

## **THE VOLUNTEER**

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It may be little noted in other states, but Tennessee is proud to be known as the Volunteer State. Thus the University of Tennessee fields teams known as "The Volunteers". And long before I was ten years old, I was a huge fan of the Double A baseball team, the Nashville Vols. So I was fully aware, and I knew that the name came from the historic tendency of Tennesseans to volunteer for wars. Revolutionary, Civil, World - you name it, Tennessee was standing in line to enlist. This awareness played no small role, I am sure, in my decision to volunteer for in-country service in Vietnam.

I had been in naval service for several years before the U.S. became involved in southeast Asia. As a midshipman I was on a destroyer in Cuban waters during 1962, before the missile crisis and Blockade. Another destroyer, where I served as Communications Officer, participated in the "Quarantine" of the Dominican Republic in 1965. I was on that same ship when I heard the news of the Tonkin Gulf Incident in 1964. That incident was the effective trigger for US involvement in Vietnam. Two years later, I was joining my next destroyer as the Engineering Department Head, as it prepared for deployment to the western Pacific and Vietnam. At that point, a call went out from the Bureau of Naval Personnel for volunteers to serve in-country in Vietnam. The Navy had many billets for junior officers, on rivers, coasts, and both ashore and afloat in advisory positions.

Why, you may ask, would I even consider volunteering to go? 26-year old me might answer "This is My War. It's already two years old, and I wonder how long it will continue. Wars don't come along all that often, and it would be a shame to miss it altogether. After all, I'm from the Volunteer state. Furthermore, I've watched plenty of World War II movies. Many of them take place in the wide Pacific. Those khaki uniforms are the same ones I wear now, and this is my chance to be one of those brave, heroic men sweeping the seas clear of hazards to Freedom. And this is a war of right versus wrong; of communist invaders in democratic South Vietnam. Why would I NOT volunteer?"

Well, there WAS a possibility of injury or death. Furthermore, the kinds of duties offered were rather different from anything I would expect to fall into my career path, and volunteering would require my early departure from this Chief Engineer job. Not especially career enhancing. Anti-war protesters? Screw those long-haired Peaceniks; they must not be allowed to subvert our nation.

There was just one compelling counter-argument, to my mind - I had met a girl, and it was serious. However, that relationship blossomed at a time when it was too late to call off my adventure - my letter was already in.

So, off I went. Two months of Pre-Deployment and Counter-Insurgency school, for instruction in Vietnamese culture and language, weapons familiarization, and a week of SERE school - "Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape". A week with no food, little rest, and mistreatment by a bunch of make-believe enemies with a POW camp.

The late-blooming romance led to a quick wedding, a brief honeymoon, and a move into a furnished apartment before I reported back for a very long plane ride: San Francisco to Saigon, via Alaska for refueling. It was March, 1968 - days after the "Tet Offensive". Arrive Saigon at 7:00 A.M. (9:00 P.M. the previous day, according to our body clocks). Hot and dusty. Badly damaged airport terminal. Climb on an Air Force bus with heavy window screening (to deflect grenades). Driver sporting a sawed-off .30 cal carbine on the dash. Lengthy drive through a teeming Oriental city, sandbag bunkers everywhere. Welcome to My War!

My assignment was to guide and assist the commanding officer of a 112 foot patrol craft in what turned out to be a Coast Guard like function. We were deployed for 45 days at a time to patrol the coastline, preventing clandestine resupply via fishing or other boats. During deployment our vessel operated out of one of four Coastal Zone HQ's; between deployments we returned to Saigon for repair and resupply. Never in my year did I feel personally threatened. There were unfocused neighborhood threats - sometimes at night you could hear mortar rounds fired and landing within a block, but the target was a police station down the street. Rarely, explosives were found attached to the undercarriage of vehicles used to transport servicemen - but never one I was in.

Once during a deployment to the remote Fourth Coastal Zone, centered on Phu Quoc Island (near the Cambodian border on the southwest tip of Vietnam) we had the misfortune of finding a reef. The vessel sat, for seven days, within a few hundred feet of jungle-covered shoreline. We remained partly submerged until a U.S. salvage ship arrived to extract, patch, and tow us back to Saigon.

My year was lightened by a single, seven day R&R in Hawaii with my bride. We spent Christmas together, despite everything. In those Pre-TSA days, she even brought a small Christmas Tree to brighten our hotel room. Then, in March 1969, I climbed aboard another chartered airliner for the trip home. It seemed ever so much quicker than the trip west! Landing in San Francisco, I transferred immediately to another plane, and continued on to San Diego where I was greeted by my wife. Protesters? Never saw one.

Looking back, my risk was rewarded. I am proud to have served my country at a difficult time. My service was never a black mark in my world - the armed forces were well insulated from the haters. Five years later I was shamed by my country's failure to live up to promises of support once we departed, but by then I was moving on in my career, which was NOT damaged by my year as an advisor. Today, forty years afterwards, once-Communist Vietnam seems closer to an ally than an enemy. I don't know what happened to the South Vietnamese people I met, but do know many have been living in the USA for years.

Sometimes, now, I wonder - what was it all about?