

“I KNEW THEY WERE GONNA GET ME”
by Paul M. Riley MD:FACS

I was called to the emergency room of the 18th MASH Hospital at Lai Khe, Vietnam, early in January, 1968. Luke, an injured 19 year old soldier, was being brought in by Ambulance. He was short of breath, and coughing up blood.

Luke had served a year with the Fourth Infantry Division defending the western part of Viet Nam against North Vietnamese and Viet Cong infiltrators heading toward Saigon, getting prepared for the Tet Offensive. Almost every day there had been enemy attacks with casualties. For a whole year Luke had somehow dodged bullets, land mines, mortar fire, and booby traps!

Like most “short timers”, Luke became very paranoid. He was sure he was going to be killed just before he left Viet Nam. Then he began to imagine seeing enemy soldiers behind every bush! He almost shot one of his buddies, thinking he was the enemy! He was becoming psychotic! He could not stay with his outfit any longer! Luke's commanding officer transferred him to the safest place in the country; a Tank Maintenance Unit in the center of the large Lai Khe Army Base. There were two well defended perimeters to the base, the nearest was almost five miles from Luke. Some mortar rounds were occasionally fired into the base by the enemy but these usually exploded harmlessly in the tops of the numerous rubber trees. The mortars also had a range of less than five miles. Luke did not have to carry a weapon since the Tank Unit was well guarded; but Luke was still convinced that he would be killed. If he heard any unusual sound or a distant explosion he would jump into a tank and close the hatch. The last few nights he slept in the largest tank in the unit. The night before he was to ship out, Luke got into the tank, covered up with several flak jackets and closed up the hatch. Just before daylight, a single Chinese made rocket was fired into the camp from about ten miles away. These rockets usually missed their target by several hundred feet. Also this was the first such rocket to be fired into this particular camp. Very unfortunately for Luke, the ninety pound high explosive warhead hit Luke's tank, splitting the seams, and blowing off the turret!

I met the Ambulance and Luke was quickly wheeled into the triage area. There was not a mark on his body but the blast had destroyed Luke's lungs. "I knew they were gonna get me", Luke kept repeating until he was sedated and connected to the respirator. He died about the same time he was to leave the country. Later, we learned that, while Luke was with the Tank Unit, his Unit out in the field had suffered no serious injuries!

This made me think of when I visited the Officers Club a few days previously. I had a strange feeling that was a dangerous place. It was too close to the outer fence, and too many of the top military "Brass" were going there. It just looked like any easy target! That night, some enemy agents cut through the fence and placed explosive satchel charges at the four corners of the large two story French villa. Guards had seen people cutting through the fence, but could not get permission to open fire! Then the whole building exploded into a pile of rubble! Many officers including two generals were killed.

I had been *invited* to see a show at the Club that night, but had declined! I also thought about the four different times when doctors told my parents that I might not survive an illness. I also thought about the times when other family members had been in danger. I remembered my dad's statement: "The safest place on earth is in the center of God's will"!

P.S.

58,267 SOLDIERS WERE KILLED IN THE VIET NAM WAR.

997 SOLDIERS WERE KILLED THE DAY THEY ARRIVED IN VIETNAM.

1,448 SOLDIERS WERE KILLED THE DAY THEY WERE TO LEAVE VIET NAM
(LUKE WAS ONE OF THEM!)

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