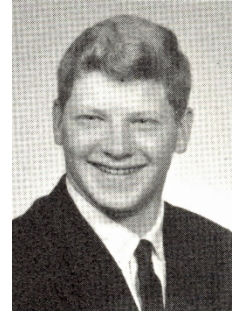


Steve Senzig OHS '65



Steve in Vietnam--1967



## VIETNAM VIGNETTES

By STEVE SENZIG



## My Introduction to the U.S. Army

During my first two weeks in the Army, several incidents of our training personnel beating trainees occurred. Some of the incidents resulted in the trainee being



maimed for life. After my first two weeks in Basic Training, a full Inspector General investigation resulted in four cadre being court martialed, and nine more being shipped to other duty stations.

After witnessing all of this, I refused an offer to go to jump school, and another offer to go to Officer's Candidate School. Shortly after refusing these offers, I received orders for the Republic of Vietnam. I still believe that there was a direct connection between my refusal and my orders.

During my AIT training, an artillery simulator blew up in my platoon sergeant's (a Vietnam combat vet) face. He almost lost the vision in both eyes. Another platoon sergeant ran over, threw him into a jeep and started for the base hospital.

On a gravel turn he rolled the jeep. They used the radio to call for a dustoff. When the helicopter landed the sergeant was helping his friend into the bird

when my platoon sergeant screamed, "STOP!! Does this helicopter have a Red Cross on it?" He was told that it did not. "Take it back and get another one! If I'm gonna get dusted off at least the damn chopper is gonna have a Red Cross on it."

<< click to play this soundtrack while you read [Platoon](#) (1986) [Adagio for Strings](#) (Georges Delerue)>>

### **In-country**

I shipped out from Fort Dix, refueling the plane at Guam and Yokohama.

I arrived in-country in the dark. We were convoyed from Bien Hoa to Long Binh in the dark at about two in the morning. Flashes of rocket and mortar fire (but without actual incident) lit up the night sky and made the trip more interesting.

During my first week in-country, I was assigned to the 90th "reppo depot" -- replacement unit. We underwent some training. On the grenade range, I learned that all I had learned in Basic and Advanced Individual Training(AIT) was wrong, and might get me killed.

On the booby trap training, I was singled out for special recognition because I made it past seventeen traps and tripwires before getting my foot "blown off" by a

small cartridge trap. This experience might give some people renewed confidence in their abilities, but I had seen only one of the seventeen traps and tripwires.

### **Arrival**

Once actually assigned to a unit (D/17 Cavalry, 199th Infantry Brigade(Light)(Separate)), I earned my Combat Infantry Badge(CIB) by coming under fire on my first road patrol.

At the little artillery base called Hill 44 near Xuan Loc, about sixteen miles east of Long Binh, during the noon chow call at the mess tent one day, a guy three people ahead of me in line stepped between the pallets instead of on the pallets, and his foot sunk into the ground up to his crotch. That's how we discovered that the entire hill was honeycombed with tunnels, including the area beneath our campsite.

That's also where I began to internalize that paranoia can lead to longevity. Besides, they WERE out to get us.

## Start of TET, 1968

<<[click to look at Tet \(Gallery\)](#)>>

During the beginning of TET, 1968, my track, an M-113 Armored Personnel Carrier(APC), was stationed on the perimeter of a small fire support base. We heard the country go up. A very large fireball followed by a mushroom shaped cloud lit the sky very brightly in the direction of Long Binh.

We counted the seconds between the shock wave and the ground tremor. The calculated distance seemed right for Long Binh. We thought the North Vietnamese Army(NVA) detonated a tactical nuclear weapon.

We got orders by radio for half our contingent to move to the north edge of Long Binh.

We found ourselves on the road, driving those sixteen miles at four AM during TET . Once we took our new positions outside the north fence, we found out that we were wrong about the tactical nukes. NVA sappers blew the Long Binh ammo dump, the largest ammo dump in the world at that time it.

We had four tracks and two companies of infantry covering the whole north edge, facing three reinforced regiments of battle hardened NVA regulars. We held them until about ten AM, when choppers got there.

We lost tracks and people. About noon with the situation in hand, we got orders to run down Highway One to Saigon to support efforts to retake the city.

[The Battle For Tan Son Nhut Air Base-- Troop C 3/4 Cavalry  
25th. Infantry Division](#)

[7th Infantry Regiment in Saigon](#)

[Tet Offensive 1968 : Turning point in Vietnam](#)

## [The Racetrack](#)

[The Battle for Phu Tho Racetrack](#)

[Battle of Saigon-Tan Son Nhut](#)

[The Battle of Saigon-Military Police Gallery](#)

[Picture on the left, fourth from bottom, shows tracks  
lining the street\)](#)

We helped mop up Saigon. The most outstanding incident was when we took out an artillery emplacement that Charley managed to set up in the infield of the Phu To Race Track.

