

Gamewardens Reunion

Ken Kalish

May 3, 2012

"I am going to tell a story. It isn't a particularly important story, or even a nice story, but it is factual. I'm even going to quote as accurately as I remember, so plug your eyes in the fifth and seventh paragraphs if profanity upsets you. I first learned of a group called Gamewardens of Vietnam in 1993. Until then, I didn't even know there was some congressionally chartered Vietnam veteran group. It turns out that Gamewardens was chartered while the war was still in full swing, and it is today the oldest Vietnam veterans group in existence. I was national president of the group from 1998 to 2001, a three year term because the President who preceded me had the arrogance to die in office and leave me swinging in the breeze. So anyhow, back to the story.

The 1996 Gamewardens convention was held in St. Louis. We had lots of folks there who had been on the boats, CTF116, but there were also a smattering of vets from CTF 115 and CTF117, all included for membership in our group by congressional charter. The 115 veterans were Army, guys who served in the River Assault Groups and who often had to go ashore and clean up some mess we had initiated. Both we and they suffered disproportionate casualty rates. 60% of both units stopped bullets or frag during our trial by fire, and there are a lot of that 60%, Army and Navy, whose names grace the Wall. The 117 boys were Navy helo pilots who flew Hueys we called Seawolves. Now and then an Army gunship or some ancient Air Force piston planes would join our parties, temporarily part of TF117.

Anyhow, things went rather well for the first day in St. Louis. Then, on the afternoon of the second day, one of the PBR sailors wandered into the hospitality room for about the sixth time and saw a man who was prior service Army and had been on the RAG boats with our AFVN historian, Paul. Paul is Army. He gunned a zippo in the Delta with the RAGs. A zippo is a tank that fires napalm, mounted in a standard Mike boat like those used to put American troops ashore in Korea and North Africa and France. I had the opportunity to work with his unit on several occasions while I was in the Delta, and although my unit faced some pretty heavy crap, the RAGs had only Mo Cai 105s, Spooky, and their own wits to protect them once they set foot in the ooze. Paul never was associated in any way with AFVN until he graced us here with his presence and took upon himself the onerous task of being our primary military researcher. Be nice to Paul. His sight is failing so he no longer can rely on his pistol and is forced to tote a shotgun. So, back to St. Louis and 1996. This liquored-up pompous ass walked into our hospitality room, spotted the veterans wearing their Army patches and Army decorations, and began to raise holy hell. There weren't going to be any god-damned Army punks in Gamewardens, and as a member of the membership committee he was going to make certain none of

those fucking mud-humpers had Gamewarden membership cards. If you had been there, you would immediately have noticed that from the beginning of his rant, not one person in that room had said a word. Thirty-odd sailors and four soldiers in that room, and only one was impressed with his own voice and his own purity. We were struck dumb. He finally shut up. When he did so five people walked out. Three of them were TF115 Army vets, one of whom graciously said "I guess I'm in the wrong place" as he left. Two were PBR sailors, one of whom threw his beret on the floor and followed the others, saying "No shit. Me too." The fourth Army vet sat swirling his Seagram's and ice in a plastic cup, just waiting for the holy moment to pass. When it did, he reached into his hip pocket and pulled out a little folio of cards. Credit cards, drivers' license, union card, vets group membership cards, insurance card, VA card, and one odd looking thing that, upon closer inspection, turned out to be a photograph of himself in his Army uniform but without his prosthetics. He pushed himself up, out of his chair, and walked up to the man with all of his fingers and toes, the man who dared to pretend he was better than the men he had so insulted. I really wanted to see a come-uppance along the lines of a slap in the face, or at least some spit. Instead, that "fucking mud-humper" pushed the picture into the face of our great Navy hero. "This," he said, "is me, the day I got home. I got this keeping the Cong out of one of your compounds." No profanity, no raised voice. He folded the cards back into a neat pack, put them into his pocket, and left.

I never saw him again, but had I done so I would have done everything in my power to convince him that the rest of us knew how important it was that we had worked as a team. We found the bad guys and nailed their noses to the ground. They went on an end run, hammer and anvil. More than once they endured "friendly fire" because we had no way of knowing how the field of combat had altered at two in the morning. Well, we marvelous and magnificent people who blessed the ears of American warriors in Vietnam would never have had the opportunity to do so had it not been for the folks at MACOI who held up their end of the communication process. Not every engineer who kept us in business worked in one of our shops. Every syllable we uttered would have been of no value at all had the people in the field not treasured the moments of relief we offered. It was our mission to entertain and inform the troops, whether we were addressing Marines in I Corps, Wind Force folks out at Ton Son Nuht, B-52 crews out of Udorn, Grunts panting uphill in III Corps, Delta denizens in IV Corps, or the folks who drove the sky cargo back and forth out of San Francisco, Guam, or Japan. I suppose, if we are totally honest, that we broadcasters were mostly REMFs. Sure, Roger did his part from LA, but was duty in Saigon all that different from Hollywierd? Not many of us ever endured the crap and daily peck on the cheek from death that Al Zidar or Paul Casper or Paul Poppino (all of whom are on this list) -- or me, for that matter, endured while actually in the fight. I killed my first man on my first day on the river, and in that same fight the man standing next to me took a round through the head. I learned that day that after the fight the only difference between mud and brains stuck to your uniform is the color, and I didn't know how to deal with that kind of reality. What I do know is that without AFVN (and Saigon Sally

and Hanoi Hanna -- should we invite those broadcasters?) there wouldn't have been much chance to take those ten-minute trips back home. Yes, we broadcasters were there for them, but in a very real way those listeners were there for us, too. They were the beaten down grunts who were sent to Saigon as MPs and who stood at the gate between us and the bad guys every single day. They were the guys who learned to fire an M-60 to the bass line of Iron Butterfly tunes. They were the women so poorly portrayed in the TV series China Beach. If you really want to know how important your contribution to the war effort was, let a few fans know that the AFVN crew is gathering in Memphis. Our words were powerful ammunition; our music was medicine for lost souls. Yes, we were a special part of the war effort, but let's not pretend to be elitists because we drew aces in a game of military poker. To quote mumbling, stiff-jointed Joe Cocker, "Whom so ever will, may come."