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Brigade, 1st Battalion 52d Infantry, infantrymen, grunts, infantry
combat, Chu Lai, MACV advisors

Vietnam Vignettes —Tales of an Infantryman

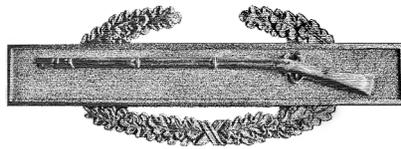
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VIETNAM VIGNETTES

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Tales of an Infantryman



LEE BASNAR

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Front cover photos

Left: The author, center, interrogates a captured Viet Cong soldier in Binh Dinh province. August 1967.

Center: In Quang Ngai province, a platoon medic bandages jungle rot on a soldier's legs while another soldier reads a letter from home. November 1970.

Right: A Vietnamese peasant weaves a basket from split bamboo near the village of Tra Binh. January 1971.

Back cover photo

Self-portrait of Lee Basnar. April 2004.

Cover and interior photos are from the Lee Basnar collection.

Vietnam map adapted from
http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/vietnam_pol92.jpg

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TO THE OFFICERS AND MEN OF C COMPANY
1ST BATTALION, 52ND INFANTRY
198TH INFANTRY BRIGADE
AMERICAL DIVISION

*You fought hard,
suffered much,
and bear the scars,
both visible and invisible.
May your remaining years
be filled with the satisfaction
that you did your job well,
and may you never forget
our absent comrades.*

Foreword

Each generation of Americans since this country was founded has called on its young men to make sacrifices on the battlefield. Each generation has transformed young men from ordinary citizens into warriors who performed deeds not imaginable by the average person. These young warriors came home and were expected to blend back into society as if they had never left, their experiences locked up, only to be released on special occasions.

Each war has produced a few good books describing life in the trenches, but usually they focus on a few individuals or special units, ignoring the true heroes: the infantrymen, or “grunts.” *Vietnam Vignettes* is one of those rare works that show life as it was for those in conventional units, slugging it out with the enemy and living daily life between battles. Each deadly encounter in *Vietnam Vignettes* accurately depicts the excitement and danger of combat and the sacrifices the grunts made for their buddies. It describes the routine of the battlefield, and the awesome responsibility of command to keep the soldiers on their toes.

The author has a special talent for giving the reader the view from both the officer’s and the enlisted man’s side. While no individuals are singled out by name for doing great deeds or for being not-so-great officers, the author skillfully describes situations that affected the life of the grunt. To use names would take away from the true value of the book and from the credit due the common infantryman.

Vietnam Vignettes recognizes our true heroes, gives family members a better understanding of what their loved ones went through, and what may have been going on in their minds while they were away.

Those of us who had the great honor of leading our fine young soldiers in battle know how special this generation is. The Vietnam War was our nation's longest war, and I suggest that it rivals the American Civil War for dividing the nation. The draftees and enlistees went to Vietnam despite having many reasons to justify not going. Politicians, clergy, educators and even movie stars were protesting the war, and yet most soldiers went into danger because of a sense of duty or honor.

Most combat commanders know who the real heroes are and will applaud this book that honors them. Thank you, Lee Basnar, for your service to your country, and thank you for *Vietnam Vignettes!*

Drew Dix

MAJOR
U.S. ARMY (RETIRED)
MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENT

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Preface

*...His vision dims, and yesteryear
Is vividly revealed.
He hears the cannon, fights the fear
In far-off battlefields...*

Excerpt from the poem
“A Soldier Retires”
by Lee Basnar

This book describes what it was like to be an infantryman fighting on Vietnam’s coastal plain and in the jungles in the area known as II Corps and I Corps. The years described include 1967–1968 and 1970–1971. Those are the years I served in that war, and the men whose actions I describe are either South Vietnamese soldiers whom I advised during my first tour, or American soldiers whom I led during my second tour.

Infantrymen in all wars share common experiences, and every grunt who fought in Vietnam will recognize scenes and descriptions in this book that he’ll swear happened in his unit or in the one next to his.

In one instance, using creative nonfiction, I compiled memories of individuals’ dialogue and several battle scenes into one chapter, “Keep Your Head Down,” rather than scatter the scenes throughout the book.

There was no other way to depict the bonding of infantrymen under fire. Otherwise, the tales in this book show the action and incidents as I remember them.

