

# Another time, another life

By Lawrence Tân JJR 69

A few years ago, my son threw a cyber party in our basement. We had about anywhere from fifteen to twenty kids. What followed was a kind of party I had never seen before. The kids must have brought in with them eight to ten computers. We ordered a bunch of pizzas and got some soft drinks. Within a short time, they had all the machines configured and networked together, and connected to the Web using our DSL line. They formed teams of two to three kids per station and started a cyber war. The participants included other teams on the Web too. These were the combatants in all kinds of fatigues. The idea was to score and to survive in a shoot out game within a cyber world, in some cyber town. The kids who came to the party were boys and girls, some boys with earrings, head shaved and with bandannas. That reminded me of the images of the pirates, as I saw them in some comic books when I grew up. Some came with strange hairstyles with colorful highlights, others with no style at all, just like straight from their beds. These were all college kids and Felix's high-school friends. I did not think I had seen a quieter party before. They just sat there in groups and immersed in their own world, clicking their mice and tapping frantically on the keyboards all through the night. I came down the next morning and saw a few of them spreading out on the floor sleeping among the empty soda cans and pizza boxes, just like a true battlefield! It looked like they had a real good time. I was wondering what I was doing when I was at their age. I was also in a war, but not the cyber kind...

Out there in the fields, everything was so unpredictable. Sometimes we moved from place to place, other times we camped in one place for months on end. At times, like cub scouts, we got to learn all the fun stuffs, like to tell whether a cannon projectile was passing over us and into the distance or it was time to duck just by the way it whistled, or to



recognize the unmistakable cracking of an AK47 versus that of an M16. The spots we stayed for months were the barren plains in Quang Tri or in the mountainous hills overlooking Hue. From hill 362, I could tell where the city was in the distance, the size of the palm of my hand when it lighted up at sunset, making it feel so homey and me so distant and lonely. Have you ever seen those Chinese classical paintings depicting the mountainous hills that seemed to float on a layer of cloud? Well, indeed, every morning we seemed to wake up in a middle of an ancient painting. All we could see was the scattered hilltops popped up here and there among the clouds. It was so deceptively peaceful and magical. The clouds gradually dissipated later in the morning as the sun came up higher. The irony was that we all realized that concealed in it were all kinds of booby traps and deadly ambushes devised by the beloved humankind.

A savvy soldier must equip himself with a nylon hammock in addition to the government issued stuffs. When we camped in a location, we set our defense perimeter, and then we set up our makeshift shelters. Basically we spread out, tied our hammocks to the tree trunks or to two strong posts planted on the ground; the poncho was used as a tent over a skeleton of wooden sticks made out of the tree branches, tied to the posts and above the hammock. On the rainy season, we collected a few pieces of rocks or branches and made a small-elevated platform on one end of the hammock, for our backpack so that the running rainwater on the ground would not soak it. Sometimes, that was home for an extended period. Due to the humidity from the ground, it was not healthy to sleep on it unless you had a protective layer. The nylon hammock was a more versatile and essential item that one would think. It was our bed and

ultimately, it was our personal body bag. We used it to wrap the body of a fallen buddy, tied both of its ends on a stick and carried it to the extraction point where they were picked up and transported back to the base camp. I carried a corporal who slipped and fell into his own booby trap on a rainy day. He died instantly, we could not find one of his arm. I did not go and collect his body parts; but I helped carrying his body out to the transfer point. He was not particularly heavy; he was a small man. He was from the region. He was kind of a loner; he hardly spoke to anyone. I remember he always carried a nylon bag of tobacco, tied to his belt. He let me try it once, and I almost flipped over! But for some reason, a few months before, during the New Year, to my surprise, he gave me a hundred piasters for lucky money. I carried the back end of the stick, and when walking uphill, his feet kept knocking at my stomach, while I could see the fresh blood still dripping from the bottom of his hammock. Yes, there is always a first time to everything. Some guy who stationed on the same hill as the corporal told me that he reappeared at night asking them to find his missing arm!

