

THE RABBI IN VIETNAM



Jeffery Feinstein was born in Stockton, CA in June of 1947. He lived his first 21 years in one home and recalled, “I walked one block to grammar school, rode my bike to junior school, and drove a car my grandfather gave me to high school. I loved that car, a 1948 Dodge Custom Royal. It took me 11 months to get it in running condition and I had that thing tricked out to be the hottest car in town. But

my father, may he rest in peace, asked to borrow it one day. I said, ‘Dad, be careful, it’s a powerful car.’ He replied as any father would, ‘Hey, don’t hand me that, I know how to drive, been driving for years.’ Well, he wrecked it, completely totaled my car.

“After high school I attended the University of California, Davis, but played around for the entire year and had to leave on an academic probation. I came home and attended a local junior college, redeemed my GPA, then went to the University of the Pacific. Well, I got sidetracked with a young lady who dumped

me and it turned my life upside down. The next morning I was knocking on the recruiter's door. It was 1967, I enlisted in the Army and was promised I wouldn't have to go to Vietnam."

Basic: "The Army send me to Fort Lewis, WA for basic training in December and January which is someplace you don't want to be in December and January. At the time, I was still okay with the Army, but still didn't have my head screwed on properly. I almost washed out of boot camp because I became ill and they were going to recycle me because I missed rifle qualification. But I told the Captain, 'If I qualify will you put me through?' He didn't think I had a chance, but I proved him wrong. I ended up with a trophy for the highest score in our battalion."

Bad abbreviation: "After basic we were standing out in the rain while the drill sergeant called out our MOS designations. Then he gets to me and roars, 'What is a 71 Charlie? And what in the hell is a Chap's Ass. It was Chaplain's Assistant, but someone had abbreviated the wording to Chap's Ass. I sort of guessed where I'd end up because my hometown rabbi had written a letter to get me into chaplain's duty."

Two forts: "I was sent to Fort Dix, New Jersey for clerical school but that didn't last too long since I could already type 80 words a minute. I became the Commanding Officer's secretary and typist and went to Fort Hamilton in Brooklyn for Chaplain's School. I was pretty much destined to be a Jewish Chaplain's assistant. I quickly learned there was a right way, a wrong way, and the Army way, and the first two didn't count. One Jewish

guy out of every other class went to Vietnam and I found out the quota in Nam had been filled by the guy two classes ahead of me. I was bound for Germany, which was fine with me. At the time, that's in 1968, there were only five Jewish Chaplains in Vietnam."

Broken promises: "In the military area, Jewish soldiers at the time were heavily concentrated in the medical corps and the staff judge advocate area. There weren't too many Jewish ground-pounders. Well, the guy bound for Vietnam slipped and hurt his back. No problem, 'Hey Feinstein, you take Vietnam and he'll take Germany.' Right. So I'm off to Southeast Asia."



No air-conditioning: "So, it's June 3, 1968, and the 707 airliner sets down at Bien Hoa, Vietnam where I step from a 72 degree

airplane into a 102 degree heat. I just about died. Albeit, I had an interesting first night in-country. I spent the night at Bien Hoa awaiting orders in a 'holding barracks' which is nothing more than a concrete slab with a canvas cover and triple-deck bunks. Well, we got hit that night. Welcome to Vietnam. One guy in the holding barracks had reenlisted so he could get an early-out. He didn't run to the bunker when we had incoming, all he did was grab the side of his mattress, flipped over on the floor, and covered himself with the mattress. Thing was, he'd forgotten he was perched on the top of a three-tiered bunk. He was the only injury we had that night."

Rabbi Ostrovsky: "I shipped out early the next day to the 1st Logistical Command in Long Binh and served as a chaplain's assistant for the 2nd highest ranking rabbi in the US Army, Lt. Col. Jack Ostrovsky. We went everywhere together, from the DMZ all the way down to the Mekong Delta because there was only five Jewish chaplain teams to cover the entire country. I remember flying in a chopper over an LZ (landing zone) that was under heavy fire. Rabbi Ostrovsky said, 'I wonder if any of our guys are down there?' I replied, 'If you go down there it's just you and God because I'm not going!' That happened a lot."

