickly learned to love red twister licorice, something he had never tasted before. Every time we went there, we bought some for him and he would store it in his back pack.

Of course it was very noisy to open a package of licorice at night when we were out on patrol where it is so quiet. It seemed like we could hear a pin drop for a mile. I told him that he could not take licorice out on ambush patrols with him. He understood that he had to leave it at the base camp.

One night when we were all sitting there very quietly in the dark, on an ambush patrol, watching; and listening for every sound in the dark

I suddenly heard a paper rattling. I knew right away what it was but before I could say anything to him about opening the licorice package out there in the silent darkness he started tapping me on the hand and trying to give me some of his licorice. I knew that he felt that if he shared some of it with me I would not be mad at him for bringing it with him. It was amazing to me to think that he was so child-like and innocent.

My scout had never owned a wrist watch. Many times when we were just sitting around he would lift my arm up, look at my watch, touch it and admire it. It was so funny to watch him gloat over the fact that I had a watch.

Finally the day came when I got my orders to leave my platoon and report to the rear away from the battle front. I was to be sent back to the rear and I knew that I would not be with my platoon any more.

My men also had new orders and were heading into a battle across the border into Cambodia. I assumed I would never see my North Vietnamese scout again so I called him over to me. Since he still did not speak English, I had to use hand signs and body language to help him understand that they were all going into Cambodia, across the border in front of us. I tried to help him understand that I was going back to the rear and would not be going with them. When I was sure he understood that, I took off my watch, put it on his arm and motioned to him that it was his now. He held it tightly in his other hand and put it against his chest like it was the greatest treasure he had ever been given and then I saw tears in his eyes. He was very moved emotionally that I would give him something so precious and valuable as my watch.

I never knew what happened to him. He did not stay with my platoon very long after they moved on because they left the area that he was familiar with. When I saw my men some time later they told me he was with another unit back in the same area where he had served with us. As long as I live I will never forget him and the humanitarian lesson he taught me. I clearly learned from him that we are all God's children and we are very much alike even when we are born into totally different cultures.

CHAPTER 11

LITTLE CHILDREN

The whole time that I was in Vietnam I carried a vial of consecrated oil with me. Before I left home I cut the finger out of an old leather glove, placed the vial of oil inside, put it on a nylon string, and wore it around my neck. I had many occasions to use it.

One of the occasions that I remember, more than any other, was the time some children were playing too near our base camp garbage dump. We always placed booby trap explosives in the dump so the enemy could not sneak in the dump at night and steal the empty cans to make bombs out of them. The explosives we placed there were called Claymore Mines. They were about the size of a library book, which were impregnated with buck shot so that the mines acted something like a shot gun. They had blasting caps in them triggered by a trip wire. Once they were armed to go off, you had to be very careful around them. Sometimes even lightning would set them off if it hit near them and the static electrical current would go into the blasting cap. Everyone, even the Vietnamese people knew they were there and very dangerous. We told everyone to stay away. We warned them not let their children play anywhere close by because they could get hurt.

That day, some of the village children started to play in the garbage dump anyway without us seeing them to warn them to get away. One of the children stepped on the hidden trip wire that set off the explosives. It killed most of the children playing there. One child was still living but wounded very severely with a buck shot pellet in the back of his neck. He was brought into our compound on a stretcher to wait for the medical evacuation helicopter to take him to the hospital. His mother was there with him crying pitifully.

I felt sorry for her and for her boy. As I stood there looking at them I had a very strong impression to take out my oil and bless the child. I was amazed to feel that impression because it looked like the boy had a broken neck from the buck shot in the back of his neck. Some of the soldiers had even lifted his head up and moved it, to look at the wound, so I assumed that if he did have a broken neck he would be paralyzed from having been moved.

I resisted the thought of giving him a blessing but the impression persisted. So I turned away where no one could see me, took the vile of oil out of the leather glove tip and put some oil on my finger. Then I went over and knelt beside the boy. I carefully put my hands on his head, anointed him and then blessed him.

In the blessing I felt impressed to tell him that he would live and that some day he would have the opportunity to hear the gospel and join the LDS church. I felt impressed to bless him that he would become a leader among his people. A few minutes later he was whisked away to the helicopter and I never saw him again.

I have often wondered if I will ever see him again. I don't know his name. However I have many times looked at the Vietnamese men, who are here in the United States, to see if one of the men might have a large scar on the back of his neck.

Maybe some day I will have the privilege of going back to Vietnam where I might find a man there with such a scar, who has become a member of the church and who is now a leader of his people. If not, I know that the Lord will allow me to meet him in the next life so we can talk about how the fulfillment of that blessing came about.

On another occasion we were out on night patrol just outside a Vietnamese village. As dawn began to light up the sky, we saw little lights bobbing toward us from the direction of the Cambodian border. We suspected it was enemy troops because the lights were coming in a single file. It was still too dark to see clearly so we could just see the images of people. They looked very small to me. Vietnamese people are by nature, very short. They are probably an average height of around five feet tall. If this was the enemy coming at us, these were really short soldiers. I also was surprised the enemy soldiers would have lights on them so they would be visible at night.