The first time we reported to our unit, it took us two days to get there. About twenty of us were driven about over an hour from the city to the foot of this mountain. The road ended there and next to a large creek. From there, it took us about six hours to climb the first hill. We all equipped with about four hundred rounds of ammunitions, four grenades, a week's worth of food, a bag of water, a rifle and your personal stuffs. Some kids also had to carry an M72 (Light Anti-tank Weapon). The climb was our first true challenge to our stamina. It was really hard uphill with all that stuff on our back. Some kids cried as they realized that it was no picnic at all. The sight of the hill was just terrifying, even though there were a few plants and vegetation; the entire mountainside was practically destroyed by B52 bombings. The remaining trunks of those big trees were all charred, scattered all over and to the distance formed such a macabre landscape. Our destinations were the units along the way into the mountain. I and another kid, Man, we were unfortunately assigned to the unit that was engaging in a firefight at the time, deep inside at the most forward position.

What was going on here? Wasn't the cease-fire supposed to be in effect? It turned out that the cease-fire was only observed in locations visible to the International Committee, but it was largely ignored in other places. We were supposed to be the fresh troops filling in for the KIA or MIA. When we got to the top of the hill, we rested for about ten minutes and we were rushed on. The scout tried to get us there before nightfall, but I fainted due to exhaustion. They managed to revive me, but we stayed over night at one lookout spot and continued the next day until we reached the Company. Along the way, we crossed a creek; its water was knee high. It looked so pretty; the water meandered into the distance, just like in a painting; under normal circumstances, it would be a romantic spot for a picnic, deep inside the mountain! As we approached the unit, sporadic gunfire and explosions could be heard. Suddenly, I saw two soldiers heading towards our direction, on their way out. I remember one with a bloody arm on a makeshift sling. The other must be his escort. I asked them where they were going, the injured guy cracked a smile, seemed all excited and said to me: "I am going home, man!" At that moment, I told myself, "Rats! Is that how you can get out of this place?" And then I thought, "Or it could be worse!". When we arrived at the destination, a barren hill surrounded with tall trees, we were supposed to present ourselves to the commanding officer there, but he dismissed us immediately and ordered us to spread out and find a foxhole or a shelter. As I was settling myself down in one of those holes, a guy came over and asked me about my emergency address. I asked him for what purpose, they already had all my information back in the HQ. He said that this was different; they wanted to know where to ship back my body! Much later, I thought the fellow might just follow procedures, since we were on the battlefield; but the way he said it sounded like that would be an eventual outcome. What an initiation ceremony!

The next morning, I was told that I was dispatched to a forward squad and asked to leave some of my personal stuffs that I did not need behind. The sergeant would take care of them until I came back (sic!). I was briefed that the squad that I was going to join down there was so close to the enemy that we were not allowed to use a spoon to eat out of the tin can. We used those broad leaves to scoop the food instead. We were supposed to whisper to each other's ear only. Two of us were taken to that location to join three others already there. We were asked immediately to dig our own foxholes. We had to do it carefully, one scoop at a time, trying to make no noise. We spent all day doing that and the foxholes were still too small. Twice a day, someone carried the food down to our spot since we could not cook there. Besides the path I came from, there were two paths downhill from our locations, towards the enemy's locations. We took turn to eat. Some of us guarded the paths; the safety pins of the grenades were all straightened out, ready to be pulled. The safety switch of the M16 was set to the off position, and ready to fire. We crouched there until the guys who finished the meal came and tapped on our shoulders. Then we reset the safety switch of the rifle and the pins of the grenades and made the switch. Those paths were guarded twenty-four hours.

