

VIETNAM: ONE MAN'S REMEMBERANCES

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The subject of this interview is former Sgt. Lee Scruggs of Portland, Tennessee. He was originally stationed with the 101st Airborne Unit at Fort Campbell, Kentucky and his assignment was the 77th Special Forces, Recon. Platoon. The mode of operation was to stop all traffic from north to south on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. His area of operations was the Plain of Reeds in Southern Laos.

Even after nearly thirty years, Mr. Scruggs' recollections of his experiences in Vietnam are vivid and very real. He spoke for more than an hour with no hesitation or prompting. I'm offering a capsulized version of his stories. The full effect of the tape itself was moving and riveting.

During a firefight, a young soldier was knocked down. Assuming he was shot because he could feel wetness on his back, he laid still until medics came to take care of him. Upon examination of the supposed wound, no blood could be found. He'd been shot in the fruit cocktail can that was in his backpack. Illogically, he was upset because fruit cocktail was a rarity and one of his favorites and could only say, "Why didn't they shoot at me somewhere else?"

In another instance, a soldier had been asleep in his foxhole and suddenly began screaming. His companions tried to see what was going on and soon found the soldier being carried off in the mouth of a very large tiger. Afraid to fire and risk the tiger

biting down harder on his intended dinner, they all ran alongside, beating the tiger with helmets and rifle butts until the frightened animal dropped his prey and ran off. The soldier was extremely lucky, suffering only from a few puncture wounds and some bruises to the ribs.

Another time, a patrol was being led by a Sgt. Martinez from San Diego, California, on a dark night. The soldier was about ten yards in front of the speaker, when he suddenly just disappeared. Inching forward to see what had happened, Sgt. Scruggs was startled by the figure of Sgt. Martinez literally jumping straight up into the air and running off at a high speed. After he'd been chased down and questioned, he told everyone that he'd fallen into a hole and then he felt something about twelve inches around crawl over him. He wasn't wasting any time waiting around to see what it was or if it had plans to have him for dinner.

An older trooper, a black man from Jamaica, was deathly afraid of snakes. Sgt. Scruggs knew this and as a practical joke, killed a large snake and walked toward the black man with it in his hand. The men had been eating "hot chow" that night which was an infrequent change and luxury compared to C-rations. When the soldier saw the snake, his eyes bulged, his food tray flew and he took off running. Sgt. Scruggs chased him until he suddenly stopped short, turned around and threatened to kill his torturer if he did not get rid of the snake. Although they were friends, Sgt. Scruggs wisely decided that he'd pushed it far enough and threw the snake into the bush.

An incident that will probably remain in Sgt. Scruggs' mind for the rest of his life involved another patrol mission that had lasted about fourteen days. On this particular night, they were on 50% alert, which meant that for every two men, one of them had to be awake at all times. The speaker took the first watch and then settled down to take his turn sleeping while his partner manned the machine gun. The next thing he knew, someone was shaking him awake and it was broad daylight. Glancing at his watch, he saw he still had another hour to sleep and asked what the problem was. As it turned out, the Viet Cong had invaded the camp while he slept, shouting, screaming, and throwing hand grenades. He found out the meaning of sleeping with his eyes open. He had seen all of this happening while he was asleep and thought he was dreaming. Viet Cong had literally jumped right over him and thinking he was dead, hadn't checked. His next thought was for his partner, who he saw slumped over the machine gun. The man had had the same good fortune. He had fallen asleep, and was left for dead. Both men, in their own words, attributed the fact that they were still alive to having "an angel in their pocket" that night.

A young trooper from Bowling Green was assigned to security forces in Saigon and one night after a prolonged firefight, he was among those who went through the streets, rolled over bodies, identified the dead and wounded and so forth. One of the bodies he came across was in a Viet Cong uniform. The soldier nearly fainted when he looked at the man's face. It was the local barber who had

been posing as a friend and giving everyone haircuts on a regular basis. This, of course, explained many mysterious disappearances.