I told my men to hold their fire. We let them come a lot closer and finally we could see they were just children. They each had a little basket in their hand called a cricket basket. The lights on their heads were miner's lamps. We knew that they were not actually out in the night hunting for crickets (even though they do catch them and eat them in Vietnam). We knew the people of the village had used the children to carry food to the enemy during the night, assuming we would not shoot the children as they came back into the village in the morning. The children were only pretending to catch crickets so we would not know what they were actually doing.

When they got close enough to where they could see us we fired grenade launcher rounds (hand grenades shot with a gun) way over their heads and so far behind them where we knew they could not hurt them. We did that so they would be afraid of the explosions behind them and

would run towards us. It worked. They started running right on up to us. We captured them without hurting them. We took their cricket baskets (which were of course all empty) and their head lamps away from them. We scolded them (in English but with loud angry voices) and tried to scare them as much as we could without hurting them so they would never try doing that again. Then we sent them on into the village behind us where they lived.

The next night as we were lying in a similar place near the village, we saw more of the same little lamps coming toward us again. I knew that the adults in the village had watched us fire grenades over their children's heads, then watch us capture them, take away their head lamps, take their cricket baskets, scold them and send them home. I was astonished that those parents would still send them out on the same errand again the very next night. How could they do that?. They were their children.

Here it was almost morning again and here the same children came again. They did not have more of the miners head lamps because we had destroyed them all. They instead had poked holes in C-ration cans (a military food can about the size of a small tuna fish can), and tied it to their head with a string. Then they put a little candle in the front of it so they could use it like a miners light to still see as they walked along. It was ingenious how they had improvised and used cans from our garbage to make new miners caps with a light in them.

This time we just let them come up close to us then we surrounded them and held them as prisoners of war. We were all laughing about it. We were the big brave Americans and had captured 20 or 30 children. However we were also very cautious with the children and their baskets because we had heard about incidents like May Lay and Lt. Calley where the older people and children from the village would walk past the U.S. soldiers and then drop hand grenades and run away killing the soldiers. It was just a part of the war for the Vietnamese to be trying to kill us any way they could, so to us using children in this way was a very serious matter. We knew they were feeding the enemy troops and we were not certain that they might also have hand grenades in their cricket baskets to kill us.

This time we took their baskets away to make sure there were no explosives in them and then held them there with us until the sun came up. Then we marched them with their hands on top of their heads back

into the village. They looked just like real prisoners of war except they were seven and eight year old children. All the people of the village came out along the street to watch us. They were laughing and pointing at us and I assume ridiculing us because we had captured their children.

I marched them at gun point up the front door of the home of the Village Chief. We knocked on his door and when he came out he was very surprised to see all these children standing at gun point with their hands on top of their heads like prisoners of war. I asked my North Vietnamese Kit Carson Scout, speaking in Vietnamese, to make the chief understand that if the children came out in the night again I would kill them. It was not hard to help the Kit Carson Scout get the message to deliver to the Village Chief. Our scout had been with us the night before when we shot over the children's heads and I assumed he himself thought I really would do it if the children came out again at night.

He talked to the Village Chief briefly. I could see from the terror on both their faces as they talked that the Village Chief believed I really was going to kill the children if they came out in the dark again with their cricket baskets. After the Kit Carson Scout finished talking, none of the village people were laughing any more. The children all went home to their parents and we went back out to the hedgerows to sleep.

I was very glad, as we stood there in the street in front of the Village Chiefs dwelling holding the children captive, that I was able to hide my true feelings. I did not want the people to know that I would never harm their children no matter what they did to us. If they had known my true feelings, they would keep sending their children into harms way.

The children never came out of the village in the dark again. For that I was very grateful. I know that if they had come out again the Lord would have shown us something else to do so we would not have had to hurt the children while protecting ourselves from harm.

I only wished that there could have been some way to let the children know that I would never have harmed them in any way. The children are always the ones who seem to suffer the most in wars. They are so innocent and yet sometimes used and abused by the adults using them for shields or protection. Surely the children remember things like that when they grow up The horrors of war stay with them all the rest of their lives.

CHAPTER 12

STRENGTH FROM GRANDFATHER

One night we were on patrol all laying in a straight line formation behind a dry rice paddy dike. It was very dark and we heard enemy movement and talking right in front of us. It sounded like they were only about 50 yards away. It was too dark for our night seeing devices called "Starlight Scopes" to work so we could not tell who they were or where they were going. We just knew from the language they were not Americans.

I quickly crawled down to end of our platoon in the opposite direction from where the enemy noises had come from. I asked the last man in the line if he for sure that he had put out one of the Claymore Mines like he was told to do to protect us. When you put the mine out, you had to crawl alone out into the pitch black darkness about 20 yards away from the platoon to place it a safe distance away from you. We put them out all around us every night) He said he had done his job. I then quickly crawled past 17 men to the other end of the line to see if the man on that end had done his job. By that time we could tell the enemy was moving in that direction towards that end of the platoon. I asked if he had put out his Claymore Mine on that end. He told me he had been too scared to crawl out in the dark and place his mine.

