

## THE VIETNAM WAR: LETTER 2



This letter  
writer  
discusses  
the realities  
of war and  
pacifism.

Company F,  
Long Range Patrol,  
51st Infantry (Airborne)  
October 3, 1968, at  
Cu Chi, South Vietnam.  
L to R: SGT Gary Ford  
and PFC Danny Arvo

31 Aug 69

Red,

I am lying in a green world with a green canvas roof over me, green sandbags walk around me, dressed in green camouflage fatigues and sitting on a green cot that once was white but now is mildewed while all around me an act of God is blowing this little radio station apart. We're getting the tail end of a tropical storm that has blown in down by Da Nang and is moving up north towards us. The monsoons are almost upon us. It's raining fairly hard, fog has cut visibility to seventy feet at high noon and gusts at night and a thirty mile an hour wind is gusting over our little relay station playing hell with my tent, blowing down our radio antennas and slowly but surely uprooting the cyclone fence around our little knoll that is supposed to protect us from incoming RPG's (rocket propelled grenades). Yesterday some asshole threw a white phosphorous grenade down the windward side of the hill and the resulting fire almost burned down our little post. Burning timbers made a screen out of my tent so now I'm sitting in here cold, wet and literally dirty after eight days up here fairly miserably - yet strangely content. My team was supposed to be relieved today but the weather has grounded the choppers and cut off all resupply so not only are we stuck up here till this blows over but we are low on food and almost out of water. Ammo is plentiful however and that's the important thing, a cold, hungry and thirsty man can fight but a warm well fed and satiated man can't without ammunition. Yesterday our little garrison was hit by a third with one entire team being annihilated and no replacements

## THE VIETNAM WAR: LETTER 2 [continued]

coming in. We are consolidated into two positions about a hundred meters apart with no one manning the hill between us and the fog keeping us from observing the ground. This makes for a very nervous situation, especially since our support will be erratic at best and non-existent at worst in this weather if Victor comes up the hill. The merry life of a Ranger in the Orient.

I don't really know the reason I'm writing this. You wrote me once, which was nice; and you were the first for which I'm grateful but I think I'll hold this when I get back and see if you write again. Sort of childishly playing tit for tat with I see if you were dropping a line for the govt or care to send an old Toronto, a word or two every now and then. Actually I'm writing because I have to write or go out of my mind and you're "it" so to speak. Things happen over here that you just can't keep to yourself - if you do you wind on them, slowly go "flak happy", get careless and eventually get "popped" when your mind has strayed from the job at hand. Sometimes, especially when inactivity has you going crazy and staring at the walls, you've got to talk things out and it helps a lot if the other person is either a buddy over here who's been through the pain too and can understand or a member of the opposite sex who can't and you hope is never all too. Even if I don't mail this at last I'll have written it out which will make me feel better.

Last Monday I went on my first Hunter Killer operation and saw Mars close up for the first time. We had two teams - twelve men - inserted at dawn about two miles inland and slightly north of Chu Lai about an hour off the chopsons we set up around a trail and a lone NVA officer walked into the

middle of us. We tried for a row but he panicked and took off in a blizzard of shells. I had him in my sights threw three slugs at him and he just disappeared. No Hollywood theatrics, one minute he's a living, running human being the next second he's down, just a red lump of clay. At first I thought it was I that got him but it was a shotgun blast that brought them down and I carry an M16 so now I'm not sure. After that everyone in his way distance knew we were in the area but on Hunter Killer operations we stay to fight rather than retreat upon breaking contact. We found some huts the NVA had been working on then moved out across a dead up gully where all hell broke loose. We were strung out on open ground with the point man less than 10 feet from the NVA when we were ambushed with grenades + automatic weapons. If they'd had a heavy M6 or a mortar we'd all be dead but as it was we were uncharacteristically lucky and not a man was killed. Two men took shrapnel in the face + I took some in the shoulder and then our NCO and point assaulted the ambushing force, the wounded man rushed the NVA after them and Victor broke contact and ran. We ran into the woodline but the NVA back twice without taking any real casualties. Then after being pinned down for about two hours were extracted under air support. Only one of us was really wounded - my wound and one other man's being insignificant - but we really lacked out that time!