This same soldier was assigned another time to guard a Vietnamese female who was a known prostitute but also suspected of being a spy. While he was guarding her, a South Vietnamese officer was questioning her, trying to get information. Obviously, she wasn't telling him what he wanted to hear. The conversation went from laughing to screaming to recriminations and back again. The soldier relaxed a little when the officer started to walk away. Then, as he watched, horrified, the officer turned, pulled a gun, and shot the girl right between the eyes. The young man was never the same afterwards.

On a little more humorous note--the jungle is full of creepy crawly things. When Sgt. Scruggs first arrived there, he slept on the ground. One morning he awoke to see a giant four-foot lizard hanging from a tree just inches from his head. After he "disposed" of the creature, he changed his sleeping habits. Whenever possible, he'd tie himself in the crotch of a tree, high enough to avoid a repeat performance. While in camp, he'd often make a hammock using the canvas on a truck. Both of these were not only more comfortable, bur much safer.

One night, after coming off patrol, the speaker and a friend he called Gary, were relaxing with a cup of coffee alongside a tank when they heard a sound in the brush behind them. They jumped up and at that instant a smoke flare was fired right at Gary.

Acting instinctively, he put up his hand to deflect it, which probably saved his life. Instead of killing him, he was only wounded and not as seriously as he could have been. Sgt. Scruggs mentioned at this time that it was the fact of seeing your friends get hit like that, that could really get to you in those situations.

Another young trooper was hit in the stomach during a fire-fight. He was knocked out. When he regained consciousness, there was no blood. He'd been hit in his belt buckle and only had the wind knocked out of him and a bruised stomach. He was very lucky.

Practical jokes were rampant. One involved some truck drivers who, under the guise of being nice, offered the soldiers Chicklets which to those who don't know, are solid chewing gum. The soldiers happily helped themselves. The "chicklets" however, turned out to be Feen-A-Mints, a fact that wasn't discovered until the drivers were long gone. That particular grudge was held for a long time.

Even though there was humor, Mr. Scruggs considers himself lucky to have returned in one piece. He lost some close friends there and it has affected him deeply. One incident he remembers clearly concerned a young man in his squad. This soldier had gone on patrol with some South Vietnamese Rangers. They were ambushed and captured. Several days later, the young man was found tied between two trees and bayoneted to death. There were well over 100 stab wounds. The trooper was only nineteen years old. No one ever knew for sure if the South Vietnamese were friendly or not. Many times Green Berets went out on patrol with them and

never came back. They'd be found dead later, killed by their supposed allies.

Mr. Scruggs said that it was often discouraging being there. He was supposed to be helping these people, teaching them to protect themselves. Several times he observed South Vietnamese fighting with Viet Cong and they would throw down their weapons and run. They didn't want the United States there. It was discouraging to try to help someone who did not want to help themselves.

Being a member of an airborne unit, Mr. Scruggs had several parachute stories to tell.

On one occasion, his unit was flying with members of the French Foreign Legion, making an aerial delivery. This involved dropping very large boxes containing mortars to parachute to friendly troops below. Anyway, a French lieutenant was scooting a box over to the doorway and somehow got tangled in the rope around the box that tied the box to a parachute. Added to that was the fact that the box was too close to the door and tumbled out, soldier and all. The lieutenant was wearing a parachute and managed a safe landing, although with some difficulty. But his exit was to say the least, comical and quite undignified. Seeing someone pulled out the door at 150 mph was amusing in its cartoon-like quality.

There weren't many parachute jumps in Vietnam, but on one, Mr. Scruggs remembers jumping with his partner and they both hit an air pocket at the same time. The next thing he knew he was tangled in parachute material and it wasn't his parachute. Some-

how, he had landed on top of his partner's chute and when the chutes unfurled they looked like descending umbrellas, one on top of the other. Luckily, they landed safely, although his partner accused him of trying to kill them both.

The war involved many individual heroisms, many of which would never be recognized. Mr. Scruggs cited the case of a young marine who was the sole survivor of a vicious attack. Wounded badly, he nevertheless literally crawled back to his unit which was 10-12 miles away.

Mr. Scruggs concluded by saying that he is proud of what he was at the time and proud of what he is today. He's proud of the country he lives in and was able to serve. He had one request that anyone seeing a soldier should pat them on the back because he feels that they will keep this country free and we should never forget that fact.