

WELCOME TO VIETNAM

Ben Hunt's first days in a combat zone coincided with the Tet Offensive

By BEN HUNT
For The Daily Astorian

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So there I was. Coming out of a deep sleep, wondering why the fireworks were so much louder now. It was the 31st of January 1968. I was in Bien Hoa, Vietnam. A 20-year-old kid from the coast of Oregon, in a transit barracks waiting to go on KP at 0400 hours.

I'd arrived the day before with 300 or so other hungover GIs; stepping off the plane after a 24-hour flight from San Francisco, into 120 degree heat. When we came in for a landing, I noticed we had picked up fighter escorts. Then I was amazed to see palm trees and thatched huts and water buffalo, and lots of people with flat cone-shaped hats. It looked like Disneyland. After we had found our gear and waited the obligatory hour, we were bused through the village to the transit center.

All along the way, I was surprised to see people in black pajamas. We had been told the dreaded Viet Cong wore black pajamas. Either the pajamas were common, or there were a lot of Cong out in the open.

We spent the afternoon doing what soldiers do most — waiting. I had drifted off that night into a sweaty bothered sleep. There were fireworks all around us in the night. It was Tet, the lunar New Year, and people were celebrating. The sergeant who volunteered us for KP had told us we were under a yellow alert, but not to worry. It was just Tet. Nothing was going to happen. As I came to, wondering why the fireworks were so much louder, there was a huge explosion nearby; I was instantly awake and on my feet. We were under attack. I stuck my head out the door and saw several GIs sitting on the wood sidewalk, watching the show.

"Come on out," one of them said. "You're as safe right here as anywhere." I took the next seat in the row. It was just like a John Wayne movie. The explosions, the balls of fire followed by a loud report. I looked down the row of hootches we newbies occupied. The third one down the street was gone. "What did that?" I asked.

"Rocket. They're all dead." I was coming into Vietnam as he was going out. It was old hat to him. He'd seen it all too many times to feel it now.

Feb. 1, 1968

I was still cracking eggs when we heard the staccato firecracker pops of a firefight.

For every huge rocket explosion there were several smaller mortar rounds that thudded in like giants' steps — slowly walking across the compound, searching. During a brief lull the NCO (non-commissioned officer) who'd volunteered us for KP came down to get us. "Army's gotta eat," he said. "Breakfast starts at 0500 come hell or high water." We followed him up the hill to the mess hall.

It was a large plywood structure, with the kitchen in the back and tables in front, where screened windows looked across the road and into the jungle-filled gully between us and the next American installation a couple hundred yards away.

"Flashlights only," he said. "We don't need to be targets any more than we have to." I began cracking eggs into a big pot, holding the flashlight in my mouth. Others worked around me, flashlights in their mouths or under their arms. An occasional mortar thud kept talk to a minimum. I was still cracking eggs when we heard the staccato firecracker pops of a firefight coming from in front of the mess hall. We all dropped what we were doing and moved to the front to watch the action through the screen windows.

It was taking place maybe 25 yards in front of us. A red dirt road came down the hill from the left and across in front of the mess hall. The jungle began about 5 yards beyond the road. Triple rows of concertina wire defined the boundary. The guards were on our side of the road, behind a sandbag fortification — shooting over and around it. The enemy was across the road in the jungle, not 20 yards away, and tracers were flying back and forth. It sounded like multiple strings of firecrackers going off, a wave of pops and flashes, then a lull.

It was quite a show for a new kid. A guard came running in the side door, "Get the hell away from those windows!" he shouted. "They can see you!" Just as he said it a spray of machine gun fire traced across the front of the mess hall. The guy next to me screamed and went down, I dove under the nearest table. I could hear my heart beating. I was scared; I hugged the cool cement.



Submitted Photo

Though trained as an all-systems mechanic, Ben Hunt became a helicopter door gunner in Vietnam.

In a few minutes the firing died down and the guard came over with his hooded flashlight to see who'd been hit. He was laying in the aisle between the tables, crying softly. "Where you hit?" asked the guard.

"I think it's my left leg," he said. "It hurts like hell." The guard moved the light down his leg till he came to his foot.

There, sticking out of his big toe joint, was a shiny bullet and lots of blood.

"You'll live," said the guard. "A couple of you guys give me a hand getting him to the aid station." I went back to cracking eggs during the lull.

Maybe 10 minutes later, the firing started, heavier and closer this time. We could hear it on two sides of the mess hall now. Someone shouted, "They're comin' through the wire! Hide where you can!" Now I was really scared. I grabbed the only weapons I could find — two carving knives. This other guy and I wedged ourselves in the 6-inch space next to a cooler, and waited in the dark. The firing was all around us and nearby. People were yelling and screaming. There was automatic weapons fire and an occasional thump from a grenade. I was breathing shallowly with my cheek against the refrigerator wall. We waited in the dark kitchen.

