Claymore Alley

A Vietnam war story · Pr'Line Mountain, 1970

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The following war story was written in 1986, before I conducted a yearlong investigation to determine for myself, how the US originally got involved in Vietnam (see my paper, "Lest We Forget" (1993), available on my website).

I have only recently come to terms with this particular experience and can now look back at this event as it occurred without the emotional baggage that skewed my perception for so many years.

It is the story of my first combat experience in Vietnam - a type of experience that would, many years later, be referred to as friendly fire.

Dedicated to the memory of all the men who were, for a short time, my brothers on Pr'Line Mountain[1]:

DEDICATION

- To Starky, who would go home dazed, confused, and destined for the hospital.
- To Ron Kressman, whose triumphant struggle against great odds gave me the strength to do what I had to do.
- To Whitey, whose love of Moon would get him stabbed in Dalat.
- To Izzy, who would finish his third tour in Vietnam on Pr'Line Mountain only to end up being sent to Leavenworth Prison for five years.
- To my Indian brother, whom we respectfully called "Chief," at peace with himself, and at war (like the rest of us) with the army.
- To John Aires, whose secret was never shared by those who knew it.
- To Chris, who would find it in his heart to take "Mai the Monkey" home with him. (Chris died homeless in New York.)

- To Gibby, Timothy, Hargrove and Harris, my closest Black "partners," whom I cannot think about without laughing... and crying. Harris would shoot his foot off on his last day of duty in Vietnam.
- To Johnny Castro and Felix, two of my Puerto Rican brothers, whom I would later be ordered to escort to Long Binh Jail (LBJ), the result of a "fragging" incident. They would both go home free, based on my testimony.
- To Peewee, another Puerto Rican friend, who shared a laugh with me after the CIA tried to recruit us for combat in Laos and Cambodia.
- To Ronald Coleman, a slight young man who had never been away from his mother. The last time we saw him he was being carried away from our hill by MP's from Dalat, screaming incoherently.
- To Murphy, whose anger and stupidity earned him a ride home - to prison.
- To Jim Jondahl, alive and well in Seattle.
- To Pappy, whose quiet southern way was a comfort to us all.
- To Frenchy, who had to stay after we all left. Later hit by a hand grenade in Cam Ranh Bay.
- To Ron Walker, who had to leave our hill because the local villagers had a contract out to kill him on sight for running over a villager with our armored personnel carrier.
- To Nameless, who, on his first night on the mountain, wandered into the concertina wire and had his foot shot off by Peewee.
- To Doc, who killed a VC prisoner with an overdose, and later tried to bury his guilt in a bottle.
- To Tim and Terry, who together, went slowly crazy.
- To Buffalo Bill Cody, whose anger would later consume him.
- To the men of Lang Bien Mountain, our sister-site, who treated us to a 30 minute light show as they shelled their own officers' quarters with M-79 rounds.
- To ALL the men in Vietnam whose names I have since forgotten.



Sunlight shatters on the jungle canopy above and falls, fragmented, on the ground around me. The humid rainforest air has become a second skin, hugging me, moist and sticky. In the past hour my entire world has diminished. Now, there is only the trail behind me and the trail ahead - a muddy reddish-brown streak that remains hidden

except for sudden surprise appearances. Jagged and twisting, it winds its dangerous way through the dense jungle of the Vietnamese Central Highlands.

The past quickly disappears over my shoulder, a distant, fading memory, while ahead of me lurks the all too uncertain future. Nothing matters more to me now than finishing this reconnaissance mission and getting back to my base, Pr'Line Mountain, alive and in one piece. My ammo vest feels good and snug this morning, the magazines of M-16 ammunition lay against my body like a shield, giving me a temporary feeling of security.

Somewhere ahead and behind me, the others are walking stealthily, crouched and pensive. Except for an occasional glimpse, I would not know they are there. Gone is the laughter that filled our throats the night before. In its place today are the hushed, muffled tones of labored breathing. Out here, being silent may give you just the edge you need to beat Charlie to the trigger. Taped down to make them as quiet as possible, the trappings of war we each carry rub caressingly against our combat fatigues. Like wind, the soft noise blends easily into the jungle sounds around us. Still playing tricks with my eyes, the eerie jungle lighting creates further illusions. Ebony black shadows against a brilliant green background present my senses with a surreal 3-D image. I can't shake the feeling that I am advancing, frame-by-frame, through a scene in a View-Master.