At night we heard people snoring. But it was hard to tell which direction it came from. At times, at 7 o'clock in the morning, they fired their machine gun randomly at our directions. The first morning we were there, Man and I jumped into one of the fresh foxhole close by which we thought it was too small for one person. When the firing stopped, we had a hard time extracting ourselves out of it. I had never been so scared, almost peed in my pants! Following the barrage of gunfire, a voice came on a bullhorn: "Good morning everyone! Did you all had a good night sleep?". Even when we were in the business of killing people, somebody still maintained their senses of humor! Some propaganda and finally some of their revolutionary songs followed the announcement. For a short while anyway, because not before long, we started to hear the cannon projectiles flying over our heads and crashing over the source

of the broadcast which quiet them down for a few days! But the 7 o'clock ritual in the morning continued every once a while. At one time, we were given the order of preparing to attack. Therefore, everybody geared up and waited for the green light. At that moment, I looked up in the sky, thought about my family and quietly said goodbye. We waited a whole afternoon and then came another order to stand down. Oof! What a relief! The next day another regiment came and replaced us. It took us one full day to pull out of that mountain. That was pretty damned close!

I think I was down at that spot for just about a week, I felt like months! It was during the rainy season. We had some bouts of torrential rains. We pulled out during nightfall to avoid their spies and scouts. Because moving in numbers like that would be so vulnerable to their artillery. On our way out, that beautiful little stream became a ferocious and roaring torrent. Due to the continuous rainstorms, it had swelled to become a much deeper and wider monster. We had to fall a tall tree on its bank to bridge to the other side. We strapped our rifle over our shoulder, sat on the tree trunk and slid our way across. I could feel the current pulling my legs really hard. There must be no mistakes or you would fall off and pulled away by the current into the dark water. We hardly had any moonlight that night; it was almost pitch dark and that made it even more difficult. At the other side of the bank, we had to climb a steep hill. On the way up there, I dropped my plastic bowl. I froze and listened to its fall knocking on the sides of the hill and realized how high up I was, and that scared the heck out of me!

One guy got lost in the dark. He started to call out, with the echo in the mountain; there was no way for us to know where it came from. One of us started to call out to him too, hoping for him to find his direction back to the column. Unfortunately, the poor guy's voice seemed to be more and more distant and eventually faded altogether. The poor kid! He would probably last a few days and died out there somewhere in the mountain.

After another hour of walk, we rested at the foot of this hill overnight. We were so tired. I hung my hammock and fell asleep in it. Suddenly, I was awakened by the rain and realize that I was thoroughly soaked in it! I managed to gather some dry branches and attempted to make a fire under a canopy of some big trees that were not affected by the midnight rain. I was so cold. I trembled so much that I could not even strike a match. Finally, some guy came over and helped me. We had that fire going for a while anyway. It was warm and it was good. I changed into dry clothes in my backpack. My blanket and my hammock



were all wet, but I had to fold and tie them to my backpack. Everybody woke up by then. We were ready to move out. On our way out on the trucks, some one pointed out to me when we passed by the Hamburger hill, Bastogne.

In those long and more peaceful locations, if we were to stay in a spot for an extended period of time, we would collect the carton boxes from the supply trips to make the tent floor, dug up just a few inches around it as water drain, just in case. That carton floor would give us a little bit more room to sit around with a few persons. Your tent was all you got during those cold and rainy days. In the daytime, I tied the hammock to the top of the tent to get it out of the way. My tent could accommodate four persons for a card game. We sipped tea or coffee along with a smoke or two, under the valuable candle light in the evening. Every now and then, small teams of soldiers passed by our station. And it was such a delight to see somebody that you knew. Even a hasty cup of tea or a small exchange of greetings and news of other acquaintances were so heartwarming. Out there, that was all you got. That was your family.

I read the Vietnamese version of The Godfather by Mario Puzzo the first time. I borrowed it from a deserter. A few of them were dispatched to our company; we had one in our squad. They were mainly used as slave labor, they were not given any weapon nor combat boots, and I was told when we engaged in a firefight, they would be rushed upfront as bait, either barehanded or sometimes they were given a grenade. Their rations were much meager compared to ours, so every now and then I gave the guy what I could spare. Officially, we were not to befriend with them, we were supposed to treat them like dogs, until they were re-instated. At times, I felt so sorry for the guy. They did not look any different than anyone of us. One guy completed his sentence and got re-instated. He asked to stay with us because our unit operated closed to his hometown and we had been together for a while. He was handed a helmet, an M16 and a pair of boots, a backpack with some extra stuffs. He was clearly so happy, he was then treated like one of us again, just promoted from the status of an animal to a foot soldier!