Without the mines out there we had little way to protect ourselves if the enemy came at us. We could just set off the explosion which was like a huge shotgun blast of buckshot going towards the intruders. In that way we protected ourselves.

I gave him another order to crawl out now and put the mine where it belonged. With the sound of the enemy moving in front of us he became even more frightened. He simply could not comply. He was so afraid that he was visibly trembling.

I knew that the mine had to be put out or we would all be in very grave danger. It became my responsibility to do it myself or order someone else to do it. At this point in time I could see no other choice but to do it myself.

As I sat there in the dark watching this young man tremble with fear, I began to think of my grandfather who had been a professional

hunting guide over in Star Valley, Wyoming back around the turn of the century. I never met him; he died before I was born. My uncles and my father had told me many stories about grandpa Vail as we sat around camp fires during fishing trips when I was young. They had told me stories of how he had helped the tourists hunt for bear and lions. Many of the stories were hair rising and almost unbelievable. As a child, I had listened eagerly to them tell me of his many acts of courage and bravery in the face of danger. As I laid there in the dark thinking about him and feeling the fear in me, I thought about my being his grandson. I felt that if he had that much courage in times of extreme danger when all others around him were frozen in fear, then some where inside me there must be that same courage.

I picked up the mine and crawled out into the dark. I was scared too. I knew the enemy was out there. I could still hear them. The enemy soldiers did not know that we were aware of them and that is why they were talking in tones that could be heard.

As I was crawling out to place the mine I remembered needing heavenly protection and prayed, asking the Lord to guide and protect me as I fulfilled the necessary task. A peaceful feeling came over me and I knew I would be all right. I placed the mine and returned to my men without incident. The next few hours were quiet. We did not see or hear any more from the enemy in our area that night.

CHAPTER 13

EVERYONE WOUNDED BUT ME

It was our 25th Infantry Division that went into Cambodia in 1970. Not many people will remember that event now unless they were there. Entering Cambodia was one of the turning-points in the Vietnam War.

It was even more significant for me however; because that was the day I was called out of the field to go back to the base camp at the rear. I would not be on the front lines any more.

The men in my platoon all went into Cambodia to fight while I became the Company Signal Officer at the Cu Chi Base Camp. The position was supposed to be filled by an officer of at least the rank of Captain. At that time I was only a First Lieutenant but a Radio Communications Signal Officer with the rank of Captain could not be

found. Because I had been an instructor at Fort Benning, teaching that very information for one year, after completing Officers Candidate School, they gave the job to me. Now I would be working in an office in the base camp

After a few weeks of working at the Company Level, as the officer in charge of all communications, I received another even more challenging assignment. The Brigade Signal Officer was going home. It was a position that was to be filled by a field grade officer of at least the rank of Major. Again I was the only officer available who knew the radios so even though I did not have the right rank, they gave me his position as a First Lieutenant. At that time I also received top secret security clearance.

It seemed very strange to me, to still only be a First Lieutenant, then to be meeting with and giving advice every day to a one star Brigadier General. He was the Brigade Commander. It was a very stressful and challenging job because I knew that hundreds of men's lives depended on my ability to help the General communicate with them during critical operations.

Every day we heard, from the troops passing through our base camp, about how fierce the fighting was in Cambodia where my men had gone. One day I met an old high school friend from Lewiston, Utah, Ben Reed who had gone into Cambodia. He said it was the worst fighting he had been in. I was really worried about my men. Those men had become like brothers to me. I was amazed that I actually wanted to be back out in the field with them, in the fighting, rather than safe here in the base camp.

A few weeks after my men went into Cambodia; I heard that they were back in our base camp again. I ran to where I was told they would be. When I came upon my Platoon Sergeant and the men, I was horrified. Every man in my platoon had been wounded! Every single one of them! Luckily none of the wounds was life threatening.

I felt so bad for them. I wanted to be able to stay with my platoon. I felt very strongly that even if I had been wounded myself, at least I would have been there with them in the worst of the fighting.

Within a few hours my dear wounded friends and brothers were all sent on their way to a new assignment. I never saw any of them again. I wish I had written their names and addresses down so I could have kept in contact with them but I will always remember their faces. Our experiences together are etched forever in my memory.

All of the men in my former platoon except me received a Purple Heart for having been wounded in Cambodia. Each of us also received the Army Commendation Metal and the Bronze Star for bravery for our service in Vietnam.

It is not the medals, that hang on my wall that are of value to me, it is the memory of the experiences we had together to earn them.

CHAPTER 14

DANGER IN THE BASE CAMP

My life was very different in Vietnam after I was pulled back to the rear into the base camp. I was inside every night and slept in a bed rather than on the ground. I ate regular food rather than the C-rations the fighting men had. My life was working in an wooden building like a normal office. Life was much safer except for the ever present dangers from enemy rockets coming into the base camp and an even worse danger from many of the men who were taking drugs. That was a serious problem for those of us who did not us drugs.

