Delta One Niner

By Don Dugger

The Army

A major portion of my childhood was spent on the East Coast. Every couple of years my family would pack up the car and drive across the United States to see relatives. My mother's family lived in Bismarck, North Dakota, and we would stop there on the way to Oregon, where most of my father's family lived.

The summer after I graduated from high school, my father, who was in the Army, got orders for Turkey. I didn't want to go. I wanted to stay in the United States. So I went to live with my grandparents in Oregon.

While I was there, I got a letter from the draft board to report for a physical. This usually happened right before you were being drafted. After the physical I called my father in Turkey. He told me to enlist. That way I could get a school of my choice. I would have to do an extra year, but I'd get the training I wanted. So I enlisted and was inducted on November 1, 1966.

As it turned out, when I came home from Vietnam in 1969, there was a rule that if you had less than five months remaining on your enlistment, you were discharged immediately. I had less than five months. So I only spent two years and seven months in the Army.

I did my basic training at Fort Polk, Louisiana. One evening while I was on KP, the CQ runner came and got me and took me to the First Sergeant's office. The First Sergeant handed me the phone from his desk. It was my father calling from Turkey. They hadn't heard from me and were concerned. I said, "Dad, I'm kind of busy with basic." We talked for a few minutes. When I handed the phone back, the First Sergeant looked at me and said, "So your dad's a Sergeant Major. I guess we weren't expecting enough out of you." From that day on, they expected more. And they made sure that everyone knew my father was a Sergeant Major

After basic I trained as a radio relay and carrier repairman. The training was called AIT — Advanced Individual Training. Our classes graduated every two weeks. Every class before ours went to Vietnam. My class was sent to Germany.

This was the spring of 1967.

Germany

In 1967 I was stationed in Germany. I was an E-4, a Specialist Fourth Class, when my CO came to me and said, "The General is coming to see you." I said, "Why is the General coming to see *me*?" He said,

“He didn’t say. I thought you’d know?”. It turned out the General was the father of a kid I had known growing up — another Army brat. He had been my father's commanding officer in Puerto Rico. I had an small office in one of the communication vans. He came to my office by him self and we talked. He started by telling me about his son and asking how I was doing. Then the truth, he had come to get me to talk my dad out of retiring. I told him I didn’t think my dad would listen to me. My CO was shaken up by the General coming. The General spoke only to me and left without saying a word to him. He wanted to know what it was about, I told him it was personal nothing important.

In Germany, while I was still a Specialist Fourth Class, a new First Sergeant pulled me aside and told me my father had been the youngest Sergeant Major in the Army, and that he meant to beat that record. I never knew whether it was true. My father never said so. But hearing another man measure himself against my father while I was still trying to figure out my own place in uniform left me with a strange feeling I never forgot.

Some time later, early in 1968, two friends and I were making plans to go to Spain. We’d heard you could live like kings there for twenty-seven cents a day. That sounded pretty good to us. We were very excited. We spent a great deal of time thinking about it and preparing.

Then Tet of ’68 happened.

Half our company got orders for Vietnam. And I was one of them. As I remember it, they handed us orders on paper. No explanation. We read them, looked at each other, and asked, “What does this mean?” That wasn’t unusual. Orders came down and we followed them.

I had grown up an Army brat. I understood the system better than most of the guys I was with. When orders show up in an Army family, you don’t ask why. You pack.

We were given thirty days leave before shipping out to Vietnam. It landed with mixed emotions. We were going to be able to spend a month at home — but then there was Vietnam.

I’m not sure whether I was trying to lessen the blow or just showing that I understood how the system worked, but I told them about the regulation that gave you a day of grace when you returned from leave. The others didn’t know that. The orders also told us what unit we would be assigned to and when we had to report.

Spain never happened.

