

Val's History; Vietnam

Before Vietnam I was a pretty good young man, but flawed. I had stolen money, confessed, but not repaid the loss. I swore a lot and with aplomb. I paid tithing, said my prayers, and was morally clean. Before leaving for combat my mother asked the stake president to interview me and I was ordained an elder in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. I think I was worthy, but there is a little question on that related to the theft not being repaid.

When I was a young 19-year-old I served in the United States Army as an infantry paratrooper with the 101st Airborne division in Vietnam. We arrived in Vietnam as part of a division deployment in November of 1967 at Saigon or it may have been Ben Hau. From there we deployed to Puch Vin, as city north of Ben Hua. This is in the southern part of South Vietnam and is north of Saigon. The 1st Infantry Division was occupying the base we took over. As we arrived, they apparently went home, at least they left and where they went, I did not know. I imagine they were redeployed to another region, because they came to country one at a time and probably were not going to be released before they spent their year there. Maybe they were sent to other units to finish their tour of duty.

Our base was large. We had a post exchange where we could purchase electronics, chinaware, and many other things. There was a post office, a swimming pool, a large French rubber tree plantation from the days the French occupied Vietnam, after World War II. There was a memorable tall cone shaped galvanized building where the locals made charcoal, and a fairly good-sized city with all the services a city has; restaurants, stores, prostitutes, etc. The sun seemed to come up on the wrong side of the world. Christmas was backwards, too. December was the most pleasant time of the year; no snow or pine trees. Christmas cards depicted tropical scenes on silk. There was an old and ornate Catholic church, and the scenery was magnificent. When not patrolling the surrounding area, we slept in wooden buildings with screened in sides, on cots with misquote netting. A hundred yards from our hooch was a battery of armor propelled 155 MM artillery with very long barrels and when they had a fire mission in the direction of our hooch the concussion from the blasts lifted us off of our cots and dust would fill the air. It was almost like there was a war going on.

We were allowed to acclimate to the heat the first month. We would go on patrols early in the morning and return some time after dark. Then we would man the bunkers on the base perimeter, looking and listening for the enemy. I had volunteered to be a radio operator for the mortar platoon. The idea was that this platoon never walked point and never was the last platoon when we went on maneuvers, therefore it was safer. The down side was the radio weighed 35 pounds and the spare batteries weighed five pounds each. We were told we needed to carry five extra batteries. That is 60 pounds, plus food, seven canteens of water, thirty magazines of ammo, rifle, extra clothes, if it seemed appropriate, and at least seven hand grenades. The total weight could be 120 pounds. When we went on patrol we only walked for about 10 minutes and rested. When we sat down, we tried to sit by a tree to hold on to so we could use our arms to help us stand up. If there wasn't a tree we would roll on to our knees and climb up our rifle.

I began this story near the day I arrived in Vietnam. The events leading to my last month in Vietnam were interesting, but mostly uneventful. I had a few memorable experiences. We lost a few men, found large caches of food, and generally had a few minor adventures. Nothing to significant to anyone, but those of us that lived it. Hot days and hard hikes, even a sneak attack on our perimeter where about 100 Viet Cong tried to sneak up on our base, just outside our section of the perimeter. That night we, the

mortar platoon put about 600 rounds of high explosive mortar shells on their location. In the morning, we had a body count of 75 Viet Cong. At least that is what was reported to me. I chose not to go outside the wire to look. Not because it was unsafe, but because I did not want the memories of the gore. My theory was to avoid as much of the images of gore as I could to minimize future trauma. As I tell my story you might notice that I jump between memories. It is not that I cannot organize my thoughts in a coherent paper, it is more like my thinking is not always coherent.

A Shau Valley

About March of 1968 I was transferred to the Company C (I think), of the First Battalion of the 327 Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division, several hundred mile north of Puch Vinh along with half of unit that came to Vietnam as part of the division deployment. Tet was over, for the most part and we had a fairly easy month. We deployed for a month and then came in for a night to resupply and go out for another month. Then we went to support an artillery fire base near the A Shau Valley, called Fire Base Roberts, I think. We stayed there a month and the most exciting thing that happened to me was being bitten by an army dog that was tied to a tent post at the chow tent. It was kind of funny. As I walked past the German Sheppard its head rotated as I passed. As soon as I lost sight of it, it quickly lunged and bit my ankle, and sat down, like it had not done anything. It didn't even break my skin, though it did hurt and startle me. I think it may have been as bored as we were. After about 30 days at the fire base, we started up Highway One going north toward north Vietnam. We had a tank and mostly walked alongside of it, but from time to time we took turns riding on top of it. My lieutenant had a reputation for not knowing how to read a map. As we went up the main highway from south to north, he asked me if I knew where we were. He showed me where we started and with a little observation of how long we had traveled, the unique zig-zag of the highway and the mountain peaks I showed him our location. I was impressed that an officer with an infantry commission could not read a map.