I thought to myself, "I might be killed on my first day in country. What a waste, I never got to see much." The sounds of battle continued for five minutes, or 15 minutes, it's hard to tell under those circumstances, but eventually it died down. Then a guard came in, "It's all clear, you can come out now, we got 'em pushed back."

"OK," said the cook. "Let's get this kitchen hopping!"

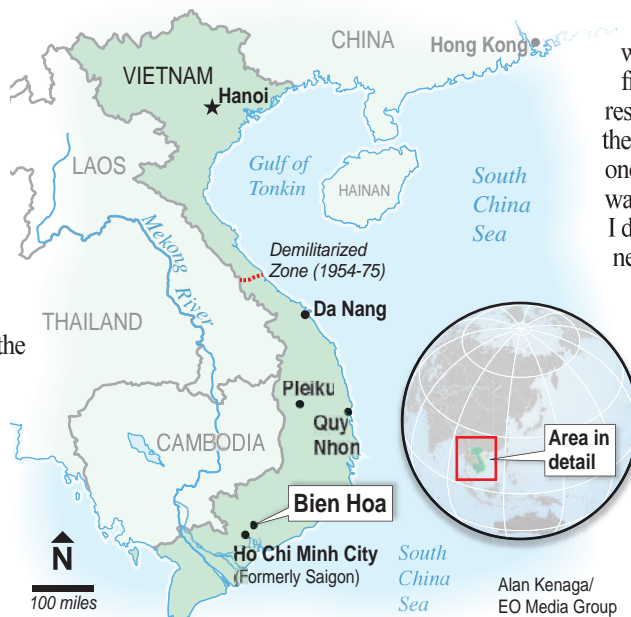
The sun was coming up and it was almost time for breakfast and I was still alive.

Over 100 enemy bodies were lined up along the hillside.

I spent the rest of the morning helping where I was told, frequently startled by the bursts from the Cobras and Huey Gun ships beginning their gun runs on the jungle across the road. They'd swoop across the company area and open up with their mini-guns and rockets as they came over the mess hall. They were determined to kill everything in the jungle.

Across the gully at the next American compound, they had over 100 enemy bodies lined up along the hillside, on display for all to see. I'd never seen a lot of dead bodies; just Mr. Stamps, our high school librarian, and Uncle Andy. I stared at the bodies. Most were wearing only shorts. Some had brown blotches of dried blood on them, others lay with their arms or legs at impossible angles.

At some point that morning when things were fairly calm, some VC sappers managed to blow the local ammo dump. The explosion felt like an earthquake and stopped everybody dead in their tracks. "What the hell was that?" We went out back to watch the huge smoke cloud and heard further smaller explosions.



Ben Hunt's first three days in Vietnam were at Bien Hoa. He was moved through Quy Nhon to Pleiku.

up like good soldiers and listened to the master sergeant giving out the orders of the day. "The Big Red One's been hit hard up North and they need a lot of help. Forget your MOS's (military occupational specialty), you're all infantry first and we're going down the list alphabetically until we get enough to reinforce the Big Red One (the First Infantry Division)."

I hadn't counted on this. My MOS was an all-systems mechanic. If it rolled on the ground, I could fix it. But I had no interest in being a grunt. Grunts got killed a lot. I wondered what would happen if I refused. The roll call was cut short by the thud of incoming mortars. We scrambled for safety. No Big Red One in my future today. Back to the lines and waiting.

"We probably killed everything out there in the jungle today, so there's very little chance of anything happening tonight," said the master sergeant. "Any Charlie that's not dead is running as fast as he can away from here. But all the same we're going to move you guys from the hootches to the two-story barracks farther up the hill, and everybody sleeps on the ground floor."

"Dismissed, hit the chow line." The beverage choices for dinner were coffee or Kool-Aid; I drank at least two quarts of the sweet, warm liquid. The only water we had access to was in huge olive drab canvas bags, full of chlorine and supposedly cooled by the bag. In the 90 degree night it was barely drinkable.

When I arrived at the barracks with my duffel bag, I was disappointed to see troops cheek by jowl and sweaty. Mattresses were on the floor, between bunk beds. Half the guys were smoking, and, if it was 90 outside, it was a 100 and smoky as hell inside.

"Lot cooler up there on the second floor, I already put my duffel up there." He was older than me, maybe 40 and a staff sergeant in an Armored Division.

"I thought we were supposed to all stay down on the first floor tonight?"

"Well, what they don't know won't hurt us."