In one of those rare occasions where we camp in the outskirt of a village, at least we could see the people, notably the woman and girls, not like in the mountains for months without seeing a female. During that stay, I witnessed some strange stuff. A sergeant and I were invited into a house. While we were sitting there and chatted, the sergeant said that he could tell fortune. He asked the owner of the house to light up three incense sticks and decided to examine a girl, a guest of the house. He started out by closing his eyes and recited something then he sniffed the smoke from the incense sticks. Then he described to the girl, to her astonishment, accurately the location of her house and the different things around there such as a well, a big tree, the location of her bed, and etc...It was really scary. He talked about her problems in general terms to which she all agreed, and finally he gave her some advices. He was a northerner, and we were in the outskirt of Hue. I would not believe it if I were not there myself!

The daytime was so humid and warm. I was all sweaty in my khaki uniform. I tried very hard to take a nap in my hammock under the shade of the poncho. Suddenly my buddy woke me up by sticking a cold glass on my cheek. It was a glass of lemonade on ice! Oh! Heaven, where the heck did you get that? I said. He asked me to follow him. We walked for about a quarter of a mile to the village. He went in a house behind a stall where they sold a few kinds of soda and some snacks. He talked to the owner who handed him a guitar and then he started singing and playing the guitar at the same time. When he finished, a few folks and some kids applauded, then he turned around and asked the owner to give me a glass of hand squeezed lemonade on ice. What a guy!

Even though we seemed to stay far behind the battlefield but we were not totally immune from the war. I heard over the radio that one of the units in the hills just attacked and took over a hill successfully. Before the cheering was over, the bad news came. Somebody stepped on a booby trap. A few killed and a few injured. I was part of the team to go and pick them up. We set out early in the morning and did not reach the rendezvous point until the afternoon. Two of us carried a wounded guy. He was

wrapped in his poncho like all the dead, except that they did not cover his face for him to breath. Every now and then, he asked me for water. I let the paramedic take care of him and not offering any water fearing that it would kill him. We did not get back until almost midnight. He was immediately picked up by another team to head out towards the ambulance. On my way back, I was so exhausted and slipped and fell into a pond. It was pretty deep; I swam right back to the bank and picked up by the team. I changed immediately when I got back to my spot and they let me sleep that whole night because I was on that mission the entire day before, otherwise I would have to guard another three hours at night. Each night we broke



the guard up into four shifts. The first and last shifts were always preferable because it did not interrupt your sleep, but they normally last about an hour longer than the middle shifts. We were told to be careful to conceal our silhouettes, as when we moved, we would be targets for the snipers. I usually sat motionless against a big tree with the safety of my gun off for three hours straight. Every now and then, somebody would signal and come by to make sure that we were awake. All those long marches and climbs in the jungle and mountains, the fear and the boredom both physically and mentally overwhelmed me at times. On more than one occasion, I had thought to end it all. But the thought of my family had prevented me to do the silly things.

During the monsoon seasons, the mountains of Central Vietnam were particular colder because of the constant rain that would last a month at a time. Most of the time, there were no shower, just continuous drizzles for days after days. We wore our clothes as soon as we washed them so that they dried faster on our back. In one spot, there were three of us staying in a small clearing up on a hill covered mostly with trees and bushes. There were Sergeant Ta'nh, a Northerner, in his forties, Ma'ng, a kid from the South, who lost his right thumb, but was dragged into the service anyway and me. From our location, our main water supply was a creek, about half an hour to forty minutes walk. Every few days, we took our plastic water containers down, filled them with water and balanced them on both ends of a stick on our shoulder on our way back. The creek was about twenty to thirty feet wide; it was with running clear water. Due to its clarity, we could tell that its depth varied at different spots. At the crossing we were at, it was just knee deep all the way across. On other occasions, I walked along it and found that there were pretty deep spots. We filled our water containers, washed ourselves and sometimes harvested some fish. We all stood behind big pieces of rock on the bank, watching for a school of fish swimming upstream. As soon as it passed by us, we threw a small piece of rock in front of them and at the same time we slowly released a grenade into the water, behind the fishes. As soon as they were scared by the pebble, they turned around and heading downstream towards the grenade. Right after the grenade went off, we ran down stream, positioned ourselves there and used our helmet to shovel the

stunned fishes over the sandy banks. Sometimes we got four sandbags full. We shared them with the other squads and we would have fish for days afterwards.