Toting weapons: "The few time we did go into a hot area we were told to leave immediately. We were not allowed in. We had one rabbi who carried a .45 automatic and an M-16 which was against the Geneva Convention. He was also a paratrooper and well-trained. And, yeah, I carried, too. I was not ordained

at the time, I was just a senior Jewish chaplain's administrator in Vietnam. I was put in charge of all the chaplain's assistants,



around eight or nine of them, plus I served as my chaplain's bodyguard. Still, we lost one rabbi in Nam, I think his name was Singer. (**Rabbi Morton Singer** was one of 14 soldiers killed in the crash of an Air Force transport plane in December of 1968. Rabbi Singer was en route to conduct Chanukan services for Jewish servicemen; he was 32 years old).

Experiences: "A couple of things. The worse job, actually there were two of them, the first was counseling prisoners at the Long Binh jail. It wasn't often that I counseled Jewish prisoners, but a few were in there, and I remember counseling one young man who had blown away his commanding officer. I asked him bluntly, 'Did you do it?' He replied, 'Hell, yes, I did it. He was going to get us all killed, but nobody will ever prove it because there were too many bullets flying around.' And he was right; they never did prove it. That gave me a different perspective about what was going on around me. I guess I'd been shielded from what was happening in Vietnam.

“The real eye-opener was when I had to go to the mortuary in Da Nang and go through looking for Jewish toe-tags. That was difficult. In such a large area there was no sound, just tomblike silence, and you’re the only breathing person in the area. It was like an ethereal experience. There were 300 to 400 boys inside that noiseless room. If I found a Jewish soldier we would notify the next-of-kin. Normally that a job for a commanding officer, but sometimes they passed the responsibility to chaplains. The senior chaplains made the call....the government notice arrived later. I’m not sure I could have made those calls, I mean, I was still pretty young and I don’t know if I had the wherewithal to accomplish that.”

The good; the bad; the ugly: “You know they say when you’re in a war, you tend just to recall the good times. Our brains are amazing things, they shield us from stuff like that. One highlight in Vietnam was when we conducted the first, and perhaps the only, Passover Seder, that’s the ritual meal for the holiday. I was in charge of that Seder and every commanding officer in Vietnam was told if they had Jewish personnel they were to arrange for them to attend the Passover Seder. It was held in Da Nang and over 500 were in attendance. I contacted the Jewish Welfare Board in New York City and arranged for them to fly the food into Da Nang, since the food had to be kosher. Wine and food, everything...it went off perfectly.”

More poignantly: “We arrived in Da Nang a day early so Rabbi Ostrovsky decided to take a swim at the beach. Signs all over the

beach warned that the undertow was really bad. So, I'm standing there watching Rabbi Ostrovsky and suddenly he's being swept out to open ocean and couldn't do anything about it. There were three lifeguards on the beach; I used to be one, too, and I beat all three of them to the rabbi and pulled him back in. Then he told me, 'I don't want this written up in Stars and



Stripes because I don't want my wife to find out about this incident.' Then he suggested, 'So, how about a Bronze star and a promotion?' I said, 'That works for me!' That's how I got my first of two Bronze Stars, that one for valor; don't know what kind of valor, but that's all they could put it under."

And the ugly: "One incident is tough to talk about, but I will share it with you. Everyone in the detachment at Long Binh, from E-6 on down, had to pull guard duty. Well, as an E-6 I had to. We were in four-man bunkers, dug about 4½ feet into the ground. Each corner had a six by six post that had a plank with sandbags on top of it, so you were pretty well shielded. Two or three stands of barbwire were in front of you plus a Claymore mine. It

was the responsibility of one person in each bunker to check the Claymore before sundown, but the guys next to us didn't do it. The VC had turned the Claymore around. We got attacked and two things happened simultaneously. The VC ran a ground assault at us; the guys to our right fired their claymore that had been turned around and it blew a gap right through the barbwire