The first day out a sniper killed one or two of our men. The surrounding area was a forest of 200-foot-high mahogany trees. There was no way we could pin point where the sniper was. We pulled back, regrouped and moved on. Another dead soldier the second day. The third day the tank was hit by a rocket and the tank commander was killed, and the sniper killed another of us; he was due to rotate home in three days. We had Phantom jets dropping bombs and strafing the trees to suppress the enemy, but nothing helped. That night, about 10:00 PM we left the highway on foot, leaving the tank and went into the forest (jungle). We walked about two hours and coiled around a hill top and went to sleep without guards or a watch. The A Shau was interesting.

We called the area the A Shau Valley. It was adjacent to Laos and the demilitarized zone along the 49th parallel separating north and south Vietnam.

The **A Shau Valley** (Vietnamese: *thung lũng A Sầu*) is a valley in [Vietnam's Thừa Thiên-Huế Province](#), west of the coastal city of [Huế](#), along the border of [Laos](#). The valley runs north and south for 40 kilometers and is a 1.5-kilometer-wide flat bottomland covered with tall [elephant grass](#), flanked by two densely forested mountain ridges whose summits vary in elevation from 900 to 1,800 meters. A Shau Valley was one of the key entry points into [South Vietnam](#) for men and material brought along the [Ho](#)

[Chi Minh trail](#) by the [North Vietnamese Army](#) and was the scene of heavy fighting during the [Vietnam War](#).^{[1][2]} The A Shau Valley is bisected lengthwise by Route 548.^[3] The [Ho Chi Minh Highway](#) now runs along the valley floor (Wikipedia).

My company was not very close to the village in the bottom land, rather, we were in the forest area along the ridge area. The terrain was very rugged, covered with timber and very little vegetation on the ground. The tallest mountain peak on my map was about 700 feet above sea level and towered above the trees. The north Vietnamese army occupied the valley and surrounding mountains. We were told there were 12 divisions of North Vietnamese regular army (NVA) troop deployed in the area. The United States and South Vietnamese army had 10 divisions deployed there. My company was close to a full compliment of about 160 men. Our first week in the valley we were awarded a pennant for our company flag for capturing the most enemy weapons; 274. Meaning we had engaged the enemy multiple time each day and killed two, five, or seven of them many times. We also lost men in these engagements. The NVA were living there in bunkers dug into the mountain. On every trail or ridge line were black and white communications lines that linked bunkers, platoons, companies, and battalions. There were also copper electric lines higher up in the trees strung on glass insulators providing power to higher level command units. I was later told that on the day we invaded the valley there were 25 helicopters and seven jets shot down. There were reportedly tunnels five mile long into Laos large enough for 2.5-ton trucks. There were also radar controlled anti-aircraft guns deployed through out the area and artillery units shooting 155 MM shells; that's big, and the only area of the war where the NVA had deployed artillery in the south, or so I was told.

Early in our time there I walked point twice a day for about 30 minutes each time. I had been taught to never walk on trails, so the first time I was assigned to walk point I stepped off the trail, made a right-hand turn, and walked down the rugged mountain, weaving around boulders. I did not ask permission. I just did it. No one said a word. When we stopped and switched point, just minutes after, the new point surprised two NVA sitting on a lookout rock facing away from them. He killed them both.

Most of the time the enemy walked into us while on patrol or checking their communications lines. They did not have much of a chance, but we also took casualties. My estimation was that we killed 10 of them to every one of us that was either wounded or killed. We tended to leave their bodies where they died. Usually, they were shot many times. Imagine a large group of men shooting a smaller group.