Wherever we stationed, we set up booby traps at nightfall and dismantled them in the morning when we woke up. We were always radioed before any unit plan to go through our locations, just making sure that the area was cleared. The booby trap was real simple and deadly. We used an empty C-ration can, punctured four holes at the bottom, and tied a stick about four to six inches tall on its back. It was then planted solidly on one side of the path, concealed in the bushes. We pulled the pin off a grenade and stuffed it into the empty can locking its spoon in there. We tied a fishing line to the grenade and string it across the path and tied the other end to some branches or a piece of rock and made sure the line was taught. The idea was when somebody walked on the path and kicked the wire, the fishing line would pull the grenade out of the can, without its pin, the spoon would jump and it should explode next to the person. An instant kill guaranteed. We definitely took turn to do this. When dismantling them in the morning, I normally squatted on the top of the hill, prayed and looked and spotted clearly the line and the environment before I made a move. Very carefully, I approached the grenade, clutched it tightly, pulled it out of the can and stuffed its safety pin back in, bent it into the locking position then collected the fishing line and wrapped it around the grenade. The corporal set this up on a rainy day wearing his pair of flip-flop. When he turned around trying to walk back up the hill, he slipped and kicked the wire.

The plain of Quang Tri was a totally different landscape. I did not believe that I saw any trees at all. There were just barren hills, small bushes and may be some tall grass. Over time, we moved around that area a few times too. When we were first mobilized there, we were replacing another unit. Our truck column took the National Route 1, (The Highway of Horror). I saw all kind of stuffs left behind on both sides of the road by a column of population who were massacred by the Northern Vietnamese Army (NVA) artillery. The population tried to run away from the advancing forces when they jumped the parallel 17 in the beginning of 1973. There would be no legitimacy and satisfaction for the NVA to take over a piece of land without its population, therefore the communist forces discouraged the people from leaving by shelling indiscriminately the main highway where people were heading south.

We were told that our positions would be very close to the NVA (Bo^Ddo^i). How close? When I just got there and took over a position from a departing unit, I asked one of the guys where were the NVA? He pointed out to me at a few guys who were squatting in the distance, just about less than fifty yards from where we were. The location was a plain with some small hills. There were no trees at all. The whole place was pockmarked with bomb holes with the sizes of the ponds. Some were of pretty good sizes; as wide as small swimming pools, results of the 500lb bombs. After a few weeks of rainy days, they were all filled with water. We designated which one was for consumption and which one for bathing. These depressions were all normally deeper than the height of a person. There were actually two sets of barbed wire separating us. Between the barbed wires were the landmines. Ceasefire was actually in effect there. I could not see it, but the Tha.ch Ha~n river was behind the NVA. I had never been so close to them. For the first few days, I slept with my boots on. Over time, we engaged in conversations over a cup of coffee or tea in the late afternoon. We also tried to exchange cigarettes. There were some spots where we were close enough to throw cigarette packs to each other. We gave them Capstan or Ruby. What we got in return were some lousy quality product from their sides. If you stopped drawing on their cigarettes for about 30 seconds, they extinguished by themselves. I asked them why? They said that the cigarettes were designed purposely like that so that not to waste any tobacco (sic)! Each one of their cigarettes consumed about a quarter of my matchbook. Not before long, they sent in some low level propagandist. I noticed that when one guy talked to me, there was always another guy hiding in the bush listening in (part of the 'threesome unit' in which if one is at fault not being reported in times, all three would be responsible). I told him to jump out and join in the conversation, he slowly moved away from his position within the bushes and the tall grass into another position harder for me to see. It was so funny! When they talked to me, I discovered that they learnt those lines by heart. If I interrupted them in the middle of their discourse, they had to re-start from the very beginning of the paragraph! They told me that they learnt that last month, the workers of some manufacturer in Bie^N Ho^a demonstrated against the owner because they were mistreated. I told them to open their eyes and watch democracy at work and asked them if the workers in the North were not happy, would the government allow them to do the same? Their responses were their workers were always happy so there was no need for demonstrations. Nevertheless, sometimes we had pretty friendly exchanges about lives in the North and the South in general. At times, they were trying to test us by throwing a pack of cigarettes quite short of the concertina line on our side and into the field of landmines. They just want to see if we knew how to navigate through the minefield. We told them that we were not stupid.