My father had retired while I was in Germany. My parents had been living in Falls Church, Virginia, just outside Washington, D.C. My father was working for the military after he retired. That’s where I went on leave. My plane got in early in the morning. When I arrived at the house at two a.m., they didn’t live there anymore. A stranger answered the door and told me they had moved out a few weeks earlier. They had sent a letter, but I hadn’t received it before I left Germany. The letter I sent telling them I was coming home was being held, waiting for a forwarding address. That didn’t shock me the way it might have shocked someone else. In an Army family, people move. Addresses change. You track them down and keep going.

I called an old family friend. They came and picked me up and told me my folks were in Oregon at my grandparents' place and were planning to move to Arizona.

The next day I got on an airplane and flew to Oregon.

Seattle

Oregon is where I had lived before going into the Army. I stayed with my grandparents. Most of my father's family lived in or near Salem. I had one uncle in Washington State.

While I was in Oregon on leave, I went up to Seattle to visit my cousins. There were three of us headed to Vietnam within a three-week period. My cousin Steve was in the Navy. My cousin Donald Wayne was going as a civilian contractor. Some of their friends threw a party for us on Capitol Hill overlooking the city. I remember feeling like an outsider. Growing up in an Army family, you move. You adapt. You never quite feel like you belong. At that party, I wanted to belong. And they took me in. I felt welcomed. Some of that may have been because they knew I was going off to war. But I did feel welcomed.

I remember falling in love with Seattle that night.

A few days later, it was time to go.

Flying to Vietnam

When I left McChord Air Force Base for Vietnam, my parents were there. None of the other families were allowed on the flight line. My father was a retired Sergeant Major, so they let him in.

My mother cried as I walked toward the plane. I didn't know what to do with that. She had grown up in a German family and wasn't affectionate. I wasn't used to seeing her like that. I felt confused and embarrassed. My little brother was there too. He was about twelve or thirteen. My father didn't say much. As I remember it, he just saluted me. I don't remember if I saluted back.

We landed early in the morning, about five in the morning. it was Cam Ranh Bay. What I remember clearly is the heat.

It was already hot — ninety-five degrees, as I recall. When we stepped off the plane, it felt like walking into a furnace. The air was thick with heat and glare.

The rest of the details blur.

But the heat doesn't.

Cam Ranh Bay was where you started in-country and where you ended it. It was a staging area. You waited there until they sent you where you were assigned. It was also where we got our jungle fatigues.

After we arrived, they sent us out on police call — picking up litter. The sand was thick and heavy, and we had to walk through it under that heat. At some point I went down. I don't remember the moment itself. The medic who treated me said it was pretty common when you first got in country. Just the heat.

We were all watching the guys who had been there a while. They seemed to know something we didn’t, and we needed to understand it. One of the things you could tell was how long someone had been there by how faded their uniforms were. The sun bleached everything. The newer guys were dark green. The older guys were almost washed out. You could see time on them. It was obvious.

Camp Enari

From Cam Ranh Bay, I was sent to Camp Enari, the home of the 4th Infantry. There were three days of training before we were fully assigned. On the first day of training, it was mostly just orientation. But that night, after I'd taken a shower, I was walking back to the barracks where I was staying, and I heard a massive explosion. I jumped into a ditch, and there was two guys standing there, and one looked down at me and said, “OK, guy, when you hear an explosion and then swish, swish, that's outgoing. When you hear swish, swish, and then the explosion, that's incoming. Understand?”. Sure enough, the next time I heard an explosion, I then noticed the swish-swish afterwards. I was kind of surprised. I didn't realize you could actually hear the rounds going through the air. During that training, I went out on my first patrol with a group of guys from the First of the 8th. We were walking through the jungle on a narrow path, spaced about four or five yards apart. All of a sudden I heard something cut through the trees. I didn’t hear a bang. The guy in front of me had been in country a while. He immediately turned around, motioned for me to get down, and said, “Sniper.” Then I realized it was a bullet I heard moving through the branches. It didn’t sound like the movies. No sharp crack. Just that tearing sound through leaves and wood. We hit the ground. It went on for a while. I could hear movement up ahead, then bursts of return fire farther up the line. Then someone called back that it was all clear. They said they had killed the sniper. That was it. We got up and kept moving. Later, I heard that the sniper had been chained to a tree. The story was that it was punishment — that he had been put there and left. I don’t know if that was true. That’s just what I was told. What stayed with me wasn’t how he died. It was that we didn’t stop. At least I don’t remember that we did. We didn’t check the body. We just kept moving.