Early on, in the valley we lost three men trying to rescue a sister company from the NVA. The enemy crawled toward them like red ants; fearless and bites like a bee sting. Over the month we maneuvered to recover the three soldiers we had lost. First trying one route and then another. No matter what route we took we walked onto the enemy or they walked into us. I found out after I was evacuated that we recovered the three bodies. The NVA had doubled wrapped them in ponchos, buried them, and marked the graves with crosses. The soldier that was telling me this was just arriving at Fort Ord to recover from his wounds when he recognized me entering the hospital. He told me that as they were recovering the bodies they were over run again and he was shot. His companion was killed. The NVA soldier took his wallet, watch, and ring. Then patted him on the head, saying, that's right Gi, play dead and you will live longer. There were many small memories that resurface for me. Another one is as follows:

One day we followed a stream downhill. Quickly it became narrow, with high sides, and walls 20 or 30 feet tall. Then the man on point stopped, signaled to be quiet, and eventually had us return the way we had come. When we could talk, he told us he stopped to rest and happened to look up, noticing 30 NVA

doing mortar practice. If they had seen us, we would have been like fish in a barrel. No where to run and easy picking. That day I remember what seems like a major event, for me. We did not have water, but it was raining. Someone spread out a poncho to collect water so we could fill our canteens. Soon I was waiting my turn with six and a half empty canteens; I was down to half a quart of water (one thing you learn in combat is you never have enough water, and for that matter, food or ammo). Two NVA had just walked into us and we shot them. I was on my belly, behind a clump of grass and surrounded by big trees that were about 15 to 20 feet apart. There were very few smaller trees or saplings because the canopy of the forest blocked out most of the sun light. The soldier to my left said, "Johnson, there is one of them just in front of you." I lifted my head to see and "crack." A bullet broke the sound barrier and made the distinctive crack that means it just passed by, but it also means it did not hit you. I thought, ignorantly, I think he just shot at me. If he does that again I am going to shoot back. I lifted my head and "crack." Pop, pop, pop, I shot. It was quiet and the soldier to my left was quiet, so I slipped back and down 10 or so feet to get in line for water at the poncho. Just as it was my turn it stopped raining. I sat with my seven canteens and said, "Father in Heaven, I wouldn't ask if I had any other choice, but I need six and a half canteens of water. If it will help there is a cloud over there." I pointed to my right and about five miles away was a small cloud in blue sky. Today I laugh that I was telling God how to get me water and answer my prayer. I guess that He laughed, too. It started to rain. I filled six canteens and said another prayer, micro managing God, saying, "You can shut it off now. There is enough falling to fill my last canteen." The rain stopped as the neck of the canteen formed a meniscus, where the surface tension pulls up the sides of the water at the lip. Wow! That was cool. I asked myself, what do I say to Father, after that. I sat for a moment and all I could think of was "thank you." So that is what I said.

I grabbed my gear and returned to the clump of grass, blessed and a little smarter. The soldier to my left said "He is still there." I knew better to lift my head in the same spot, so I crawled toward him, the other soldier, and to my surprise I saw, in plain sight, the enemy soldier laying half back, against a tree, where I had previously shot. Among the things that surprised me was the enemy was in plain view of the other soldier, but he did not do anything, except sic me on him. I had heard that up to 20% of soldier never fire their weapons in combat, but I had never seen it before. A few days later I had another interesting experience.

By now I am walking point several hours a day, because of the many casualties we had taken. Of interest, we had to blow down trees with det-cord to make an extraction point for the medivac helicopters to winch out our dead and wounded. I was walking point and we stopped to change lead position and to rest. As we were sitting, mostly looking along a stream 20 feet below us, I noticed saplings moving like some one was using them as hand holds to assist their walking up hill. I gave the word to be quiet and enemy were approaching. No one appeared for 30 or so seconds and people began saying I was seeing things when the two NVA appeared and shot at us before we shot at them. Still, they did not have a chance. Forty-five against two was not fair odds for them. They shot two of us and when quiet returned one of them was moaning. I heard a voice telling me to go down and help. I said to the voice, "What if he is waiting to shoot me?" "Go down and help him," it said. I replied, "What if he is so shot up, and I have to kill him to put him out of his misery?" Go down and help him. I pondered, and while I thought my platoon sergeant, with a large field dressing on his neck walked past me and down the hill. A few minutes the moaning stopped and the sergeant returned. I had bad dreams for 50 years, because I did not make a decision and overcome my fear.

A few days before this one of my squad members said to me, "I am going where you go." I asked why, and he said you are always in the right place at the right time. I had noticed this phenomenon, but could not have thought anyone else would have noticed. Inwardly, I thought, this is true, but you are still alive, so far you have been in the right place, too. It is funny, but others notice. Then another event happened that to me was significant.