I had read the studies done on “officer casualties” in the other wars. The studies found that more 2nd Lieutenants had been shot in the back than those who were killed on the front lines during every war. The study implied that many of them were most likely shot by their own men. I became aware of that problem when I was in the field and now in the base camp it became even more apparent that the studies were true.

The danger in the base camp was much greater from our own men who were taking drugs and killing the officers who opposed their using them. It was almost safer to be in the field on ambush patrols. At least out in the field we all stuck together and protected each other. In the rear, it was every-man-for-himself.

Almost all of the men in my new Radio Communications Platoon, in the base camp, took drugs and did other things that most of them would not have done at home. There was little any of us could do to stop them. Even if we could have convicted them of doing drugs the Army would normally leave the man in your platoon after the conviction. There were no jails to put them in where we were. Then that man would become an even greater threat to me.

We often heard stories of our fellow officers who were killed in the base camps by their own men when the officers tried to stop the men from taking drugs. If one soldier wanted to get rid of another soldier, he would just throw a Fragmentation Hand Grenade into the man's sleeping place at night. (It was called being "FRAGGED"). The time spent in base camp was a time to be careful in a decidedly different way than was necessary while we were out in the field.

CHAPTER 15

CARELESS ADVICE

By 1970, the year that I was in Vietnam, the war was starting to wind down. The military was telling us that we were going into retrograde and pulling out. One of our jobs was to help close down the base camp. We were destroying extra equipment and shipping reusable items back to the United States. Every unit was being reduced in size. When the men went home they were normally not replaced.

However the war was still going on. There were still battles going on outside the base camp. We could still hear the bombing from B-52's going on at night. We still had to do guard duty on the perimeter, as it became our turn on a rotating basis. From time to time as an officer I would be in charge of a group of men out on the guard towers at night. I would go from one to the other to make sure they were not asleep.

There was a lot of time to talk to them there in those towers. I was able to do a lot of missionary work as I spent time with them in the guard towers at night. There was nothing to do but sit like prison guards up in the towers along the perimeter and watch. We could not sleep at all during the night, so we kept watch and talked and talked. Most of the time God and dying would be a part of the conversation. It made it very easy to bring up the subject of the church and our beliefs.

From time to time there would be new replacements come into the base camp. When they arrived, they would almost immediately be sent right out into the fighting units. They did not get to stay in the soft life of the base camp (if you could call it that compared to the life in the field) for more than one or two days.

After I had been working in the rear base camp for some time there were two new Lieutenants who arrived in the base camp from the United States on their way out into the front lines. It was their first night in

Vietnam and they were both about to become Platoon Leaders.

I did not know them. They were just fellow officers. They were men who were; of course, very anxious to talk to me because I had been out on the battle front where they were going. I remember so well that night standing there on a little foot-bridge over a small stream in the base camp talking with them and answering their questions. I remember telling them that it really was not that hard to lead a platoon and that the war was pretty much over so they would not likely even see any action.

The next day, it was announced that on their first night in the field, one of those two officers had been killed by an enemy ambush and the other one had stepped on a land mine and was so severely wounded from the explosion that he had to be flown back to the hospital in Japan.

I have regretted the conversation I had with them so many times. Why did I not realize the seriousness of the situation and warn them to be careful in every move they made? I will always wonder if I had cautioned them rather than try to ease their fears, if they would have been more careful and maybe not have been hurt.

CHAPTER 16

BATTLEFIELD HOME TEACHING

After living in the base camp at Cu Chi for a few months, I became a member of the LDS Group Leadership; Peter Cookson was the group leader. Don Glover and I were his counselors. Peter was only a Private First Class (E4) but had been chosen as the Group Leader, which was the same thing as a Branch President. We had many officers including a couple of senior field grade officers in our group. The Protestant Chaplain, who was over us, was puzzled as to why the LDS church would choose an enlisted man to be the leader of our group when there were several high ranking officers available. He would often twist his long Texas style mustache and say, "Peter I just don't understand how you can be the leader of these men. You are just an enlisted man, why doesn't your church pick one of the field grade officers to be the leader?" He never got an answer that satisfied him.

With Peter's calling came many spiritual gifts; among them was the gift of discernment which he had more than I had ever seen in any Bishop before. He blessed the lives of every man in our group with his spiritual leadership. As we worked with Peter it was easy to see that by

his prayer and inspiration we were able to set up programs and call many men to callings that either brought them back into activity or kept them from going inactive. There were lots of memorable activities our group participated in but too trivial to write about in this journal. One humorous thing I'll mention--- is how we would all laugh silently during the opening song in Sacrament Meeting when we sang, "We are all enlisted".

Another experience that I remember well is the day we were all at an LDS Area Conference in Saigon. The Church News reporter was there and took pictures of us. Our Group Presidency picture came out on the front page of the Church News, which was quite a thrill for many members of our family and our friends back home. The photographer also wrote an article about our home teaching program that appeared in the Church News a few weeks later.

