

BEATING THE ODDS

Richard Paul Jones



It was the spring of 1969 and the war in Viet Nam wasn't going very well. Our oldest son, John, was serving in a Marine Tank Battalion on Hill 55 near Da Nang. He had graduated from high school in 1966, and nothing could dissuade him from jumping into the middle of the fight. When you joined the Marines in those days, it didn't take long to get your feet wet. Eight weeks at Parris Island and another eight in Am-Track School at Camp Pendleton, one short leave and boom – there you were in a hot, humid, buggy, snaky place where the people smiled at you one minute and tried to kill you the next.

John got to Hill 55 in late May of 1968, just as the infamous Tet offensive was winding down, but when we read his letters you would have thought he was on vacation. "Sorry I haven't written sooner," his letters usually started, "but we were out on an operation the last week or so. This afternoon my buddies and I took a bunch of Vietnamese kids swimming in a river under a The Namo Bridge, which we were guarding. How are the Braves doing this year?" He never talked about the bad stuff because he didn't want to worry us.

Eight months later, on a quiet Sunday afternoon, our telephone rang, and the operator asked if we would accept a telephone call from Bangkok, Thailand at \$45 per minute; the caller was John, who quickly explained he was on R&R and hadn't been paid and wanted me to wire some money to him first thing Monday morning. At \$45 a minute, I quickly gave up on trying to figure out what day and time that would be in Bangkok. "I'll go to the bank as soon as they open but you'll have to figure out the time difference," I said. "Are you okay? When will you be home?" I hurriedly asked, seeing more dollar bills flying out the window with each word.

"Yeah, I'm fine," John said, "but it sure is great to be here in Bangkok for a while. Oh one more thing," he said. "I only have a few months left, and if I ship out then Ron will still have enough time left so they'll probably send him over here. When replacements first get over here and they're green as grass about everything, that's when they're most likely to get killed. So I've been thinking maybe I should extend until Ron gets to be a short timer so he won't have to come over here."

Ron was another of our sons and was in the Army, stationed at Schofield Barracks in Hawaii and his MOS was 11B10, light infantry. I wanted him to stay right there and take his chances with the sharks; but I also couldn't bear the thought of John adding even more months to his already perilous tour of duty. In my mind's eye I immediately saw a whole flock of \$10 bills fly out the window. This was clearly not the

time and place for a philosophical discussion. That's when my own military experience kicked in; I realized that it was extremely unlikely that the Army would be able to connect the dots until long after Ron had too little time remaining on his Selective Service obligation.

"That's a sucker bet," I quickly said, glancing at my watch. "You would be betting a sure thing against something that might or might not happen. You would be placing yourself at certain risk, when we have no way of knowing whether they will send Ron to Nam regardless of what you do."

John never mentioned it again. He came home in August of 1969 without a scratch and wearing the Navy Commendation Metal with V Device for bravery under fire. When we met him at the Atlanta airport, he finally admitted that there were a lot of times in Nam that he didn't expect to make it home. And sure enough, we beat the odds; Ron spent the remainder of his selective service tour in Hawaii. You can put that down to courage, brotherly love, a concerned Dad with a gambler's instinct...and probably a little shot of Irish Luck as well.

Please scroll down for photos (taken by John's friends)



John - 20 Years Old – Vietnam 1969



John with his US Marine Corps Buddies 1969



Easter Sunday 1969 in Vietnam



Ron in Hawaii 1969

Author's Note – Statistics:

In 1968 and 69 there were 28,208 US Forces who died in Vietnam. Of those who lost their lives, approximately 86% were enlisted and 55% were either 19, 20 or 21 years of age.

US Marines Killed In Action in Vietnam = 14,836

The highest loss-rate for any Marine MOS was 11E (Armor (Tank) Crewman) = 27% KIA

US Army Soldiers KIA in Vietnam = 38,190

US Army Infantrymen (MOS 11B, 11C, etc.) KIA in Vietnam = 20,460 = 54% KIA