

My Arrival

By Dave Flores

What to write about, I have the hardest time trying to come up with the subject of the article. I am always hoping for stories to be sent to me from the guys, but memories are fading. Times, places, names are all harder to remember now. So I sat, shaking those marbles in my head, trying to come up with what to write about. Thinking back to those days across the pond, I thought, how in the hell did I end up with the “LURPS”!

First of all, I found out that most had come from line units, volunteering for the lurp unit. So they came with some experience under their belts. Some in house training on small unit tactics and procedures, what the goals of the unit were and then you were assigned to a team. What follows is how my first month went following my arrival at Cam Ranh Bay.

I and eleven others were drafted into the company! I arrived in country, May of 1968. I had orders for the 173rd Airborne Brigade. During the processing of everyone and getting them all on the right trucks, the sergeant in charge hollered out, “When I call your name, stand over here”. Well, he collected the orders we had and gave us our new ones. We were all now assigned to, F Company, 52nd Infantry, (LRRP) Airborne Det, 1st Infantry Div. the twelve of us where all Airborne qualified and now we were all headed for a leg outfit! We were headed for Bien Hoa, right next to Saigon. During our trip South, we asked anyone who looked like they had been around, if they knew what the “LURPS” were. A little laugh, a “you guys are screwed”, and they would walk. Most people we asked had no idea what kind of outfit we were headed for. The Big Red One’s replacement depot was located Di An. Once we arrived there, we were told to hang out and a truck from our company would be coming to get us. That happened the next day. You remember, “hurry up and wait”!! Another thing that confused the heck out of us was those guys that kept yelling, “SHORT”, and then laughing at us. Well, we lonely twelve still were clueless as to where or what kind of outfit we were headed for.

Next day the truck showed, a young, thin sergeant hollered out, “all those for F Company, 52nd Infantry, get on the truck”. He introduced himself as sergeant Mike Sharp, and we were headed for Lai Khe base camp, on highway 13. This was about 35 miles N/W of Saigon. He told us Lai Khe is known as “Rocket City” and the commanding general of the 1st Division lives there. I asked if we would get weapons before we left Di An. He said, “I have one and that’s enough”. With that, we were on the road out of Bien Hoa.

The base camp was located in the middle of a rubber plantation. Highway 13 ran right through the middle of it. The company area had barbed wire strung around it and appeared small.

The truck stops, and there to our right is this painted sign, our company sign. Seems everyone is outside and in formation. No one had shirts on and every one was already sweating. An NCO came over to the truck and hollered, "get the _____ off the truck and fall into that formation without your shirts". We did so and the formation was moved onto the road where we heard those words, DOUBLE TIME. Yes, we were going on a run! Led by our 1st Sergeant, SFC Morton, tall, lean, deep voice and in charge! I did not finish that first run and I did not finish the run the next day. The heat was kicking my butt and I just hadn't adjusted yet. Well, 1st Sergeant Morton laid it out, "make the runs or you'll be transferred out of the company. Our company had PT and Sergeant Morton was great on all the runs. You see, all those grunt companies around the base camp just loved to holler all kinds of crap at us as we ran by. Sergeant Morton would stop the formation and call them names or invite them to come over for an, "ass whipping".

Within a few days we all started our in-house training. Small unit operations, forget what we learned in AIT. Compass reading, immediate action drills, E&E tactics, equipment, and radio. Also lots of time at the firing range to practice what we learned. Soon we started taking little walks outside the base camp, going little father each time. Before we knew it, we were assigned to a team. I was assigned to Sergeant Mike Sharp's team. This was the first guy I spoke to from the company, the truck driver! As he looked us over, he just started pointing to guys and telling them their job on the team. I got the radio! I told him I knew nothing about radios, and he said, "don't worry, I'll teach you all you need to know". More training now, only this was with your own team.

Right next to our company area was this replacement company. New guys would go there before going to their real companies, some sort of indoctrination jive. During one of the many rocket attacks, this area took a hit. We all ran over to help; this was my first sight of dead or wounded GI's. It let me know this place was for real, in not a very nice way. I also thought that I have damn near a whole year to go.

All this time in the company, we new guys are listening to the radio transmissions from teams in the field. We are hearing their stories when they return from the field. We are asking questions. It's now June of 1968, there's a team in the field, and things are getting pretty hairy for them. They need an extraction and there were no choppers close. There is one; it's a Cobra Gun ship! The team leader knew they would be done if they

didn't get picked up quick and I think the Cobra pilot knew this too. Well, the pilot went for the pick up and the team jumped on! A ride is a ride! Everyone made it out and the only extraction of its kind during the entire war! Based on what I had seen since my arrival to the company and my new training, being drafted into this company was a good thing!

With Sergeant Sharp's team ready to go, we packed up and were headed to Quan Loi base camp along with Sergeant Mattoon's team. The brigade up there called for two teams to do recon work for them. The two teams pulled quite a number of patrols. Some we operated together and others we worked separately. Let me say at this point, sergeants Sharp and Mattoon taught us a lot more once we started working in the field. I know that I and "Giant" (aka, Don Hildebrandt) feel that those two sergeants made us survivors. We operated out of Quan Loi till October of 1968, when we returned to Lai Khe base camp.

Time moves on, and so do your Sergeants, your team leaders and friends. Some gets orders for home, some get wounds that send them home, and some go home in a way they never expected. From what I have read, 1968 was the highest year for casualties. Of the twelve of us that were drafted into the company, four came home. Many things happened to me during my tour and on patrols. Some of these things changed me forever, as with many of us. We are all glad that we made it home, we love seeing everyone at our reunions and we enjoy the get-togethers so much. As we think back at those times, some of our own experiences come in, and some think, "WHY DID I MAKE IT HOME, AND NOT _____???"

Dave Flores