While serving in the group leadership position, I started a publication called *The Soldier Saint* and became its editor. It was a monthly publication that we used to send out to every LDS soldier who was in our area. We tried to give our brothers something of a spiritual uplift and some guidance during those trying times. Thankfully the army was willing to send our publication to our men by army mail so long as we did the publishing. The army also made available the records of all the men in the Division so we could find those who were LDS.

We felt somewhat helpless to know how to strengthen the men who were under such severe temptations in that particular environment so prayer was a big part of our work. We did all we could to reach our brethren out in the field with the news letter as well as those in the base camp. We felt that eventually much good came from our efforts. Some of the men even sent their copy of the *Soldier Saint* home to their wives and their wives wrote back to us with letters of encouragement and gratitude for what we were doing. President Smith, the full time mission president over Vietnam who was stationed in Japan even wrote a letter for us to publish.

Our LDS group leadership worked very hard at the home teaching program of the Church. We were not allowed to go to the men out in the field, just the ones in the base camp. It was interesting to go home teaching to the inactive men there in the base camp. When we would go into their hooch (that is what we called the places where we slept) there would almost always be *Playboy* fold-out pictures all over the walls.

Many times during our home teaching visit, we would sit down to teach the man about the gospel and there facing us were 8 or 10 naked women hanging on the walls. All we could do was look at the floor while we talked so we did not have to look at them. When we stood up at the end of the meeting to give a prayer and shake hands, we had to be very careful to keep our eyes on each other or on the floor, to keep from seeing the pictures without trying to do so. It made it hard to keep our visit on a spiritual level. However many of those men were reconverted. It was a thrill each time we went back to a brother who had become active again and see that he had taken the pictures down without our asking him to do so.

Through our church activities, we were able to bring many of the men back into the church. We will never know the spread of good that came from the conversion of those 20 to 30 men who started to come back to church with us. If each one of them went home and only converted one person who converted one person who converted one person the effect would soon grow into thousands of converts as Ammon prophetically promised us in the Book of Mormon (Alma 26:22).

CHAPTER 17

DREAMS OF WARS

One night, as Peter Cookson, Don Glover and I were in a Group Presidency Meeting, we started to talk about our past lives at home before we arrived in Vietnam. One of us mentioned that he had had a dream reoccur throughout his life. After some discussion we realized that all three of us had had that same type of dream for most of our lives. The dreams were about a war that we would be involved in ---some day in the future.

We talked at great length about those dreams. As we compared them we discovered that we had each dreamed about the same kind of actions during the war where we were hiding and running to protect our families. The one difference was that my dream and Don's dream took place in a large city full of buildings while Peter's dream took place in the mountains where he was hiding his family in caves.

Until that night, I had always assumed, when I got drafted into the Army, that my dream was to prepare me mentally to be able to go to Vietnam. However, as the three of us talked, we came to the conclusion that Vietnam was not the right war. By comparing actions in each dream

we perceived that the war in our dreams was a war in the United States not there in the jungles and rice paddies of Vietnam and that it was still in the future.

I know that my dream was only given to me and my family and it has no meaning to anyone else. Peter's dream was only for his own information and so was Don's dream only for him. These dreams were not given to us as public information and I only mention them here because this night and our conversation about our dreams was a life changing event for me. All three of us were just astonished when we realized that each of us had the same type of dream and none of the dreams were about Vietnam.

I have thought a lot about those three dreams many times since that night. The interesting thing to me is that at that time Peter was from a very large city and I lived in the country. Now I live in a very large city and he lives in Costa Rica where there are mountains and rural villages. Someday we will see if those dreams were just dreams or if we had a preview of some of what Orson Pratt, Heber C. Kimball and others saw and wrote about---happening in the future of our country and to our families.

Cu Chi LDS Branch Presidency 1970



Cordell Vail Peter Cookson Don Glover

CHAPTER 18

SOME THINGS WERE GOOD

There were some US Navy riverboats stationed on the river that ran by the Jackson forward Base Camp where I was stationed for several weeks. It was back out in the battle front away from Cu Chi. My job there was establishing a forward radio communications center for the Brigade Commander. The river boats were small boats that patrolled the river to keep it safe for the US Armed Forces Personnel to travel. When the boats docked by our base camp, they used our communications lines at night to communicate with their headquarters.

The Navy had great food, brought up the river to them from the ships in the seaports. Since the sailors were not allowed to leave their boats, they had no way to buy liquor. The Navy sailors were anxious to get to know us because they knew we could go to the PX commissary store and buy all the liquor we wanted. Their idea was to get us to trade their food for the liquor we could so easily buy. Therefore, we often went to the PX, bought bottles of Scotch, and took them down to the river to trade for steaks and lobster. What a "Life Of Riley" we lived there by those boats. If you are ever going to join the military, join the Navy. The food is great.