Every infantryman retains memories of firefights, booby traps, mines, and spider holes. Two soldiers who fought side by side in the same battle will remember and describe the action differently. Each infantry unit developed a distinct personality, and each tour, for those who spent more than one tour over there, was a unique experience.

Vietnam affected a generation of Americans, as did World Wars I and II and the Korean War. Although not global in scale like the world wars, nor fought in set-piece battles over key terrain like the Korean War, the Vietnam War lasted longer than the United States' involvement in the other three wars combined. Tens of thousands of Americans died in Vietnam, and hundreds of thousands suffered injuries from wounds, accidents, and mental trauma.

This book is not about the scale of the war nor about American casualty statistics and enemy body counts. It's not about high-level tactics and large battles. It's not about strategic objectives, nor about the political ramifications of fighting and eventually giving up on the war. These are my memories of the beauty and the ugliness of South Vietnam, of the monsoons, the odors, the rattle of machine guns, the tracers lashing the darkness, the misery and the humor, and the tough life of an infantryman in Charlie Company.

Lee Basnar

SIERRA VISTA, ARIZONA

2004

Chapter 8



The Man in White

Deep wrinkles furrowed his brow and cheeks. He shuffled, cumbered by his years. Ivory thatch and goatee complemented his white shirt and trousers, contrasting with green bamboo hedge and brown paddy. He was barefoot. Puttering near a hedgerow, he waved and watched as we—alert and cautious—traversed a fallow field.

Charlie Company had conducted a helicopter combat assault into a nearby rice paddy two nights before, where we reinforced a platoon fighting off a fierce attack near some grass shacks in Dodge City.

After that battle, and after the firefights that followed, we swept the neighboring fields and hedges under a sweltering sun, searching for the Viet Cong who usually triggered a gunfight in and around Dodge. The VC honeycombed the ville with spider holes and tunnels; finding them all proved impossible. We destroyed those we found, but on each ramble through Dodge we encountered new burrows and fresh enemy soldiers.

Enemy automatic weapons fire crackled, digging up the ground around us, driving us to cover behind the nearest paddy dike. The

firefight intensified as we fought back with rifles, machine guns, and grenade launchers. I forgot about the man in white, concentrating instead on staying alive and defeating the enemy. The brief fight ended, inconclusive, with no friendly losses. We would search the distant tree line for evidence of enemy casualties.

Advancing toward the enemy-occupied hedgerow, I flinched as heart-wrenching wailing wavered across the paddy. Turning toward the sound, I glimpsed a bent old woman hobbling toward the trees to my left, arms stretched in front of her as if pulled by an invisible cord. She threw herself onto the ground, disappearing behind the trees and shrubs.

I remembered the man in white standing near those trees, and with ugly suspicion tormenting me I changed direction, striding to the tree line.

Beyond the trees, arms wrapped around her dead husband, the widow vented her anger, her grief, her despair. She screamed, she bawled, she sobbed, and finally she whimpered, sinking into the emptiness of a future without her mate. Her tears diluted a red splotch that merged with others as his blood seeped from multiple bullet holes in his shirt, transforming his white clothing to crimson.

Our eyes met. I shuddered at the anguish and intense hatred surging across the abyss that separated us. Her feelings needed no common language to bridge the distance from her soul to mine. Unable to withstand such intensity, I shifted my gaze to the dead farmer. As if he had known the end was near, and had welcomed it, his wrinkled face was serene. Choked with emotion, I whispered, "I'm sorry," and turned away.

The hapless man's strange reaction, standing upright in full view and waving when caught in the middle of a firefight, mystified me. Whether he attempted to draw our attention away from the VC's position I can't say. Perhaps he tried to warn us. The poor peasant died as he had lived, with dignity and calm acceptance of his fate.

The man in white became just another number in a war where inflated statistics enhanced or destroyed careers. Uncertain as to which side caused his death, I reported him as a VC killed in action. He probably was a VC, at least when the Viet Cong controlled his village. When we won the shoot-outs, he became a friendly Vietnamese farmer. Without the means to change his circumstances, he changed his loyalty. I couldn't blame him for that.

I turned for a final look at that huddled heap of human misery and then walked away, toward the next hedgerow and the next firefight.

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