We used .50 caliber machine gun fire to blow openings in the brick wall around the race track (five feet high and four feet thick), then drove through the openings and engaged the enemy.

I will never forget the look on the face of the NVA artilleryman as he frantically cranked his gun down to bear on us, knowing he wasn't going to make it. We received the Valorous Unit Award (the equivalent of giving each man in D Troop the Silver Star) and the Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Palm Unit for our activities.

When we finally returned to Long Binh for a stand down. We found out that the post barber was no longer available to give us a straight razor shave. Someone found him dead on the concertina wire the morning after TET. He was Viet Cong. I still remember him holding a straight razor at my throat.

## Water Runs from the FishNet Factory

We were stationed at a place we called the Fishnet Factory a few miles southwest of Cholon on Highway One for the summer of 1968.

Once every few days our turn would come up to run into Tan Son Nhut for a trailer full of water. My first water run was an education. Air Force officers saw us coming on the air base after quite a while in the field. They saw how dirty and unshaven we were. They shouted to each other "Look! Real soldiers!", and ran to their hooches for their cameras.

We tanked up on water, moved to just outside the gate, and parked. All but one of us left the tracks for an afternoon of relaxation in the middle of downtown Saigon. Our first stop was a Bachelor Enlisted Quarters that served a good steak. When my Filet Mignon hit the table, I was in the bathroom. Someone came in to tell me. I said "Yeah, but look at this!", and flushed the toilet.

Before long, we were all in the bathroom flushing toilets while the steaks cooled. After the meal, we found a place that would give a steam bath and a massage while they laundered our clothes. On our way back to the tracks, one of our guys



lost his wallet when the back of his pants was slashed with a razor. He never even felt it. There was no blood, but we all got a lot more careful walking down the street.

We went into Tan Son Nhut Airbase for water every day. Each track's turn would come up every four or five days. It was very nice to have a half day liberty once or twice a week while it lasted. We actually got to know the area around the main gate of Tan Son Nhut very well. One day I grabbed a taxi to the Cholon PX.

The local sitting next to the driver asked me if I had a ration card. I told him that of course I did. He asked to see it. He painted it with a clear liquid. He showed me that he could now mark off an item, then wipe off the mark. Then he asked me to buy a refrigerator, an air conditioner, and some other stuff.

I told him I didn't have the money. He peeled off about twelve hundred dollars MPC(Military Payment Certificates) from a roll that would choke a horse and gave it to me. I went in the front of the Cholon PX and out the back door. I hailed a cab and went to the Tan Son Nhut PX.

## The Vietnamese National Costume for Women

I wrote home to a friend about the Vietnamese national costume for women.

Phonetically it is called an ow dzai. I ordered one from a small shop near the airbase. I got a sheet of paper with instructions for measuring a woman's body for the outfit.

In addition to the bust, waist, hips, inseam, and height they wanted from the point of the shoulder to the point of the elbow, from the point of the elbow to the wrist, circumference at about four or five places on the arm, point of shoulder to the spine at the back of the neck, and two or three measurements using the nipple as the point of reference.

My friend measured his lady. I paid for the outfit, gave the shop the measurements, waited the required amount of time, and went to pick up the outfit. The shop had been bombed and the neighbors all said that no one had survived.

My friend told me the measuring session was not wasted -- he married her.

## **The Water Buffalo**

At one point in my tour, a driver named Wild Bill was promoted to Track Commander(TC). His driver, Swickie (a phonetic spelling, but we already had a guy called "Alphabet"). With Wild Bill's encouragement he ran down a water buffalo.

That's when we found out that if you killed a water buffalo the US Government shelled out a hundred and twenty five bucks to the household that put in the claim. If you killed the head of the household they only paid twenty-five bucks.

## **Jose Gonzales**

While at the Fishnet Factory, we guarded a general's house trailer nights. In the same compound other elements of the 199th(SEParate)(LIGHT) were stationed -  
- some of them were the 179th Military Intelligence Detachment, 40th Public Information Detachment, 49th Infantry Platoon (Scout Dogs), 11th Combat Tracker Team.

The 40th Public Information Detachment had a guy named Jose Gonzales from Bedford-Stuyversant in New York. He told us his home turf made Watts look like an affluent neighborhood. Jose used to see us in the field while shooting pictures for the Army news (*The Stars and Stripes*). We offered him rides. He always accepted even if he hadn't been planning to go that way. He knew we had cold beer on board. We became friends.