Though it may sound strange, there were times in Vietnam when our Division could not get re-supply parts for our equipment. The local people were stealing much of it when it came in off the ships or off the convoy trucks. Many things we needed were taken before it was even moved out to the troops. We learned that in Saigon you could actually buy those spare parts right on the street from vendors on the black market.

There were some critical spare parts that we were desperate to get and we could not get them through regular supply channels. Our base camp was about 2 hours from Saigon and the commander knew those parts were available on the black market in Saigon. He therefore allowed me to take a jeep and some men and actually travel to Saigon on business. When we got there, it was astonishing to see blankets laid out along the sidewalks along the streets for blocks and blocks. On those blankets was every type of military supply item you could imagine, even gun parts and ammunition. You could buy every part of a Jeep that could be taken apart except the frame (and that may have been further on down the street).

The black market was an amazing sight to see. There were no police trying to stop them. Local people had stolen the parts and now they were selling them. We found exactly what we wanted and went back home. That was not the only such trip for us to get critical parts.

On one such trip we found out the military had a place for servicemen to make phone calls back to the United States. It was not really a telephone hook up; rather it was an AM Radio hook up that looked like a telephone. Because it was a radio not a telephone when you finished talking we had to say "OVER" so the other person would know it was time for them to talk. Only one person on the line could talk at a time or you cut the other person out. It was hard to have a conversation that way but it was a thrill to have the privilege to call my wife and hear her voice. Talking to her was like a gift from heaven.

Another thing that really surprised me about service in Vietnam was R & R (Rest and Recuperation) leave. Every soldier in Vietnam was able to take a two-week R & R from Vietnam during his or her one-year tour of duty. It seemed odd to me that they would give you a two-week vacation during the war, but I was not going to turn it down. We could go almost anywhere in the Pacific area we wanted to, at the Army's expense, including Australia and Japan. I chose to go to Hawaii.

My wife and I saved our money so she could fly over and meet me there. We also paid the way for my parents to join us so they would be able to visit Hawaii. I knew it would be wonderful to be with Janice again but it would also be hard to see her and then have to leave her again. For this reason I waited to take my R&R until right at the end of my one year tour. I only had one month left when I came to Hawaii.

Words cannot describe the feelings that I had when I got back on that airplane to go back to Vietnam. I almost would rather not have had that little time we had together than to have to leave her again so soon. We did have a wonderful time however there in Hawaii.



CHAPTER 19

SPIT ON

Finally by December 1970, my on year tour of duty in Vietnam was finished and I was able to go back to the United States. I was to report to Fort Benning again where I had one more year of service before my discharge. remember during the long flight back, I began to review all the experiences of the past year. One of my memories was of the airplane trip on the way over to Vietnam. I remember thinking about how hard it was to be going into "the unknown", not knowing what would happen to me and to the rest of the men on the flight. I did not know any of those men; we were a group of soldiers going to war. When we arrived we were each assigned to different units so I never saw any of them again. However I knew that some of the men on that plane were going to die. I remembered how I was praying for the Lord to protect me and let me have the privilege of being spared and allowed to go back home. As I was remembering those prayers on the way back home, I was grateful that they had truly been answered.

It should have been a thrilling experience to arrive back home in the United States. Growing up I had seen ticker tape parades, in the movies, of the soldiers coming home from previous wars. I remember the soldiers proudly marching or riding up the streets of New York while the

people watched and cheered. The air was filled with confetti falling from the roof tops. Excitement and joy radiated everywhere. Everyone was happy to have the soldiers back home.

What a shock it was to us when we arrived at the Los Angeles Airport. There were no ticker tape parades for us. Instead there were protesters standing on both sides of the aisle inside the airport where we disembarked. The people who were waiting there for us were not cheering, throwing confetti or waving flags. Instead they were war protesters who booed us and even spit on us. They also yelled vile names at us and called us traitors. That was our thanks and welcome home.

Battle weary, all we could do was to try to ignore them. I have often thought about that scene at the airport when I hear people talk about the movie *Rambo* and what he was portrayed as being like after he came home. I wonder if any of those protesters had watched *Rambo*, if they would have dared to be there in the airport to spit on soldiers returning from war. But we understood that they knew nothing about freedom and the price that some of our comrades had just paid with their lives, to try to purchase freedom for the South Vietnamese people. The men who gave their lives were our friends and fellow patriots in this war. To us our fallen comrades were no different than the soldiers who gave up their lives in wars past.

The actions of those war protesters made us wonder if they even understood the price of freedom that has been purchased with the blood of patriots in the present and in the past.

The war protesters appeared to us to be people who were wallowing in their prosperity never giving a thought to the price that was paid in the past and in Vietnam to keep the people of the world free from oppression. They seemed to have forgotten the wars and sacrifice by others to create our free nation and to make it into this great land of opportunity. These protestors stood before us as a symbol of people who take no responsibility for helping other countries gain their freedom too.

Before I went to Vietnam i watched many of my peers leave for Canada rather than to go to war. Some of them are still there. Those young men along with the people, who were booing us at the airport, were not to my mind, loyal American citizens. They were the sad result of misguided teaching in our society mostly by college professors who were against the war. They appeared to us to be people who enjoyed what they were not willing to pay for.