That night we stayed in a Montagnard village. We sat around a fire. The Montagnards seemed comfortable with us. Almost happy to have us there. The guys talked the way soldiers talk when the day is over. Calm. Laughing. Unconcerned. Earlier that day we had been pinned down by a sniper. And now it was just evening. What struck me was how normal everyone seemed. They had been doing this for months. I felt like an outsider. Like they understood something I didn’t.

That night we took turns standing guard at the edge of the village. An hour or two at a time. I don’t remember exactly. When my shift came up, I had just woken from a deep sleep. The guy I relieved hadn’t told me someone was out beyond the perimeter. I was still waking up when I saw someone moving fast toward me. I raised my weapon. He spoke first. “Whoa, don’t shoot!” I stopped. “What the hell are you doing?” I said. “I almost killed you.” He acted like it was nothing. He apologized.

I remember mostly the relief — that I hadn’t pulled the trigger.

Welcome to Vietnam

When I first reported to my assignment, I arrived in the afternoon. The guys I was going to be working with took me to the EM club that night and we had a beer. I met a soldier there. He was Mexican-American. I had spent part of my childhood in Puerto Rico, and my Spanish was still pretty good. We started talking. He told me I had a Puerto Rican accent. That surprised me. I didn't think my Spanish was good enough to have an accent. We talked for a while. It wasn't long, but it felt easy.

The next morning I was headed across the motor pool to the shop when I ran into some of the same guys I had been with the night before. They were already talking when I walked up. It took me a moment to understand what they were saying. The Mexican-American soldier I had met the night before had been killed that morning on a convoy. I looked at one of the sergeants. He saw that I was upset. He looked me straight in the eye and calm voice said,

"Welcome to Vietnam."

Operation Clean Sweep

For the next four to six months, I worked in the shop repairing equipment. I was assigned to the Battalion signal maintenance platoon, BSM. It was a platoon that wasn't assigned to any company, but was part of the 124th Signal Battalion. It was steady work. VHF radios, mux equipment — whatever need to be fixed. There were good men there. Every one of them was in Vietnam for his own reason. You could write a story about any one of them. For me, it was a calm stretch. By then I was an E-5, a Specialist Fifth Class. I had studied electronics in high school. I knew more about what we did than most of the platoon. They called me "the professor." I occasionally taught classes in electronics. During that time, the 4th Infantry ran what they called Operation Clean Sweep — large patrols made up mostly of support troops. On one of them, I was assigned a squad as part of a larger patrol. The lieutenant in charge was green. He didn't really know what he was doing. When we started he told me to take a flank. I tried to explain that we wouldn't be able to keep up with the main body if we did that. He got irritated. "Do what I tell you, soldier." So we did.

We couldn't keep up.

They moved ahead, and suddenly there we were — five of us, none of us combat veterans — in the jungle, alone and off the line. We came into a village. A few Vietnamese men were squatting in one yard. The rest of the village was empty. There was an African-American soldier with me who, like me, had been in country a little while. The other three guys hadn't been there a month. He and I stepped off to the side to talk. His first instinct was simple. "If we don't kill them, they'll kill us." I looked at him. "You going to do it? You're going to walk over there and just shoot them?" He looked at me. Then he looked back at the men in the yard. His face changed. "Oh God," he said. "I can't. You're right. I can't." "I've got a better idea," I said. "Let's just keep walking. When we're out of sight, we'll cut to one side and run." We did. It worked.

When we were clear of the village, we both knew what had almost happened. We didn’t say much. But there was a look between us. We had pulled it off. We weren’t dead. And we didn’t kill anyone. I’ve often thought I’d like to talk to him again. We never had the chance.