### **Binh Tri Dong Village**

During the May offensive a convoy we escorted ran into an ambush. The Third Platoon started at Fire Base Smoke in the Binh Chanh District, southwest of the Cholon District of Saigon.

In early May, the Third Platoon engaged in actions in Binh Tri Dong Village along with elements of the 3rd Battalion, 7th Infantry. These actions lasted for three days. We lost one vehicle and three enlisted men.

We started the mission as an escort for a 200 vehicle convoy. When we entered Binh Tri Dong Village we noticed that the children, usually on the side of the

road, begging for candy and rations, were not in evidence. Many of the members of the Platoon predicted an ambush. We aggressively engaged the enemy and sent the convoy on by another route when we were hit. We remained engaged for almost five days. That is the longest period in my life that I have been continuously awake.

We lost a track. The next day the shell of that track was hit by a 500 pound bomb, and blown a quarter mile down the road. After the action, we were required to sift through the mud that filled that track, looking for some piece of the remains of the track commander so that he could be classified Killed in Action(KIA) instead of Missing in Action(MIA) in spite of the fact that at least five of us saw the man take a hit to the head just before he dropped though his hatch. We found a thumb bone, with knuckle. It took three and a half hours.

Also, during this action, our TC's track(Wild Bill's--36) had two cherries for gunners, and they cowered in a corner of their track, refusing to man their weapons. The TC (Wild Bill) threatened to shoot them both with his .45 if they didn't pump some rounds through their 60s. At the next slackening in the actual battle, Wild Bill traded one of the cherries to my TC for me. I was officially

transferred later from my old track. I served on Bill's track until his DEROS(Date Estimated Return Over Seas).

Part of my new responsibility was to keep that other cherry straight. During the action, another sergeant rigged a .50 caliber starlight scope to his .50 caliber machine gun(MG), sighted it in, switched the .50 to single shot, and began bagging VC one at a time with one head shot for each in the middle of the night and no moon. The starlight scope was amazing.

The next morning, the VC were gone as though they had never been. At the end of this action, I drew first guard and still had no sleep. Partway through my guard shift I hallucinated a large purple dragon bounding across the free fire zone, so I opened fire.

When the excitement died down, I got to go to sleep, and someone else pulled guard. We were awarded the Presidential Unit Citation for our activities during those five days. That is the equivalent of awarding each man in the platoon the Distinguished Service Cross.

I am still trying to prove that this was the action for that citation. The book lists the award as given to the first platoon, but they were on standdown. At around this time, my CO promised me the next open TC slot.

Our first assignment after the May offensive was to go to a big banana plantation southwest of Saigon, and police up all the gear left behind by a contingent of the 9th Infantry when they cut and ran from a couple of sniper rounds the day before. We recovered about a quarter of the stuff they dropped.

### **The Fourth of July Barbeque**

With nothing special planned for the Fourth of July we decided to make a celebration ourselves. We cut a fifty-five gallon drum in half lengthwise and used the halves to make a really big barbecue grill. Jack Payne (originally from Texas and still owes me money) announced to the world that no one knew how to barbecue as well as he did.

We broke into the general's refrigerator and stole a couple of hundred steaks. The general came by later and we thought it only fair to invite him to join us for a steak. He was impressed. He was a gentleman when he found out that his reefer supplied the steaks and there was no fuss.

## **Summer**

We were part of ambushes. blocking forces and village sweeps all summer.

During one of these actions, I had the very good fortune to have a bullet bounce off my helmet. I had just moved my head.

One day, our driver went through a haystack and its center pole was infested with red ants. We got off the track and got naked very fast. We dove into the nearby rice paddy.

Another day the driver went through a clump of bamboo. The thorns opened my arm so bad that the medic offered me a Purple Heart after the stitches. I had seen all the John Wayne movies. I turned him down because it wasn't a "real wound."

## **Smitty**

We decided to break the boredom one day by pissing Smitty off. No one had ever seen Smitty pissed off. About a dozen of us sat around a small clearing while at the focal point Smitty continued performing self maintenance type tasks.



He shaved. He cleaned his M-16, a .45 and an M-60. He swept the dirt out the back of his track. All the while we were saying things that were intended to get him angry. After the first hour most of us that were white ran down, and could not think of any insults that we had not already tried. We had already said the nastiest things we could think of.

A half hour later everybody had lapsed into silence but the guys from Bed Sty and Watts. They kicked it into high gear and the rest of us got an education in how to insult. After an hour of this, Smitty picked up his M-16 and fired off a whole clip. By the end of the clip there was no one but Smitty visible in the clearing. There were small voices from nowhere saying stuff like "Hey, Man, we was just funning. No need to pop caps."