Sergeant Joe Frasier is several yards ahead of us, walking the point. He signals back to me that we are going to stop and take a break. I pass it on to the men behind me. Time to have a smoke. As I light my cigarette, I notice Dave Fry moving up to my position. He whispers that he wants to take my place so he can be near his buddy, the sergeant.

I struggle with the decision. Dave shouldn't be out here at all. He's a truck mechanic, not a grunt. But no, Dave just couldn't leave Vietnam without a taste of what it was like to be on patrol in the jungle. He and Joe somehow convinced the captain that this was going to be a "safe" reconnaissance. Still, Joe (and the captain) shouldn't have let him come. But what do you expect when you are on a patrol led by your company clerk - a clear signal as to just how out of touch our commanding officer was with reality. We all know that there is nothing safe in this god-forsaken jungle.

Apparently Joe's own combat inexperience was overridden by the fact that he's the only one in our company who's trained to replace the batteries in the electronic listening devices used to track enemy troop movement. When we were given this mission to find several electronic devices that had been installed on a nearby ridge a year ago, replace the batteries and return to our mountain, our captain made Joe the leader even though he was by trade - the company clerk. He got the training instead of someone in our security platoon because of Joe's college degree. The captain, an ROTC graduate, thought that anyone who hadn't been to college was only capable of shooting a rifle.

Knowing all of this makes me hesitate. I don't see how having these two guys leading our patrol will increase our chances of survival, but Joe is signaling to me that I should do it. Reluctantly, I change places with Dave.

Stretching out the last few hits of my cigarette, I think about this trail we are on. The main road between Dalat and our site, Pr'Line Mountain, cuts right through it. At that point the banks are steep as cliffs, and the trail continues on either side. In 1968, some Vietcong walked this same path. I wonder what was on their minds as they waited for the approaching American convoy. As the sounds of truck wheels on the pitted mountain road got closer, did they have any second thoughts? Did they have any regrets as they depressed the detonators to their Claymore mines? Probably not. Many young American men died that day, never knowing what hit them. From then on, that pass would be known to both Americans and Vietnamese alike as... Claymore Alley.

Time to move again, deeper and deeper into the jungle. All we have is a rudimentary map of where the sensing devices are supposed to be. The odds are high that we will never find them, which makes some of us angry.

Disgruntled feelings are forgotten however, as an odd silence soon blankets the area. Usually there are noises in the jungle around us - birds, monkeys, or other unseen forest creatures. Together, they fill the background with the same kind of sounds you hear in old Tarzan movies. But these sounds have suddenly disappeared. Sensing danger, my skin begins to crawl.

We move forward, cautious and silent. Those of us who have been out here before are nervous because something definitely isn't right. Joe signals for us to stop. Has he seen some movement ahead? He vanishes into the brush ahead of us, and Dave follows him. I wish I could see better, but the jungle is just too thick. I crouch behind a lush plant, trying to make myself look invisible.

An explosion! My brain is rattling in my head. My ears are ringing. I am lying flat on the ground but I don't have any idea how I got there. My mind reels as I try and figure out what is happening. It was so damn loud, yet the noise was quite distinctive. It sounded just like a Claymore mine. A million thoughts race through my mind, but only one pushes to the front... Ambush!

I expect the sound of gunfire. Can anybody see the bastards? Where are they? Why aren't they shooting at us? How much time has gone by since the explosion? Seconds? Minutes? Time is stretched to the point of distortion. My heart is pounding so hard. Why isn't anyone shooting at them? I can't see anything! Can't anybody else see where they are?

What's that? Screaming. A man is yelling something. My God, he's screaming for his mother! Who is it? Where is he? He's screaming in English, so he must be one of us! Which one? Goddamn it, why is no one shooting? Can't anyone see the fucking gooks? No gunfire. Shit. Shit! This can mean only one thing.

Lou, the man to my rear, has moved up next to me. We exchange a look that tells both of us that we have reached the same conclusion. We were now facing that which GIs feared most of all in Vietnam. More than the North Vietnamese Army, more than the Vietcong, more than anything, we feared - the boobytrap.

Seconds tick by. Lou and I are closest to the screams, but the source is still 30 to 50 yards ahead of us. It must be either Dave or Joe. Shit! How did they get that far from us? Were they crazy? If Joe thought he saw movement, why were they walking on the trail? You never walk a trail that Charlie might be using! Why didn't Joe let us know what was going on? Defer the questions. Whoever is out there is still screaming, "Mama, mama!"

God, he sounds just like a little kid - in tremendous pain. I can't stand it. I fight back the urge to throw up. Lou crawls ahead. He motions for me to follow. I can't. I'm frozen in place. All I can think of is the hidden mechanical deathtraps around me that I could set off with the slightest movement.