LONG BINH AMMO DUMP BURNING AFTER VC MORTAR ATTACK



then at the same time a rocket struck next to our bunker and buried into the ground before exploding. It blew out the corner posts of our bunker and the top came down and sealed us in a coffin. The guys in bunkers to our left and right were all killed that night, but the VC couldn't get to us and we could get to them. We were sealed in like a crypt. When they got us out the next day, there were shrapnel holes through the sand bags at

one end of the bunker and through the sand bags at the other end of the bunker, and not one of us got a scratch. I have no idea how that was possible. I guess God was looking out for us. From that point in my life I knew I had to do more than I was doing, the incident gave my life a new purpose. You know, I volunteered to pull guard duty on Christian holidays, like Easter and Christmas, so other soldiers could have time off. Ironically, nobody ever volunteered for me.”

One funny story: “Religious services in the military have to be conducted in English. It’s okay to conduct a service in Hebrew or Latin, but they have to be translated into English. The holiest day of the Jewish year is Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. In the chapel, I had to go in and remove the cross and put up the Star



JEWISH CHAPLAIN BLOWING THE SHOFAR (NOT FEINSTEIN)

of David. We had a packed house for Yom Kippur, starting at dawn and finishing at dusk. Yom Kippur is a day of fasting and intensive prayer, you can’t eat or drink. Rabbi Ostrovsky would read in Hebrew and I would translate into English, then visa-versa,

all day long. The last thing done on Yom Kipper is the blowing of the Ram’s horn, the Shofar, one blast only. Well, it’s about 120 degrees in the chapel, we’ve had nothing to eat or drink all day long, my mouth was like sand. The rabbi gave me the command to ‘give the long blast’; I put the Shofar to my mouth and I think

the only thing that came out was dust. Not one sound. So there I am with 500 eyes on me, all thirsty and hungry, and they can't leave until I blow the horn. I tried again. Absolutely nothing. I sort of looked skyward and said, 'please', tried again, and got a very low 'toot', but that was enough and we all enjoyed the feast."

Strange reunion: "I'd been back from Nam about 15 years and was working for a rather large paper company. They flew me into New Jersey and I was picked up by limousine about a block long. I'm sitting in back and can't even see the driver, but after I did my business 'thing' and had to return to the airport, I said to myself 'I'm not sitting back there again,' so I sat up front with the driver. We talked, the driver was about my age; I asked him if he had been in the service. He said, 'Yeah.' Vietnam? 'Yeah.' What years? '68 and 69.' Me, too. Where were you? 'Long Binh.' What'd you do? 'Chopper pilot.' Who'd you fly for? 'Chaplains.' This guy had been my chopper pilot that I hadn't seen for 15 years. We detoured from the airport and found a bar for a couple of cold beers together."

After Nam: "My diabetes had onset while I was in Nam. I went from 225 lbs. down to 160 lbs. in just six weeks. I ended up in Letterman Army Hospital for almost two months then received a medical discharge. I finished up college at the University of the Pacific with master's degree in communication and went into the public business sector for several years. I raised two wonderful sons, but I was never happy. I realized the sadness came from

chasing dollars. I wanted to be a rabbi, knew that when I was in Nam, but life got in the way. With the Master's degree I entered the Rabbinic Seminary in Manhattan, and I've been doing this for about 16 years."

Rabbi Feinstein is the founding rabbi of Kehillat HaShem and serves a small but dedicated congregation at the base of the Kennesaw Mountain Battlefield.



Final thoughts: "You look at America's history and to me there are four things that changed this country. First, the Declaration of Independence. Second, the Civil War, which changed forever the way we looked at things. Third, the completion of a trans-continental railroad system that opened up the entire country. And fourth, the Vietnam War. For the first

time we realized we can challenge our government, and we have never been same since. When I went to Vietnam, I was a little bit to the left of Jesus Christ, then when I came home, a bit to the right of Attila the Hun. You can look at something from a distance but you get a completely different view if you're there. I was petrified to go to Vietnam, but it made me who I am today.

It changed all of us, some of us for the good; some of us for the bad. But would I do it again? Absolutely.”

Shalom, Rabbi Feinstein, Shalom.