Smitty put the smoking weapon back in its place, walked across the clearing to within two meters of where I had been sitting, reached into the grass, and held over his head an eight foot King Cobra with the head shot off. He dropped it, and went back to what he had been doing. To this day no one knows whether Smitty had been upset at all, but no one in the unit ever tried to piss him off again.

## **Surprise!**

We were stationed at a small fire base when an incident took place that changed the way that I dealt with new people.

One of the grunts near us flipped out, stood up and began killing GIs with his M-16. When it was over, fifteen seconds later, five people were dead. His own guys shot him to death, but not before he had killed four of his own. More were wounded.

This was within thirty yards of me. After that, I tested people. I didn't trust them until I saw how they reacted after they have completely lost their temper. I pushed. A friend of mine once told me that I was "cordially disliked" by all that knew me well. Maybe so, but I knew what any of them would do under duress or extreme provocation.

## **Johnny the Kit Carson Scout**

We had a Kit Carson scout that sometimes worked with us. We called him Johnny. He had been a Viet Cong(VC) for a little longer than all of his adult life.

They start some of them young. He had been on a mission to a small village with his VC unit when it suddenly dawned on him that it was his home ville.

He started trying to find family. He caught two of the men in his unit raping his sister. He killed them. He went around the ville killing every member of his own unit. Then he found an American unit, and applied for the Cheu Hoi program.

When he finished debriefing and retraining, he began working with our units. He showed us a lot of caches, tunnels, and other things in our area of operations.

Johnny had picked up some VC prisoners and got some information regarding cache locations. A couple of tracks took out a platoon or two to find the stuff. It wasn't in the first location, or the second, or the third.

The scout was beating the two VC with us pretty severely every time there was nothing to show for the exercise. As we were going down the road to the next spot two figures jumped up and ran about 500 meters to our left. The prisoners screamed "VC! VC!" so we shot the running figures. They turned out to be a five and an eight year old from the last ville. The villagers and the parents came out to find out about their kids.

The scout beat both VC to death, in front of the parents, so they could watch. It took most of the afternoon. He graciously allowed the parents of the children to administer the coup de grace. We were forbidden by the "rules" to get involved -- it was an internal Vietnamese matter. That's when I became a heavy drinker.

### **The Joy of Flying**

Returning from an action, we watched as an F-111 flipped over and nose-dived into a ville, doing a lot of damage to the plane, and not helping the ville at all either. An eight-year old girl was badly burned. There was a funeral procession on the road, and we commandeered the vehicle, off-loaded the coffin, and sent the girl to an aid station.

We had 8 tracks and 200 infantry. We cordoned off the ville until the flyboys could come and pick up their little black box. This incident taught me a lot about cultural differences. The Vietnamese protested through channels about the tremendous disrespect that we had shown to the dead by interrupting his funeral procession for something so unimportant as a girl. She would probably have died without our involvement. That was far less important than the respect due the dead guy.

## **REMFs**

I watched two REMF's(Rear Echelon Mother Figures/Fuckers) get into an argument about which of them was the more macho. They held their forearms together with each one's fist at the others elbow. An impartial observer dropped a lit cigarette between the two arms. The first to pull his arm away from the hot cigarette would lose the bet.

Five cigarettes and some bad burns later, neither had moved his arm. They decided it was a draw. One went to the medics to get the burn dressed. The other didn't. His got severely infected. That was within a week of another REMF paying one of our guys to drop a track's ramp on his foot so he could go home. It almost worked. He got light duty and walked around in a cast for several weeks.

## **The Wire (but not HBO)**

At one point we were pulling perimeter security for a small fire base. The 199th brigade got orders to pull out to allow the 82nd Airborne to take over the task. The D/17 tracks remained to make the transition smoother.

It was the first field assignment in-country for a brigade of the 82nd. They came in about 10 AM while our guys were loading onto a Chinook. They scoped out the

area and set up their night patrols. At dusk we heard a knock on the combat door of our ramp. The only time I ever heard such a knock.

We were on the corner of the perimeter, and they had two patrols that didn't know how to exit through the concertina. I stepped on it to show them how, and held it while they went through. The first patrol went out about 50 meters and began moving across the face of the perimeter parallel to the wire. The second patrol started out towards the other side.

Their closest machine gun pit opened fire on the first patrol. I ran down and dived over the sandbags catching the gunner in a necktie tackle. My TC was right behind me, and tackled the gunner's buddy just before he killed me. He thought I was the biggest VC in the world.