We had stopped to rest and change point. I had been on point and by now was walking point about half the day, or so I remember. The day before we had called for artillery on the far side of the mountain, to where we saw the copper wire pointing and the NVA doing mortar practice. This morning, the artillery people decided to fire two additional rounds. I am not sure why, nor how they got so far off target, but the first round screamed in a terribly loud voice. Instantly hitting 10 or so feet to my left. Killing two and the second came even angrier and closer. It too, landed just past me. I was now turning and dropping to the ground when it hit and blew, throwing me five or so feet off the small mound I was standing on. I landed in a heap. Numb along my entire right side; leg, side, arm, and face. Thinking I must be injured, but not feeling any pain, I started to inwardly giggle and repeat, "I am going home! I am going home.!" I was on my feet in a second and without the help of a rifle or a tree. As the numbness wore off, I decided to wash off the mud and blood spots every where a sliver of brush had penetrated my arm. As I cleaned the wounds there was not a single blood spot on my body. Oh, the disappointment! The second artillery round killed the person in front and behind me. I tell these events as a series of things that prepared me for the next events.

We got a new platoon sergeant, replacing the sergeant with the field dressing on his neck. His first duty seemed to be to tell me I was walking point. For some reason that I will never understand and makes me feel like a coward, I said, calmly, "No I am not." Why not, he asked. I replied that I had been walking point four hours a day and there were two men in my squad that had never walked point. They said they could not see well enough, but did not wear glasses. Until they take a turn, I am not walking point." He left and returned a few minutes later telling me I was demoted from team leader to assistant machine gunner. I thought, "Okay, so I have to carry an extra 200 rounds of bullets, so what." It did not dawn on me that if we made it back to base, I might get court martialed. The night before this, I said my prayers, as usual. Asking to bless by family, my sweet heart, and me. "Father in Heaven, this place is destroying my soul. If you will, take this from me and if I must be shot, let me be shot in the left heel, right big toe, go to Japan, and home," I asked.

We started out that morning with 42 men left in the company. I was assistant machine gunner and seventh in line of march. The point man was following the trail, which followed the copper lines on glass insulators. Automatic fire barked its distinctive bark and five men were shot. I recall Barclay, a tall quiet and dim young soldier as he returned fire in a high kneeling position. Seven across his chest! The lieutenant called for the machine gun. He pointed for its location and direction of fire so he could carry the wounded to safety. The gunner placed the gun wrong and as he tried to make the corrections the bipod foot got stuck under a root. The LT. jerked it twice and freed it. Placing it where he wanted, he pulled the trigger. Nothing! I said, "Sir, would you like me to do that?" He looked left and up at me and said, yes, letting me take the gun. I hoped I remembered right. I think the bolt must be pulled back to fire. Pulling the bolt back and pulling the trigger it worked. To the gunner and the other assistant, I said go get me more ammo. The gunner did not have a weapon and asked for my rifle. I told him no. They left and sort of returned; throwing me more belts of M-60 ammo and magazines of rifle bullets. I think the gunner rightly decided that I could do this alone, since I was not willing to share my toys.

At first, I was firing steadily, sweeping left and right. Very quickly I realized I did not have sufficient ammo to keep up this rate of fire. I began shooting burst of three as best I could. Aiming where I could, between trees, high, and low. This was effective at suppressing the enemy fire, at first, but as I slowed to conserve ammo, he began returning fire at me. The Lt. was able to move the others to safety without much trouble, though one soldier was so afraid he kept grabbing tree branches and pulling himself off the Lt's back. Eventually he took a round through the center of his buttocks and up through his vitals.

An interesting thing happened to me that was totally unexpected. Someone had hit me on the left heel with a sledge hammer and my right big toe was burning with pain. I looked in surprise, but no one was there. Then I felt sand hitting my arm and right cheek. As I looked right, I saw a line of bullets hitting the ground; actually, I saw divots in the ground making a line, from my right knee to my shoulder and then it stopped. "Oh no, he can see me," I thought. Then, again, the divots a foot in front of my feet and dotting the ground, coming up between my legs. My heart began to pound in my chest and panic began to overwhelm me. A calm voice then said, "Don't be afraid. Your prayers have been answered, literally." "How do you not be afraid," I thought. I had no idea. Time slowed. I watched the divots dance closer. I took in a deep breath. Let it out calmly, allowing my head to bend forward and let go. I gave away my fear and sense of control. Relaxing and letting God. This was not so much a thought, but more an action of letting go with everything else implied. WHAM! A slap as hard as mother's slap to my face; I am pretty sure I deserved the slap. The firing stopped. "Well, that was more than I asked for," I thought. I might as well see how bad the damage is. Nothing, not hole, no blood, nothing! Wow! That is amazing, I thought. Then the final event!

