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What the Hell Was I Thinking

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During the first two years of my army service, I had three opportunities to not go to Vietnam.

I graduated high school in May of 1964. This was the beginning of the buildup of the Vietnam draft. The main thoughts of the boys my age were girls, cars, and the draft, usually in that order. I had a neighbor, Pete Newton, who was like a father to me. Pete was a full-time technician and first sergeant of the National Guard unit in my hometown, Florence, Alabama. The summer I graduated Pete sat me down and told me that he could get me in the National Guard even though there was a waiting list of over a hundred plus boys trying to avoid the draft. This National Guard unit was a high priority signal unit and they drilled two to three weekends a month. I couldn't see myself obligated to six years of National Guard duty so I told Pete that I was not going to get drafted because I was headed to college.

That fall I left Florence to attend the University of Alabama. This was a mecca for boys like me. There were beautiful girls, lots of parties and liberal college ID restrictions in the local bars. These were the best times of my life. Academics was not even a second thought, and I had the grades to prove it. ROTC was the only subject I excelled in. I was even on the ROTC drill team (this later got me in trouble in basic training because fancy drill is not the manual of arms taught by the drill sergeants). I got to know some of the university's staff, in particular the Dean of Men. After the first semester I had to visit with the Dean at the end of each semester in order to attend the next semester. My playtime came to an end in the fall of 1966 when I got my draft notice. I was to report on December 5th to AfEES, Alabama, which consisted of a few of old warehouses outside of Montgomery, Alabama. That month the state of Alabama's quota was to hand select 104 young men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four to represent the state of

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Alabama in the Armed Services of the United States of America. I was one of those lucky young men carefully chosen! I was sworn in on December 7th.

By 4:30 am December the 8th I was standing in front of a mess hall at Ft. Benning, GA wondering what the hell I had gotten myself into. I guess this was the way the army showed me that it had a sense of humor. No training starts the first of December because of the Christmas break. January 3 was when the next cycle started. We pulled all the dirty details for the next month.

When basic training finally started after January 3, I was in my first week when I got word from the Red Cross that my father was in the hospital and not expected to live. I was sent home on a ten-day emergency leave. I spent those ten days talking to Dad about my future. Dad was proud that I chose to go to officer candidate school (OCS). Returning to Ft. Benning I was recycled in Basic Training. Rather than reporting to my assigned Basic Training Company, I was told to report to the Battalion Commander. Even I knew this was strange. The Bn Commander told me that he suspected the drill sergeants were scamming the trainees by making them use a laundry service that they got “kickbacks” from. I was to report to him if I saw anything suspicious. Even I who had no time in the army knew this was a bad idea of ratting on the drill sergeants. I completed Basic and was assigned to Ft. Dix, NJ for advanced individual training (AIT). Before I could start AIT, my father passed away and I was sent home on emergency leave. Getting home was an adventure.

I went over to McGuire Air Force Base to hop a flight to Washington DC. I was put on a plane assigned to an air force General. I took a seat in the rear of the plane. Shortly after takeoff this General came back and started talking to me. I had never seen a General and now this old

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grandfatherly man was talking to me. I can't remember what we talked about, but he told his aide to make sure I got to Washington Airport.

The only flight I could get close to Florence, AL was Nashville, TN. When I arrived in Nashville, I was being paged to the Information Desk. I met a county deputy; he took me to some place in the country where I got in the car with a TN State trooper. Driving like a bat out of hell the State Trooper took me to the Alabama state line where I got in the car with an AL state trooper. He took me home to Florence. Neither me nor my family ever found out who arranged these rides.

At Dad's funeral the veteran's affairs representative for Lauderdale County asked Mom and I to come to his office the next day. When we got to the VA's office, he explained my Dad's VA benefits and then told me he could get me out of the army on a hardship discharge. I asked for time to think about it. Mom and I discussed for a long time. Mom wanted me to get out of the army before I was sent to Vietnam. I told Mom about my conversation with Dad and how proud he was that I was going to OCS. After sitting with Mom and listening to her cry I told her that I was staying in the army.

After two weeks I reported back to Ft. Dix, only to find out that my military occupancy specialty (MOS) had been changed from 11B (Infantryman) to 11H Antitank. The company I was assigned to was made up of reservists and national guard men with three US or regular army draftees. AIT was easy for me because my section 11H was all national guard who were already trained on the 105 recoilless rifle, and they were going home after AIT. When I completed AIT, I got orders for Germany. This meant I could spend the remainder of my two-year obligation in Germany because the VC and NVA did not have tanks. Two days later I got orders for Infantry

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OCS—Ft. Benning, Ga. The first sergeant called me in and asked, “Which orders do you want?” I told the first sergeant that I wanted to go to OCS because I couldn’t live on enlisted pay.

I reported to OCS in May for a “Zero week of indoctrination” by some narcissistic lieutenants (Tact Officers). Several times as I lay in my bunk at night, I thought about quitting the next day. I didn’t quit because my dad was proud of me for being accepted for OCS. In the last week of OCS, two friends and I turned in our “quit letters” to our Tact Officer. The reason for us quitting was that the army was going to commission a general’s son that we thought couldn’t lead men to the latrine if they had diarrhea. If the letters were accepted, we would have less than two years left to serve and would not be sent to Vietnam. The tact officer placed us in the “front leaning rest position” as he read out loud each of our quit letters, slowly. He rejected our letters then for the first time in six months he talked to us like we were human beings. He said he was sorry that there was nothing he could do about the general’s son being commissioned, then he tore up our letters.

Before we graduated from OCS, we filled out our “dream sheets” (assignments that we wanted to be considered for). By this time, I had been in a training status for a year and the Army had indoctrinated me into thinking I was a real killer. I placed on my dream sheet that I wanted to go to ranger, airborne, and special forces schools. When my orders arrived, I thought the army had made a huge mistake because I was assigned to a basic training company at Ft. Lewis, Washington. I got an apartment, started dating and living like a real person. Seven months later I got my dream sheet wishes and received orders for ranger, airborne, Vietnam.

In Vietnam I remember one evening during the monsoon season laying in the mud after being on patrol for a week. I was so wet that my skin shriveled. If I walked past a bush, it could

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tear the skin. As I fought off mosquitoes as big as hummingbirds, I begin to ponder how did I get here.

As I started my brief military career, I came to several crossroads and had to make decisions whether to go right or left. In making these decisions I always remembered my dad's last moments with me, and I tried to be as professional as possible. I will always be proud of the uniform I wore and the men I served with.