The guy I left hung up in the wire had a sore crotch for days. The next morning their colonel jacked me up for failing to salute him at the wire. I pointed to the woodline and told him that the only officer that I saluted that far out in the field was an officer that I wanted to see dead. Then I asked him if he wanted a salute, SIR! Without another word, he turned and walked away.

## The Land Deal

In October or November I took R&R in Hong Kong. I called home, and told my folks that I had extended for 66 days for the 150 day early out when I got home. One guy in my outfit refused to extend seven days for that early out.

I reassured my folks that they didn't have to worry about a thing as long as Johnson didn't halt the bombing. Two days later, while I was still in Hong Kong, Johnson halted the bombing.

I went to the Penthouse Suite of the Hong Kong Hilton, got very drunk, and, with a good-time girl on each knee signed the paperwork to buy some Florida swampland from a company called GAC that has since been disbanded after being found guilty of land fraud.

All that concerned me was that the contract included a life insurance that paid off in the event of my death, and did not exclude acts of war. A couple of years after I got home, the property went back for non payment during an extended period of unemployment.

## A Quiet Fall

We knew we were going to get hit hard at Thanksgiving. It didn't happen. We did get Thanksgiving dinner flown out to the field, and served to us by Donut Dollies.

Eighty-seven of us came down with Ptomaine poisoning. We knew we were going to get hit hard at Christmas. It didn't happen. We knew we were going to get hit hard at New Year's. It didn't happen. We did see a spectacular fireworks show. Everyone with ammo to burn burned some.

We knew we were going to get hit hard during Nixon's inauguration. It happened. Fortunately, I wasn't there. My plane was landing in the teeth of a blizzard in Anchorage, Alaska for refueling. I watched the wing tip come within six inches of the ground. I thought how ironic it would be that I survived the tour, one of three percent in my outfit without a purple heart, one of two percent to finish my tour without any venereal disease(VD), and then die on the plane ride home. I didn't die and finished out processing the same day.

When we got to Oakland, California we were entitled to a steak dinner. The sergeant in charge of the process told everyone who wanted their dinner to get in



one line, and everyone who wanted out of the Army to get into another line. He had no takers for the dinner.

I decided to buy my own damn dinner as a civilian. I suspect that the money for our dinners went into his account. We accepted whatever they told us so we could get out faster. That has made it much more difficult to prove service connection for a number of things that are not documented.

### **A Civilian Again**

When we finished out processing, and knew that we were civilians again (seventy-two hours from the field to civilian on the streets). About thirty of us decided that we were going to stop at the first restaurant on the other side of the Bay Bridge (between Oakland and San Francisco). We all knew we would never see each other again. We wanted to have that steak dinner together before going home.

We picked the first nice restaurant with a bar. We went in and ordered our first round of drinks. The bartender explained that we would all have to show ID because the drinking age was 21 in California. We pulled him halfway across the

bar by his lapels (we were being nice -- it was the lapels and not the throat) and someone explained the facts to him.

He told us that he would serve us under duress, but would have to call the police. He served the round of drinks, and then called the police because two thirds of us, all combat vets, were not yet 21 years old.

When the police arrived, we explained that we were all combat vets, and we were going to sit down and have dinner -- with drinks -- before going home. They explained that it was illegal. We explained that there were thirty of us willing to die if we didn't get that dinner. Did they want to push hard? We had dinner. Since then, I view a lot of laws as optional.

By the way, the CO that promised me the next TC slot DEROS'ed before it came up. The promise was never honored, and I finished as a SP4 instead of an E5.

\_\_Senzig

<<click to play>>

[We've Got to Get Out of This Place](#) (Eric Burdon and the Animals)

*“Most requested song on Armed Forces Radio when I was in Vietnam”*

--Adrian Cronauer (the movie Good Morning Vietnam was based on his life)



[Army Commendation Medal - ARCOM](#)

presented for sustained acts

of heroism or meritorious service.



[National Defense Service Medal - NDSM](#)



[Vietnam Service Medal](#)



[Vietnam \(RVN\) Gallantry Cross Military Medal](#)

accomplishing

deeds of valor or displaying heroic conduct while fighting the enemy.



[Republic Of Vietnam Campaign Medal](#)



[Republic of Vietnam Civil Actions Medal 1/C](#)

[Army Combat Infantry Badge](#)



[Army Combat Infantry Badge](#)



## [Army Valorous Unit Award](#)

The Army Valorous Unit Award is a prestigious award for extraordinary heroism in action against an armed enemy of the United States in a single action or short period of time. It is the unit award equivalent of earning a Silver Star for an individual action. The highest unit award is the Presidential Unit Citation, with the Valorous Unit Award being the second highest.

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