Later we heard another element of the patrol moving through the jungle. That was a relief. Now we could find our way back to the staging area and then back to base camp. They were loud. Careless. We looked at each other. I thought “These guys are going to get killed.” We moved off to either side of the trail and waited for them to pass. As they came through, I saw a major. I stepped out in front of him. “If I were the North Vietnamese,” I said, “you’d be dead right now.” He didn’t like that much.

Eventually we rejoined the main element and found our way back to base camp.

The Team

Not long after that operation, things shifted. The 4th Division began changing the way it operated. There was more emphasis on keeping communications solid in forward areas — not fixing failures after they happened, but preventing them. Around the same time, a new man arrived in the shop. He handled parts. We didn’t get along. He was pushy. I could be stubborn. Some of that friction was mine. Looking back, I think my commanding officer saw an opportunity. He needed a small mobile repair team that could move into forward areas and make sure communications were solid before operations intensified. Separating the two of us probably solved more than one problem. So he put the team together. I was put in charge. It was a small team. A handful of men. We went where communications mattered most. Sometimes by chopper. Sometimes by small plane. Sometimes in trucks with shop vans on the back.

Most of the time, nothing happened. You’d go in. Check the equipment. Make sure the radios were solid. Leave. But we were going into places where other men stayed.
You could see it on them. They had been through things I hadn’t.

Kill Crazy

Not long after the team was formed, I was sent to a forward facility to fix some equipment. It was close to Camp Enari, but it felt different. I don’t remember the name. There was equipment everywhere — tanks, personnel carriers, helicopters. And the Skycrane. That helicopter looked like a spider in the air. Long legs. No real body to it. Built to lift things, not carry men. It would hover over heavy equipment and pick it up as if it weighed nothing. That image stayed with me.

That was where I first met him. They called him Kill Crazy. No one called him that to his face. It was something said behind his back. Not a title — a label. There was a story that followed him. I have no way of knowing whether any of it was true. The story was that he had once found a soldier who had been captured, skinned alive and killed. Some said it was his brother. That he found him himself. That something in him changed after that. I don’t know if any of it happened. It was just what people said. It may have been a story made up just to explain his behavior.

He was a Sergeant in charge of LRRP teams — Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols. We were sitting in a bunker when he told me a story. He had just come from transporting two North Vietnamese prisoners by helicopter. According to him, he pushed one of them out of the aircraft to get the other one to talk. He didn't say it like he was bragging. He said it like he was explaining something. Like he wanted me to understand that this was what the war required. You had to do terrible things. That was the only way to win. I didn't argue with him. I didn't agree either. I just listened. There was something unbalanced about him. But there was something else. He cared about his men. That part was obvious.

Not long after that, I began seeing him more often. His LRRP teams were sent where the action was. My team was sent where communications couldn't afford to fail. Those turned out to be the same places. Sometimes I went in alone. Sometimes with part of my team. Sometimes by chopper, sometimes by truck. He would already be there. Or arrive not long after. We weren't exactly friends. We didn't talk about anything except the mission. But we were in the same world. And I was beginning to understand how different that world was.

Dakto

Not long after I first met Kill Crazy, I was sent north to a place called Dakto. They had been hit with 122mm rockets a day or two before I arrived. The craters were everywhere. Massive holes in the ground. There was one right next to the mess tent, that image is permanently in my memory. You didn't need anyone to explain what had happened. I remember standing there thinking, what the hell was it like to be here when that happened? The soldiers I saw were calm. Dirty faces. Tired eyes. They weren't dramatic about it. They just carried it. I fixed what needed fixing. And then I left. They stayed.

Body Bags

After Dakto, I was in transit to another assignment. I don't remember where I was headed. Just that I was on a chopper waiting to take off. And on the tarmac, lined up in a row, were five or six body bags. Just lying there. I didn't know who they were. Or where they were going. For the rest of that flight, I couldn't stop thinking about them.