We cooked two meals a day with the same kind of food most of the time. We always have a soup of xu xu (or xu ha`o) with the dried shrimps. I did not really care. When you were hungry enough, then even a simple meal would always taste good, especially with some crushed hot peppers. We started out to receive one C-ration pack each week; then twice a month and later, it became a monthly thing. We were told that the headquarters were running out of them. But every time when I could get back to town, I could buy them from the marketplace; there were plenty of them. Somebody stole them and sell them to the black market. On a few occasions, some of the guys caught snakes; they chopped it up into pieces and sautéed it. I got a piece and did not particularly like it; those guys did not even care to skin it. Everyone knew how to cook rice in an ammo box or sometime in a helmet (extra helmet for cooking). We brought the water to a boil then we dumped in the washed rice and kept the lid closed. When it was almost cooked, we diminished the fire at the bottom and put some of the burning charcoal on top of the ammo box so that the rice would be cooked evenly. I remembered I dreamt about a can of Coca Cola. If I had a can, I told myself, I would burry it in the mud for a few days just to keep it cool. At the beginning of the month, when we got paid, people always had a few packs of cigarettes. By close to the end of the month, we used to walk around with a can collecting the left-over cigarettes buds that people dumped on the ground and tried to survive until the next pay day.

We must have stayed in that same area for a few months. When we got there, it was totally dry except for the few large bomb holes. We were in need of dry wood to make the fire for cooking, so a few of us scouted around the area. On one occasion, we found a collapsed wooden bunker, shaped like the character V upside down; we started to dig into it to pull the wooden pillars out, suddenly I saw a human foot popped out of the rubble. The type of sandal still on the foot indicated it was an NVA. We left that place as fast as we could. We stayed in that location through the monsoon months. The sky was always grey and it rained incessantly, and finally the whole area was flooded. We got stuck on the hills. Before the flood, at least we could still see those ponds. When the plain was flooded, there was no way we could tell. But we still have to travel to the outside at least once a week for the supplies. There, normally four of us went with empty backpacks. We picked up the rations for other hills nearby too. They would come to us later when we got back. We would strip ourselves all the way down except for the shorts, and barefooted for easier walking and just in case we fell into those ponds we could manage easier. Someone had to play the scout and everybody else followed behind. The depth of the water varied from stomach to neck high. We carried the supplies on our heads. Very often, all of us were victims of the leeches. When we got to a high spot where we could take a break, we would use a cigarette to burn the leeches off our body. All I needed to do was to touch each one of them with a burning cigarette; they would fall off from my body almost immediately. They were all over, even on my most intimate part. We just had to get used to it. The invisible ponds could also be so dangerous. There was one guy who had a few days of leave, left the company in the morning, disappeared and never reached the units on the outside. A few days later, we discovered his body when it floated to the top. When he left, he wore his entire outfit, had his heavy backpack on. When we found him, his rifle still strapped to his neck! His backpack must have slipped out somehow. He must have fallen into a pond and drowned.



Looking at the world my kids are growing up today and reflecting on my own time at those same ages, no wonder we have such a wide gap. Those supposed to be the prime years of my life. Lost and wasted. But I learnt to appreciate everything a little bit more, value any relationship that I got. However taking everything into considerations, I was damned lucky, I came out unscathed. A lot of other kids at my age were not so lucky. How many had perished in that war altogether from all sides? How many families were devastated? When the memorial wall for the American Vietnam veterans was inaugurated, I cried. Where is the one for us?

**Lawrence Tân - 2004**