

I spent a year in Viet Nam. I was a dental technician assigned to the 8063rd Hospital at Cam Ranh Bay. Cam Ranh had beautiful beaches, and it could easily have been transformed into a luxurious resort. To the combat troops who went there for R&R it must have seemed like a luxury resort.

Although we were part of the hospital, we in the dental clinic had little or no daily interaction with people in the main hospital. One of my hootch mates was a guy who worked in the hospital lab, but we guys on the front line of the war on tooth decay were a fairly autonomous detached unit.

One Friday night we were enjoying grilled steaks and plenty of beer when we were called back to the hospital. Choppers were coming in and offloading wounded. Doctors quickly established a triage. Suddenly I was facing real war, and I didn't like it. Somebody barked, "You two, take this litter to building J, stat!" We picked up the patient and off we went. That seemed like a good time to ask, **Where the hell is building J?** The other guy didn't know either. As it turned out, it wasn't really war. A couple of clans in a nearby village got caught up in a *Hatfields and McCoys* type situation that turned bloody.

I reported to work in an air-conditioned building at 8:00am, had a couple cups of coffee, cleaned up messes made by dentists all day, and got off work around 5:00pm. The clinic closed at noon on Saturdays, then we had a *GI party* in the afternoon. I hated that. We all did. But CCR and Iron Butterfly blaring over the PA system made it tolerable. Someone always commandeered a jeep and loaded it up with cold beer. As soon as we finished cleaning the clinic, we headed to the beach.

My most vivid memory of Viet Nam was one Saturday afternoon with a bunch of buddies lying on the beach soaking up sun and suds. GI 1: **Hey, turn that up. I love Dionne Warwick.** GI 2: **What are we going to tell the folks back home?** GI 3: **About what?** GI 4: **About this.** GI 5: **He's got a point. We can't tell them that instead of storming the beaches we laid on the beach and got drunk.** GI 6: **That's a dilemma I'd love to be facing right now.** GI 7: **Okay, here's what we do. When someone asks about the war, get a deeply troubled look on your face, bring your hand up to your brow, look away, and say quietly *I don't want to talk about it.***

The only time I touched an M16 after basic was when some goofball officer decided we enlisted types needed to be prepared to defend the perimeter of Cam Ranh Air Base, just in case it should come under threat of invasion. Cam Ranh was the safest place in South Viet Nam, and we all knew it. The chances of us being overrun were about the same as Vermont State meeting University of Alaska at Ketchikan in the Rose Bowl. But we lined up, each took temporary possession of a rifle, and formed a perimeter. If any Viet Cong had been watching, they would have been laughing their asses off. **Hey, Pham, I'm pretty sure we can take these guys.** Viet Cong didn't scare me. Knowing that behind me were a bunch of hospital workers, each holding a loaded M16, scared the crap out of me.

We had a gym, a crafts facility, a good BX, a well-stocked liquor store, a library, an outdoor bar on the beach, and a Bank of America branch. We had very good food, and plenty of it. With Sundays off, we had time to consider some of the weightier philosophical debates of that day. **Who is funnier, Groucho Marx or Jack Benny?** As I recall, the correct answer was Bob Hope.

I wrote frequent letters to my wife back in Tucson. As my year slowly ground down to the last agonizing days, I was certain something bad would happen and I'd never make it back to the "real world". Every GI over there experienced the terror of the last days. My wife said in her last letter that Mike and Shiela, a couple we enjoyed hanging out with, would also be there to greet me in LA.

The first thing that happened when I got to LA was Shiela pulled me aside and said that her husband and my wife had been having an affair while I was gone. And she demanded to know what I was going to do about it. My mind was on overload. I had just stepped into a land that seemed foreign. I felt exhausted, dazed and confused, and angry. Yet, through the fog of peace, I was able to focus my thoughts briefly. **I have a plan. Leave it to me.**

I wasted no time springing into action. **Hello, sarge? Any chance I could hop on a flight back to Cam Ranh?**