Duc Lap

Then I went to Duc Lap, near the Cambodian border. I flew in on a small twin-engine turboprop — I think it was a Caribou. I was bringing a replacement generator with me. The landing wasn't gentle. The plane dropped, pulled up hard, and hit the strip fast. The tailgate was already down. The loadmaster shoved the generator out of the plane and yelled, "Get off my plane." The plane never fully stopped. I ran off the back with the replacement generator. It was airborne again almost immediately. Then the mortars started coming in. They were after the plane. They didn't last long. Just long enough. Most airstrips had a tower or something like one, but Duc Lap had a 55 gallon oil barrel with a backpack radio on it. That was my introduction to Duc Lap.

Their position was on a small hill. A handful of Green Berets. Their antenna pointed west — into Cambodia. We weren't supposed to be in Cambodia. No one explained anything. It was understood that some things weren't discussed. Standing there, I had the sense we weren't being told the whole truth about everything. Not angrily. Just awareness.

They had a 50-caliber machine gun mounted on a Jeep. They were firing it into the jungle. Not under contact. Just firing. It didn't feel tactical. It felt casual. For fun. I didn't say anything. I didn't feel connected to them. Looking back, that was one of the moments when my questioning of the war moved forward.

When I left, base camp told me I had to bring the damaged generator back. It had been hit by a mortar and was full of holes. When I loaded it onto the plane, the loadmaster was angry. "What the hell are you bringing that piece of junk for?" I told him I didn't have a choice. I had orders. He didn't like it. But we loaded it anyway.

Hot Showers & Monkeys

After Duc Lap, I was sent to another forward camp south of Camp Enari. It wasn't much. Just tents with bunkers dug beside them. Mostly technical guys like me. We got along well. There was a different feel there than with the Green Berets. Less intensity. More ordinary. One of the guys had a monkey. We'd play with it during the day. But the nights are what I remember most. The sky would be lit up with flares. It wasn't really dark. Tracers everywhere. Small arms fire. Mortars coming in. And North Vietnamese soldiers shouting from somewhere out in the dark: "F*** you, G.I." Angry. Mocking. We had plenty of support. It didn't feel like they were going to get through the perimeter. It felt unreal. Like watching something from a distance, even though you were inside it. When they shouted, my first reaction wasn't fear. It was that they were being stupid. They were giving away their position. It went on night after night. You learned to sleep through it. Or something like sleep.

A few miles away there was an old French garrison with hot showers. Concrete walls. Warm water. It was very seldom were able to have a hot shower. A few of us went there one day just to clean up. On the way back we saw two Navy A-4s overhead. We didn't know what they were doing. As we climbed out of the truck back at camp, they came in low along the road we had just driven. They dropped ordnance right along it. There had been a North Vietnamese patrol there. If those jets hadn't been there, we would have been attacked by that patrol. At the time, I just set it aside. Later, I realized how close that had been.

While I was there, one of the soldiers shot himself. It's possible I heard the gunshot and didn't register it. We frequently heard gunfire. They said he had gotten a Dear John letter. I don't know if I saw him. I have an image in my head of him lying in his tent, but I don't know if it's real. That uncertainty stayed with me.

Hong Kong Mountain

Then came Hong Kong Mountain. It wasn't there for the LRRPs. Its main mission was an Air Force radar facility. The LRRPs were there simply because it was a mountain. It wasn't dramatic. Just a big lump rising out of nowhere. You could see a long way from up there. There was even an outdoor theater. We watched movies. It could feel almost ordinary. I was there to fix a VHF radio relay. Kill Crazy was there with his teams. He was having trouble communicating with base camp and the patrols that were out. He came to me because he knew I could fix it. The problem wasn't the radio. It was the signal. So I set up an antenna tuned to the frequency he needed. By the end of the day, we could communicate clearly with the LRRP teams in the field and with base camp. The radio was in the same bunker where we slept. During the day it was just work. At night, it was something else.

One of his men was in the bunker with me one afternoon. Young. Younger than me, but a large man. Kill Crazy wasn't there. He started talking. He was very upset he was on the verge of crying. He was scheduled to go out on patrol later that week with Kill Crazy. He said he was afraid he was going to die. There wasn't any drama in it. No shouting. Just fear. Clear and plain.