"I dunno. I don't want to catch any shit."

"Trust me. This is my second trip through here, I've already done one tour and these attacks are always hit and run. Won't be squat going on tonight."

"I guess I could take a look." He was right, it was much cooler upstairs, and I knew he was probably right about nobody finding out. Who would have time to search all the empty barracks or want to? I dropped my duffel on one of the middle bunks. There was a nice cross breeze carrying the warm scents of the jungle through the barracks up here. I flopped down on the bunk and soon drifted off into sweet smug sleep.

'I heard the first chit! chit! chit! of bullets popping through the thin walls of the barracks.'

I was awakened a couple hours later by a firefight erupting outside the end of the barracks — only about 30 yards from the wire and jungle. The sergeant and I stood on either side of the door watching the tracers flash back and forth.

"Guess I was wrong," he said. "Too bad these steps are lit up, makes us an easy target, guess we'll have to wait this one out." Then I heard the first "chit! chit! chit!" of bullets popping through the thin wood walls of the barracks. This must have been why they didn't want us to sleep up here.

What could I do? Can't leave. Dangerous to stay. The only thing I could think to do was go back to my bunk, get on the floor and pile mattresses all around me, two, three layers thick, and hope. The fighting continued for over an hour. I lay in the dark and listened to the snap of rounds coming through and wondering if I would make it. I was too green and scared to know if the mattresses would help or not, but they were all I had. I couldn't see where the sergeant was and I didn't care. I waited in the dark, listening to the cacophony of popping gunshots rise and fall, once again wondering if I'd be killed so soon after arrival. Eventually the firefight ended and I drifted off into troubled sleep. My second night in country.

Feb. 2, 1968

For the third night in a row, I was awakened by explosions and a firefight.

I got unlucky and was picked for guard duty. I wasn't thrilled, I was gonna get to play grunt after all. At the appointed hour I showed up at the armory to draw my equipment. I was handed an M-14 and four clips and a steel pot with no liner. "What the hell am I supposed to do with this?" I asked.

"Put it on your head, it might save your ass anyway."

I plopped the steel pot on my head, it came down past my ears, I could see about 4 feet in front of me. "What about a flak jacket?" I asked.

"Sorry, fresh out; besides, nothing's gonna happen tonight, trust me." Grumbling, I followed the Officer of the Day out to be shown my post. It was near the barracks I had occupied the night before, about 10 yards back from the road, maybe 20, 25 to the wire. There were about six sad sandbags; a pile barely taller or wider than I was, when laying down. Some of the bags were split open and dirt crumbled out. "This is it? You gotta be kidding me. This isn't big enough for a little guy, let alone me," I complained.

"Relax, nothing's gonna happen tonight. There's nothing left alive down in the gully." He walked off with the other guards and I laid down and started propping the sandbags up. As long as nothing happened, I'd be fine. It was soon dark and warm and I drifted off to sleep.

For the third night in a row I was awakened by explosions and a firefight. It was the same as the night before. The guard post immediately in front of the barracks was having a heavy fight with Charlies in the bush.

I was laying to the side of the barracks, about 20 yards away. I peeped up over the sandbags, sliding the steel pot back on my head. I could see the tracers and muzzle flashes coming from the jungle. I tried to sight on one and popped off a couple rounds. A couple tracers flew over me in response. I did a full frontal with the ground and reconsidered. It seemed wiser to not put my head up. I just had to let them know I was there, not necessarily hit anything. So I decided on a strategy of just putting the M-14 above the sand bags and blindly popping of a shot now and then. Occasionally during a lull, I'd peek over to make sure nobody was sneaking up on me.

My mouth was dry. I was sweating. It was going to be a long hot night. I spent my time peering around and trying to keep sand out of my rifle. At every noise I jumped like a cornered cat, too wired on adrenaline to consider sleep, too afraid as well.

'The great Tet Offensive of 1968 was done for me.'

By first light I hadn't heard firing in over an hour, and that was from off in the distance. The sky went from dark gray to magenta to red orange as the burning red ball sun rose over the jungle. Soon the O.D. came to relieve me; I turned in my steel pot and rifle and headed for the chow hall.

The fighting was over for now. The great Tet Offensive of 1968 was done for me. We could hold formations and get on with the business of the Army. Soon I was on a C-130 headed for Quy Nhon and then a Chinook helicopter to Pleiku. It was the beginning of my year in Vietnam, an event that would always be with me, and with any of us who lived through those times in that place.

Ben Hunt left Warrenton to enlist in the Army in 1966. Though he was trained as an all-systems mechanic, he became a helicopter door gunner. Today, he is the proprietor of Sunset Lake Farm.

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