

IN THE LIFE OF A RANGER

Robert Deppe cavalry division, vietnam, silver star medal,
bronze star medal, purple heart

One day right after high school I ran into a cousin who had recently returned from Vietnam. He told me I should enlist, and volunteer for Ranger and Vietnam while I still could. So I did. I enlisted and after doing so I only told my dad who was in World War II at Pearl Harbor and I don't recall what unit, and the Battle of The Bulge" with I think it was the the 223rd Infantry Regiment of the Rainbow Division. This was time when the anti-war movement was still going strong to say the least.

Because of the shape I was in from track in particular, I did very well in boot camp, jump school and Ranger School. I also had the uncanny ability to see very well at night. The CO encouraged me to volunteer for Vietnam. He thought I was a natural for reconnaissance.

I arrived in Vietnam just after the monsoon season. We had left the States 18 hours earlier with stops in Anchorage and Tokyo. I was still keyed-up when we landed, and still remember how the warm moist air felt so heavy on my face and arms as I stepped out of the plane and into that hot and steamy, tropical night. Later, I climbed into an olive-colored bus whose seats smelled of mold and mildew. There were three other soldiers on the bus. No one said a word to me. They just looked out the windows with blank expressions. By the time they drove us away from the lights of the airfield, our khaki uniforms were dark and soggy with sweat. We arrived at An Khe in the central highlands some hours later. I had slept the whole ride there.

I was now a RANGER.

Our job was to scout, observe and report on enemy activity in the vast area beyond our perimeter. A helicopter would drop five or six of us into the jungle within 20 miles of our camp, and over a four or five-day period we would reconnoiter a series of grids. It was extremely dangerous, of course.

During the first three months of 1972, our reconnaissance discovered a large build-up of enemy forces in the valley area southwest of Dak To and northwest of Kontum City. In addition to the positions occupied by elements of the 22nd Division, there were two Ranger camps, Polei Kleng and Ben Het, located along the Laos and Cambodian Borders. FSBs (Fire Support Bases) were almost totally dependent on outside fire support if

they were to survive large-scale, enemy attacks.

As we left the Ranger camp of Polei Kleng it came under intense enemy artillery fire. The rounds were exploding in a tight pattern within the perimeter. A regiment sized enemy force had closed in around the camp and were placing accurate small arms fire on the defensive positions. The ARVN scouts reported tanks approaching from the north. I could see silhouettes of soldiers, NVA or ARVN's running around from the explosions that were a daily routine here. I noticed the command bunker exploding as we felt bullets hitting all around us. I told my M-60 gunner to shoot at anyone coming our way and if the figure wasn't large, shoot it. We escaped down a pre-determined escape route down a cliff.

Not more than two clicks from Polei Kleng we were ambushed by an estimated company sized element of the North Vietnamese Army. As the first three men of our team exhausted their first magazines, I recognized the danger caused by the lull in firing and rushed to their area, firing my weapon and throwing grenades. Shortly after reaching the position I noticed several seriously wounded all around me. After carrying one soldier to safety, I called in aid for the wounded and began retaliatory fire on the enemy positions. By holding the enemy at bay the remaining rangers were able to escape to safety without injury. I received a Bronze Star for this action.

After returning from a six day R & R in Bangkok I was assigned to Camp Holloway, Pleiku because Polei Kleng was overrun again. The CO told me we were receiving numerous reports of contacts with enemy forces of unknown size north of Kontum, but no major attack had developed. He told me he needed me to lead a reconnaissance patrol that night to the north of Kontum City.

As we started down a ridge the point man of our patrol discovered an enemy bunker complex. As the first three men exhausted their first magazines, I recognized the danger caused by the lull in firing and rushed the bunkers firing my own weapon. The other team joined us and got pinned down by a machine gun bunker. As the teams withdrew from the bunker complex, I remained in position. I had vantage point of thick

grass and anthills for cover. I threw two fragmentation grenades, and suppressed fire, covering the team's withdrawal. I ran up the ridge with a bloker (M-79 grenade launcher) with my M-16 on my shoulder and destroyed the enemy machine gun bunker and crew. By holding the rest of the NVA at bay my fellow team members were able to escape without injury. When I attempted to rejoin my team, I was hit by enemy fire, wounding me in the left leg. I think my actions gave the team the precious time they needed to reach safety. I was awarded the Silver Star and a Purple Heart.

A few weeks later the Cavalry Division was pulled out of Vietnam and I was reassigned to a Task Force. That meant we had considerably less support. The next few weeks were the most nerve wracking because I didn't DERO home until August. I had pulled 20 some missions as a team leader and my nerves were on edge constantly. I kept praying I would not make the wrong decision. I walked point until my last 10 days in country. It was but one year. One year in Nam but filled with moments seared indelible into the soul and psyche, moments that sometimes rise to the surface and more often than not, lie dormant, under the surface. Ready to rise up in rage over the most trivial of things.

For me too, on a quiet evening when I close my eyes and start to drift off, I am back in the jungle of thirty-five years ago, and it is not a troubled or fearful feeling, its more like being back where I belong. I remain very proud of having been a soldier, and its something that never leaves you.

Don't get me wrong, most days are spent never giving that year in Nam a thought, but then, it's Memorial Day, Veterans Day, or a day like today when I see something on television, and I am there again, hearing the throbbing beat of an incoming Huey come to save our butts in an emergency extraction, feeling my heart pound in rhythm with the

whirling blades, my nose filled with the pungency of cordite, and then come memories of my teammates faces and the knowing smiles we gave each other as we feel the bird lift us heavenward out and up from a green hill filled with death.

Not all memories are bad. Seeing the beauty of my first mission into Happy Valley and standing watch as dawn came, the light, the mist in the trees, will always be one of my most beautiful memories, and coming to know the values of and giving full respect too the Monteyards I came to know. And some of the most treasured are the memories I have of smiling faces of the men I served with; when I too wore a younger mans face.

I am no hero I was only a soldier doing my duty for my feats were nothing extraordinary in any way. I can recall numerous events equal or more perilous performed by others and myself. The courage and heroism I saw, especially my fellow rangers and soldiers, but also many of who were Montenyards and South Vietnamese Rangers would make anyone proud. The heroism I saw from chopper crews who risked their lives without a moment's hesitation when they did extractions and Dust-off's (MEDEVAC or Medical Evacuation). That was a thing of beauty, the skill and precision and courage. I am proud to have witnessed them and to have known some of these brave men.

So in closing, whatever your view on the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, NEVER and I mean NEVER abandon the troops like you did in Vietnam. My father came home to a Parade in New York City. I came home to signs and protesters screaming obscenities and yelling baby-killers and murderers. Vietnam veterans everywhere are still suffering from the abandonment they received when they came home. Welcome Home and God Bless to ALL who served this great country.