Delta One-Niner, that was the patrols call sign, was already in the field that night. At first it sounded routine. Kill Crazy was on the radio with them. There was some joking. Nothing unusual. Then they reported contact. Four men. Against twenty or more North Vietnamese regulars. Almost immediately, Puff broke in over the radio — an AC-47 gunship. He said he was in the area and could provide support. You could feel the shift in the bunker. If Puff engaged, the odds changed. Base camp answered. The lieutenant said they were over budget, so use artillery. Puff could not engage. Kill Crazy argued. Not yelling. Firm. Puff was there. He could clear the area. The lieutenant held the line. Puff answered to base camp, not to Kill Crazy. That option was closed.

There was a pause. Then Delta One-Niner called in artillery. On the enemy position. Coordinates. Adjustments. Then silence. Long stretches of it. You'd hear something. Then nothing. We didn't know what was happening during those gaps. The voice would come back. Still calm. Still controlled. More adjustments. More waiting. Hours passed like that.

Then the voice came back again. Calm. Reading coordinates. Kill Crazy had earlier positions written in front of him. Both the patrols position and where they had called in artillery. He looked at the new number. Then at the old ones. "Wait." He looked again. "He's calling it in on himself." He didn't sound surprised. More like he knew what that meant.

For a second it didn't register. Four men. Calmly calling artillery onto their own position. The voice didn't change. Just numbers. Then—Nothing. By this time it was very early in the morning. And I had to get back to base camp. I had to pack up and leave. I never found out what happened to them.

Coming Home

Not long after Hong Kong Mountain, I was back at base camp, Camp Enari. I was supposed to be leaving for home in a few days. We got hit early one evening. Around dinner time. Mortars. The order went out to get into the bunker. I was hungry. When we were in the field all we got was C-rations. I

really wanted a decent meal. The mess hall was maybe a hundred yards away. So I started walking toward it. A sergeant in the doorway of another bunker, yelled at me to get back in the bunker. I turned around and started back. Some of the guys at the bunker entrance were laughing at me for getting caught. There were some new troops inside. They were shaken. Then a mortar landed behind me. Not that close. But close enough. It pushed me forward. The guys saw it. They laughed harder. I think back on that now with a kind of amazement. What the hell was I thinking?

From there I went to Cam Ranh Bay to process out. That's where I met him. He was eighteen. He was at Cam Ranh Bay to go on R & R. He had been in combat in the field for nine months. We were sharing a bunk. Cam Ranh was supposed to be safe. That night we heard gunfire in the distance. Not close. But enough. Then he started to panic. He had survived nine months in the field. But in that moment, he didn't feel safe anymore. I sat next to him. Put my hand on his shoulder. Told him he didn't have to worry. We were at Cam Ranh Bay. He was safe. I remember thinking how damaged he was.

I flew back to the States and came through Fort Lewis. It was late. Around midnight or one in the morning. They took us into a mess hall. The lighting was dim. Tables set up like a restaurant. They served us steak. After everything, it felt bizarre. Quiet. Polite. Almost formal. We ate. Then we moved on to processing. We were all very anxious to get home. There was a medic drawing blood. He was taking forever. One of the guys said we could do it ourselves to each other. So we did. The medic didn't like that. He said you can't do that. Our attitude was simple. What were they going to do — send us to Vietnam? That had been a kind of mantra that we use throughout my time in Vietnam. The medic didn't know what to do he had a hall full of war veterans who just wanted to go home.

They gave us uniforms to wear home. They were going to pin medals on them. Some guy ahead of me said he didn't want them. That landed. None of us did. So we didn't take them.

I shared a cab with a couple of other guys headed toward SeaTac. My cousin was going to pick me up. I remember feeling happy. Just happy to be home. I reached up and felt my dog tags. For a moment I just held them. Then I ripped them off and threw them out the window.

"I won't need those anymore."