Time to pull myself together. The screams are getting louder. How much time has passed? An eternity? Lou signals me again. This time I move. Together we cross the distance between us and the source of the screams. It is the longest distance I have ever traveled in my life. With every movement Lou and I expect one of us to set off another mine. There is the strong taste of metal in the back of my throat.

So strange. No more explosions. No gunfire. Did they only set one trap? Very unusual, and lucky. We made it! However, our elation at having gone the distance without getting killed is dampened immediately by the strange sight of Dave lying there on the ground. Joe is kneeling next to him, staring at him, in shock.

Dave is more than a mess. Both his knees are bent 90 degrees in the wrong directions and his fatigues appear to have hundreds of holes in them. Through the holes, blood is spurting everywhere. He must have severed arteries, because the blood acts like it's being pumped. I had no idea people could bleed like that. His screams have turned to moans, and I feel like I'm going to pass out as the others gather around us.

Recovering from my stupor, I start ripping off the numerous battle dressings I am carrying and begin applying them to his wounds. Someone else pulls out a Morphine ampoule and injects it into Dave's leg. My hands and clothing are now covered with his

blood. Bones are sticking out of both his pant legs, and the ends look jagged and sharp. We radio for a Medevac helicopter.

I must be dreaming. The whole situation feels so strange, so unreal. The morphine Dave received has taken effect, and he is actually cracking jokes with the southerner we call Pappy. Somehow, the scene defies belief. I know Dave must be dying, he's lost so much blood. I feel sick to my stomach. Dazed, I take a position on our perimeter, while the others try and comfort him.

What's that? There is something not quite right about those trees. Is there someone there? Again, time is distorted. I'm going to die. No, it can't be! I aim at the shadows - my thoughts are interrupted by a small shirtless man jumping out of the brush with arms raised, yelling, "Don't shoot! Don't shoot! ARVN! ARVN!"[2]

Chaos. I felt dreamy before, but now the last shreds of reason and logic have left me. I no longer belong to this world. We all stare in disbelief as the jungle around us starts spitting up South Vietnamese soldiers. There must be ten or twelve of them. Someone orders them to come out and put down their guns. Two or three do, but the rest are refusing.

It is all starting to make a sick kind of sense. The reason there was no shooting and the reason the mine didn't completely blow Dave apart, was that the mine belonged to them. This must have been their mechanical ambush! ARVNs were known for using the C-4 plastic explosive used in Claymore mines to light their fires during the rainy season, thus rendering the mines powerless in some cases. In this particular case, there was just enough explosive left in the mine to tear Dave up without killing him outright.

Yes, they admit that the mine was theirs. A trip-wire had been strung across the trail at its lowest point. They apparently had been waiting just up the hill. They had to have seen us! Saying nothing, they must have watched Dave walk right into it. Reality is setting in. We have been ambushed by the ARVNs, the South Vietnamese, our allies. Why?

There is a queasy feeling in my stomach. It's so strange to feel something after being so numb. I can't identify it, but it is working its way up my throat and into my head. My intestines turn to fire as I try to cope with the rage.

We are all yelling. We demand that the ARVNs come out and put down their weapons. Some ARVNs are yelling back that they won't.

I am watching another ARVN. He's young, just a boy really, and he is separated from his weapon which is leaning against a nearby tree. He looks into my eyes and slowly starts inching his way toward his weapon. I train my M-16 on him, smile, and nod toward his gun. "Go ahead," I say. "Get it." He takes a step.

Deliberately exaggerating my movements, I make a point of reaching down and turning the switch on my M-16 from single-fire to full automatic. He freezes when he hears the ominous click. Again, I tell him to get the gun. He refuses. I want to kill him so badly I can taste it. I fantasize that the fire from my M-16 splits his body in half. It's odd that I should feel I need more reason to kill one of them. After all, if I hadn't changed places with Dave, that could be me on the ground screaming.

I sense a movement off in the brush. I turn and notice that there is another ARVN hidden there with an M-60 machine gun pointed right at me. The man behind the gunsight looks very frightened. I know I should feel lucky that I didn't kill the young ARVN, for I certainly would have died on the spot from that machine gun. But I don't. All I feel is incredible anger.

Finally, we get them all out of the trees and disarm them. How much time has gone by? The chopper is on its way. We keep asking them why they didn't yell something at us to prevent this from happening. They tell us that they have been on ambush in this area for two weeks and that we shouldn't be here. Yet, no one can give us a reason why they didn't stop us from tripping that mine. Tempers are starting to flare on both sides.