The lieutenant said, "Is anyone else shot?" "I am," I said. "Don't joke, Johnson," he said. He then asked where I was shot, got his reply and called for a machine gun to give me covering fire while others helped me move to a safer position. My squad leader brought the gun. He was to my left and a little above my position, maybe 20 feet away. I watched as he threw the gun down and began firing, like me, full trigger, burning 200 rounds as he swept toward me, skimming three or four inches off the ground. He never saw me! I immediately had a thought that one of us was going to die. Then this was a no brainer, if the choice was mine, I would kill him. I made up my mind that there was no way to stop the gun, move, or yell over the barking of the gun. I picked a spot and told myself if he did not stop by this point, I would shoot him. I had fire 800 rounds of machine gun ammo and by now I was using my rifle (I may have been on my 20th magazine of rifle ammo) and the barrel protector was so hot I could not hold it. I moved the trigger selector to fully automatic, holding the magazine and stock, aimed at his heart, waited, and finally began to pull the trigger.

Time was almost standing still. I felt I was making as good a decision as I could. I felt okay about what I was going to do. This surprised me, a little. Then I heard the small, quiet voice say, "lay down." I asked, "Don't shoot and lay down?" Thinking, wait a minute. I have something to do first. No answer! Then I said to myself, "Okay, but I am not going to watch. Comfort my mother," I prayed. I turned my head to the left. Pressing it as tightly as I possibly could into the ground and a feeling of peace filled me. Then Whack, whack, whack; shoulder, neck, and head. Black, nothing! No memory; no pain; I was not there.

The light clicked on. I sat up. I looked where the squad leader was. He was looking just past my left shoulder. It looked to me like he was deciding what to do next. There was no recognition of my presence evident. To my regret, I then said, in my best 19-year-old voice, "You son of a bitch!" His eyes bugged out

of his head like a cartoon character, when he saw and heard me. Isn't it funny how God blesses less than perfect people?

I made it to a MASH hospital and watched surgeries until dark. My injuries were minor and I had to wait. I was flown to Da Nang to the naval base for surgery. After surgery the nurse with the sweetness of an angel asked if she could do anything for me. After filtering and thinking, I said an ice cream would be nice. In a few minutes she came back to tell me they were locked up, which totally makes sense in the military. "Can I do anything else for you," she asked. I replied, "I would like to go to Japan." The next morning she gave me the news that Friday; in two days, I was going to Japan. "You did that for me?" I asked. She smiled, "Yes." When I arrived in Japan, I had surgery to close my wounds. It turned out that my doctor was LDS and invited me to go to his branch services the next day. It was all in Japanese and so nice. On the way back to the hospital I told them my story, hoping to influence a trip home. He was so kind as he explained that I had to go back to Vietnam, because I had six months left to serve there and he had to do his duty. I could tell how badly he felt and tried to comfort him as I mourned for myself. The next day he returned with a smile from ear to ear and told me that the hospitals were so full, that from Vietnam to Germany anyone that would be hospitalized over 30 days was to be sent state side. "Me? I asked. He smiled and said, "Yes."

When I was evacuated up the cable and into the helicopter the company was down to 35 men. We had had as many as 50 replacements that month. In all, we lost an entire company in 30 days and there was no idea when the others would be safe again.

I think I learned a few things from these experiences that I would like to share:

You do not have to be perfect to be blessed by God with miracles.

Fear is the enemy of miracles.

God did not set me up to fail. He gave me preparatory experiences to help prepare me to lay down my life with hope and calmness.

Even when miracles are given it does not mean that we are not still in the battle.

God seems to enjoy helping.

I hope that I have not offended anyone with this true series of events or that any mistakes in my memory will not offend. I absolutely know that God loves me, knows me, is patient, and knows the beginning from the end. That said, my testimony is not perfect, but I am bought and paid for by God's love for me.

Ps. I have had other experiences that are not addressed in this document, but are profound to me. Some are war related and others are before and after my military service. I will try and record these over time.