As soldiers, we went to Vietnam because we were asked to go, not because we wanted to fight a war. We supported our government and showed that we were willing to pay the price of freedom for other people in the world, even with our lives if necessary. We were just grateful to be home, alive and now here were all those people booing us.

How could they know of the pain we felt knowing that many of our comrades were not there with us? They had given up their lives to preserve freedom for people of another nation so they could have what we have. We knew who we were and what we represented. We just ignored them and walked on through the airport, past our ticker tape parade of booing.

There were other things done by anti-war protesters which made our coming back home to booing crowds even worse. On the news we saw that Jane Fonda had gone to North Vietnam and actually called the American prisoners of war traitors to their faces.

It was reported, on the news, that when she first got there, some of the prisoners assumed she was their friend and had come to help them so they tried to give her their social security numbers written on little slips of paper. The men expected her to give their information to the U. S. government so that the government would know that they were there as prisoners and still alive.

Instead, the news reported that Jane Fonda gave the little papers with our prisoners of war's social security numbers on them to the North Vietnamese prison camp officials. The News Media said that after she left, the North Vietnamese Officers beat those men who tried to give her their papers and some of those men actually died from the beatings.

If what the news reported about her is true, I do not know how she can live with what she did. Only God can be the judge of us all.

The final insult to me as Vietnam Veteran was when Robert Kennedy was running for the Presidency of the United States. As a presidential candidate the news reported that in a speech in New York City, Robert Kennedy had offered to donate a pint of his blood to the North Vietnamese Red Cross to aid the wounded North Vietnamese soldiers. (Back in the old days I think that would have been considered treason for a presidential candidate to do that.) If he actually said what the news reporters and Paul Harvey reported him to have said, then I

guess we see that in our day, it was not treason but just another slap in the face of the Vietnam War Veterans.

There is nothing that can be done about those anti war protests and their actions now. They are sad events of the history of our country. We can not stop war protestors in the future. We have no right to. Each person has the free agency to believe what he or she wants to believe. How such people treat others as a part of their beliefs has created some dark pages in the history of our country. All we can do now as Vietnam Veterans is to forgive, forget and go on with our lives.

I went back to Fort Benning, Georgia and served in the military for one additional year. I was promoted to the rank of Captain and resumed my duties as a teacher there in the Infantry School Radio Communications Department. Following my discharge I went back to BYU and finished my degree. Upon graduation I went to the University of Utah for two years of Graduate School and then became a professional genealogist. I am now working as a computer programmer. How I got from being a professional genealogist to a computer programmer is another book that I am writing. I will let you read that story there.

CHAPTER 20

NOT EVERYONE CAME HOME

My close friends and family asked me to write down these spiritual experiences many times but I have not wanted to start thinking about these things again especially when I remember a dear friend who went through training with me but who did not come home alive.

His name was Gary Rule Mower , a farm boy from Fairview, Utah. I was a farm boy from Hyde Park, Utah. We were alike in almost every way and we became very close friends. We had both served missions, attended BYU and had been married in the temple. He loved his wife and was faithful to her just as I had tried with all my heart to be faithful to Janice. Both our wives had given birth to sons shortly before we were sent to Vietnam.

Gary loved to do missionary work in the military and I did too. So far as I could tell he lived every commandment with exactness and he constantly encouraged me to do the same. During most of the advanced training we went through together, he was right by my side. We were

even at the airport together, with our wives, when we left for Vietnam.

Four months after we arrived in Vietnam, Gary was killed by a land mine. It has been one of the great sorrows of my life. Even to this day I often ask why he had to die. There is no question in my mind that -- if it had not been the will of the Lord to allow him to live, Gary would have had the same protection and promptings that I did. I do not know why he had to die and leave his wife and child alone for the rest of their lives.

I still often remember his wife, Ruth Ann, and their son, Gary, in my prayers. Without husband and father their lives have been very hard. Oh that there were more that I could do than just pray for them. It was too painful for me to even contact them for many years. Finally I did contact Gary's wife and sister and talked to them. They of course did not know me because after all these years because I only knew Gary in the Army away from home, but I certainly knew them. I hope that I can, in some way over the years, be able to do something to help ease the pain of Gary's earthly loss to his family.

Gary's loss of life has embedded into every fiber of my being the reality of the protection that the Lord blessed me with. It reminds me constantly of the importance of listening to the promptings of the Holy Ghost and of the importance of following those promptings. I know of a certainty that the words of the famous poem "except for the Grace of God, there go I" is true of me and Gary. However, I am also reminded that the will of the Lord is always right and we are not to judge when things don't turn out like we think they should or the way we want them to.