We debate on what we should do with them. Several of us, myself included, suggest killing them all. This clearly agitates the ARVNs who understand English, which was our intention. I am not thinking clearly, but in my anger, I wonder who could blame us? One of us is worth ten of them any time.

Our arguments are disturbed by someone running down the trail toward us - a GI. The patch on his arm tells us that he is with MACV, a liaison detachment between the US Army and the South Vietnamese ARVNs. He looks really worried as he sizes up the situation. He tells us to move down the trail and cool off. There is no more time to argue. The Medevac is near and we have to get Dave to a spot where the chopper can reach the ground. Around us the jungle growth is so thick and high that we are invisible from the air.

We make a stretcher for Dave out of shirts and sticks. Two men carry the ends, while another and I try to hold Dave's shattered legs together. The leg I am holding is broken in at least four or five places. We have to run and the sudden movements cause Dave to scream again. We have no choice but to keep moving fast, for Dave is in deep shock and the morphine is wearing off.

We finally reach a point on the trail where we can see the sky, barely. The chopper hovers overhead, its Red Cross blazing in the reflected light above the trees. I have never seen anything look quite so good. Slowly descending, its giant blades chop the ends off the

branches overhead, showering us with leaves and twigs. The pilot can get no closer to the ground, so they lower a litter. We strap Dave into it, and he is gone, pulled up into the treetops. I never saw him again.

Our mountain base contacts us by radio. We are told that one of our armored personnel carriers is on its way to pick us up at the trailhead. We trot down the trail, our muffled footsteps punctuated only with curses from some of the men. I feel completely empty, drained.

The ride back to our mountain is pure Twilight Zone. We pass through villages on the way that must by now, know what happened. The streets are lined with tiny, silent, hate-filled faces. They stare at us and we stare back. Some of our men yell obscenities and point their guns at them. Oddly enough I cannot, for I realize that my anger is not with them. They did not mine the trail, although I'm sure the majority of them wished we had all breathed our last in Claymore Alley. Our so-called "friends" and "allies" did it, the ones we cannot trust to have at our backs, the ones who can't fight their own damn war. Whose war is this anyway? Where is the sense in all of this? The logic? The goddamn meaning? What the hell am I doing here?

When we reach our mountain, the others head off to the small building we call the EM (Enlisted Men) Club to drink and recount the story. Not up to it, I jump off the armored personnel carrier and walk quickly up the road to my hooch. Along the way, I pass several of the Vietnamese civilians living with the ARVNs that share our mountain. They look at me and run away. They appear to be scared to death. I wonder what they see.

Alone in the safety of my room, I sit on my bed, stunned. Hated by both the North and the South Vietnamese, I realize that we are doomed to lose this war and have no business being here. Dave was injured for absolutely nothing. What a terrible, terrible waste! I decide that I must do whatever I have to, to survive. Yet, inside me, the feeling that I will never leave this god-forsaken country takes seed and starts to grow. I start to shake uncontrollably and there are tears streaming down my face, but I am not crying. In fact, there is no emotion left in me at all. It is as if I have somehow been removed from my body. My mind is detached and separate, watching, while my spirit mourns its loss.

For Dave and I both lost something that fateful day in Claymore Alley: he, his legs, and I - my innocence.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

For years I felt incredible anger at the South Vietnamese. I believed that they let us walk into that ambush because they wanted to see us killed. Although not out of the question, I

realize now that this was not an accurate depiction.

The truth is that these ARVNs were scared to death, just like we Americans were every time we set up an ambush. A moment of indecision on their part, due to their surprise at finding Americans walking down a trail when they were expecting Vietcong, was more than enough time for Dave to trip the wire on that claymore mine (we later found out that we were not supposed to be in that area). Afterwards, they waited, just like we did, for the proverbial "shit" to "hit the fan."

Years later, my research into the war would also teach me that this was not "their war" after all. I now feel nothing but relief that we did not act on our anger that day.

Jeff Drake, 2024

CORRECTION (2026)

A correction: Since writing this story, a fellow veteran reminded me that Sergeant Lou Andelmo, not Joe Frasier, was in charge of the patrol that day. Joe was with us because he had been trained to service the sensors. After so many years, memory blurs some details, even of a day like that one.

NOTES

1. Pr'Line (pronounced "pray-leen") stood for "Primary Line." The mountain was the largest signal communications installation in South Vietnam.
2. The ARVN acronym is for the “Army of the Republic of Vietnam.”