The frightening thing about it all is that it is so very easy to "kill" in war. There's no remorse, no theatrical "washing of the hands" to get rid of non-existent blood, not even any regrets. When it happens you

are more afraid than you've ever been in your life - my hands shook so much I had trouble reloading and it took a visible effort to perform each motion and control what would normally be called panic but which, somehow, isn't. You're scared, really scared and there's no thinking about it. You kill because that little SOB is doing his best to kill you and you desperately want to live, to go home, to get drunk or walk down the street on a date again and suddenly the grenades aren't going off any more, the weapons stop and unbeliavably fast it seems, it's all over and you're alive because someone else is either dead or so anxious to stay alive that he's run away and you are the victor - if there is such a thing in war. You don't think about it...

I have truly come to envy the honest pacifist who honestly believes that no killing is permissible and can, with a clear conscience, stay home and not take part in these conflicts. I wish I could do the same but I can't see letting another take my place and my risks over here and the pacifist ideal can't drive over my own objection to it from my mind; the fact that the only reason pacifists such as the Amish can even live in an orderly society is because someone - be they police or soldiers - is taking risks to keep the wolves away. To be a sheep in a world of sheep is one thing, to be a sheep in a world of predators something else and if someone hides behind the label of sheep due to cowardice while another has to take his place holding the predators at bay..... somehow I just can't see it, or do it - not when I can't believe in it. I guess that's why I'm over here, why I fought so hard to come here and why, even though I'm scared

most of the time, I'm content to be here. At least I'm doing my part according to what I believe. The only thing keeping the wolves from the flock are the hounds. But I tell you that, allegorically speaking, it is a hard and scary task to be a wolfhound.

I've run on here for quite a bit and am sorry if I bore you but it helps to talk some things out and there aren't too many good conversationalists to write to. I hope you don't mind my ranting on like this but it looks like I'm going to be stopped now as the winds are up to 50 MPH and my tent is slowly being demolished and I've got to head for the trenches. This is shaping up to a full scale hurricane which is expected to develop 80 MPH winds up this high. It looks like a cold, wet, rough night which will be made more so by the fact that all our clothes are tropical gear. I hope somebody, somewhere is having fun tonight.

George

## LETTER 2: TRANSCRIPT

31 Aug 69

Red,

*I am living in a green world with a green canvas roof over me...dressed in green camouflage fatigues and sitting on a green cot that once was white but now is mildewed while all around me an act of God is blowing this little radio station apart. We're getting the tail end of a tropical storm that has moved in down by Da Nang and is moving up north toward us. The monsoons are almost upon us. It's raining fairly hard, fog has cut visibility to seventy feet at high noon and zero at night and a thirty mile an hour wind is gusting over our little relay station playing hell with my tent, blowing down our radio antennas and slowly but surely uprooting the cyclone fence around our little knoll that is supposed to protect us from incoming RPG's [rocket propelled grenades]. Yesterday some dunces threw a white phosphorous grenade down the windward side of the hill and the resulting fire almost burned down our little post. Burning embers made a screen out of my tent, so now I'm sitting in here cold, wet, unbelievably dirty after eight days up here, fairly miserable - get strangely content. My team was supposed to be relieved today but the weather has grounded the choppers and cut off all resupply so not only are we stuck up here till this blows over but are low on food and almost out of water. Ammo is plentiful however, and that's the important thing; a cold hungry and thirsty man can fight but a warm, well fed and satiated man can't without ammunition.... We are consolidated into two positions about one hundred meters apart with no one manning the hill between us and the fog keeping us from observing the ground. This makes for a very nervous situation, especially since air support will be erratic at best and non-existent at worst in this weather if Victor comes up the hill. The merry life of a Ranger in the Orient.*

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*The frightening thing about it all is that it is so very easy to kill in war.... You kill because that little SOB is doing his best to kill you and you desperately want to live, to go home...or walk down a street on a date again and suddenly the grenades aren't going off any more, the weapons stop and unbelievably fast it seems, it's all over and you're alive because someone else is either dead or so anxious to stay alive that he's run away and you are the victor - if there is such a thing in war.*

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George