I am confident that I will see Gary again on the other side of the veil. I am sure he has had just as many missionary experiences over there --- where he labors in the spirit world as I have had here. I sometimes wonder if maybe he is watching me, as a ministering angel, already aware of my activities and the fulfillment of those dreams we so often talked about such as our being like the sons of Mosiah in our missionary work. It was our life long dream and hope that we could fulfill the promise of Ammon in the Book of Mormon to literally convert 1000's to the gospel in our life time. (Alma 26:22)

It is my prayer that when I meet Gary again I can report back to him that I have kept my part of that promise we made to each other as I know he will have done himself.

COMING OF AGE

Arriving home and getting back to our lives was not the end of the war for us. Most of us still think about the war a lot and have to try to block it from our minds. It is a part of us. We just have to learn to get past it and try to live normal lives again.

After a few months of being back home, we watched the nightly news on TV as the South Vietnamese Army crumbled and North Vietnam took back the land some of our friends had given their lives to help keep free for the South Vietnamese. For some of us it was a year of our lives fighting for their freedom. Many of our comrades paid the ultimate price and gave their lives to help South Vietnam.

I remember, so well, standing in front of the TV in our apartment at the University of Utah watching on that day when the very place I had been fighting, fell back into the hands of the North Vietnamese Army. The news showed our base camp being over run. I watched as Cu Chi fell back into enemy hands.

I can tell you that my emotions were so strong--thinking about what we gave to take that place ---I think I would have gone back that very day if I had been called back to duty. What a helpless feeling to have! What a price we paid for that place only to have the South Vietnamese just give it back without a fight.

The war was over and all we fought for was lost and given back to North Vietnam. You would think that would be the end of the war for us. But it was not. The worst was yet to come for us as Vietnam Veterans.

Years later in 1995, I was working as one of the managers for a sewing factory in Logan, Utah. We had a lot of Vietnamese boat people working for us. Many of them had come to America from Vietnam just a year or two before.

The war had been over for more than 20 years when they had finally escaped and come to America. As they worked for us they learned to speak English. Since I was the one to teach them English I got to know some of them very well.

I talked to them a lot. Several told me that just before they left Vietnam they had seen American soldiers who were still prisoners of war. They said they were slaves to the North Vietnamese Army. I listened to

them describe the scene with horror. It could have just as easy been me. I could have been captured. I could still be there alive as a slave.

I lived in constant fear while I was there that I would be captured. I had seen prisoner of war movies all my life. That was my greatest fear, and now to have them tell me that some of my fellow servicemen were still there 10, 15, 20 and maybe even 30 years later. How can I not think about the fact that one of them could just as easily been me. The war is not over yet for me. I constantly wonder how the North Vietnamese could have been so clever in their negotiations after the war that we could have just forgotten the MIA's and not have any way that we could go after them. How could we have just left them there alive? How? There is no answer to that question. It is a tragedy of war.

If I were given the opportunity to go back to try to free them even today, I would go! How can I think that the war is over for me as long as I feel some of them are still alive over there as slaves? The war is still not over for me, not in my head. I never watch army movies about Vietnam. It always starts the flashbacks. Sometimes I still have flash backs about being captured in my dreams. I often thank the God of Heaven that my life was spared and that he gave me the privilege to have the power to protect myself and my men while I was with them. For that I will be ever grateful. I only regret that others had to die. I pray for their families and for their grief to be turned to peace.

Truly my dear friend Gary Mower and I both came of age while at war but in a very different way. I lost much of my hearing. Every day of my life that hearing loss reminds me of Vietnam. Gary lost his life. Surely almost daily, Gary's family still thinks about the ultimate sacrifice he made for his country. That makes my hearing loss seem like such a little thing compared to his. We both went willingly because we were asked to go. We both gave all that we knew how to give in a way we knew how to give it. For neither of us is that war over yet, not for us or for our families.

See more pictures from Vietnam at:

<http://www.cordellvail.com/vietnam/pictures.htm>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cordell Vail was born in 1943 at the Logan, Utah LDS Hospital to Ammon W. and Winona H. Vail. He has one brother and two sisters. He and his brother and sisters all grew up in Hyde Park, Utah where their father owned the local grocery store called Vail's Market.

Cordell graduated from North Cache High School in 1961. He then attended BYU for one year before serving a fulltime mission for the Church Of Jesus Christ Of Latter-day Saints to Finland from 1963 to 1965. Following his mission he was a guide in Nauvoo for a summer. He then resumed his studies at BYU where he married Janice Lavonne Richmond in the Salt Lake LDS Temple. They have 7 children.

Following his military service and graduation from college, Cordell became a professional genealogist. He ran Ancestral Research Center Inc. and the Utah Genealogical Academy for several years before becoming a computer programmer.

Cordell has filled many callings in the LDS Church to include being ordained a Seventy, served as a Stake Mission President twice, several stake missions, on the High Council. in several Bishoprics, an Elders Quorum President, Ward Executive Secretary, Ward Clerk and several other teaching callings in the ward.

He has been a popular speaker at firesides, seminars and civic clubs over the years. He has published several other books and written scores of research papers. Many of his handouts, research papers and news letters can be read at:

<http://www.cordellvail.com/epistles>

<http://www.goldenmailbox.com/library>