

Vietnam Veterans of America

Chapter 324 - PO Box 18631 - Milwaukee, WI 53218

In Service to America

Elections for the VVA 324 Board of Directors will be held at the April meeting. Members are encouraged to participate.

Meeting Notice

15 April, '15

Elks Lodge

5555 W. Good Hope Rd.

Board Meeting 6 p.m.

Chapter Meeting 7 - 8 p.m.

Meetings are held on the third Wednesday each month. You are also invited to join members for conversation and discussion after the meeting.

Chapter web page: www.vietnamvetschapter324.com

National web page: www.vva.org

Future Meetings

2015

20 May, 17 June, 15 July, 19 August,
16 September, 21 October, 18 November,
16 December

Chapter 324 Officers

President - Pat Ciofani 702-7734

Vice Pres. - Oliver Williams 358-4416

Secretary - Dennis Symanski 453-3600

Treasurer - Pat Moore 354-2533

Director - Ron Coppersmith 262-255-2832

Director - John Morgan 871-9274

Director - Joe Murray 262-389-7325

Director - Mike Ducette 262-968-5508

Siagon Falls - The War In Vietnam Ends

April 30, 1975

8 Things Vietnam War Movies Leave Out (By an Enemy Soldier)

By Evan V. Symon , Nguyen Hoa Giai March 27, 2015

http://www.cracked.com/article_22206_8-facts-about-vietnam-war-i-learned-as-viet-cong.html

Even if your knowledge of the Vietnam War comes exclusively from Hollywood films and Texan textbooks that only refer to it as “that one the good guys lost,” you’ve probably heard about the Viet Cong. They were a bunch of jungle-fighting guerrilla warriors who killed American boys via night-time ambushes and terrifying traps. Well, that’s one side of the story. Here’s another: They were a bunch of scared (mostly) young kids fighting in a massive conflict for very personal reasons. We sent a writer out to Vietnam to speak with Nguyen Hoa Giai. He fought as a Viet Cong from the late 1950s to the end of the war in the mid-’70s. Here’s what he told us.

#8. We Weren’t All Communists; We Just Wanted Independence, or Revenge

I became a Viet Cong guerrilla in the late 1950s, when I was 15. It wasn’t because I was a Communist, or because I ran away to join the circus and just got wildly sidetracked. My uncle actually fought on Ho Chi Minh’s side of things during WWII when the resistance against Japanese occupation was actually funded by the Americans and Brits.

I was just mad at how the South was pushing all of its excess money into the major cities like Saigon. The South Vietnamese government seemed to

The Other Side continued on page 2

VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA

Milwaukee Chapter 324

March 18, 2015

Meeting Called To Order at 7:00 pm by President Pat Ciofani

A Moment of Silence was observed for our brothers and sisters no longer with us, for all POW/MIA's and their families and for all serving our country

Pledge of Allegiance

Chaplain's Prayer – Mike DuCette

Minutes of the February 18, 2015 meeting reviewed and accepted

Treasurer's Report – Pat Moore - \$4708.74 balance in our checking account

Communications

Attendance – Dennis Szymanski, Pat Moore, Oliver Williams, Pat Ciofani, John Morgan, Mike DuCette, Paul Balge, Joe Herbert, Joe Campbell, David Titter, John Zutz

COMMITTEE REPORTS

VVA/AVVA Membership Update – Joe Herbert –

No Change

Fund Raising – June 11 and August 14 & 16 are our dates at Miller Park – Moved and passed to purchase POW/MIA flowers for \$140 to go with our orange blossoms

Website – Pat Moore is our administrator – Contact him if you would like to post something

OLD BUSINESS

Elections for Board of Directors – Elections are in April – Please consider taking a leadership role in your chapter

Alternate Sites For Meetings – We will look into holding some future meetings at some other locations

NEW BUSINESS

Allied Veterans Meeting Participation – Discussed becoming more actively involved in Allied Vets – Moved and passed to provide lunch for the May meeting

Wisconsin State Council – VVA Region 6 meeting to be held May 15-16 in Janesville

Wauwatosa July 4th Parade – Moved and passed to participate

For the Good of the Chapter – Discussion on doing something to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War April 30th

Adjournment – 7:35 pm

The Other Side continued

ignore small towns and villages, like mine. Ngo Dinh Diem (the leader of South Vietnam at the time) even took away our farms and put them under the control of a single rich guy who'd supported the French in World War II. This happened all over South Vietnam and was called "land reform," rather than the far more accurate "serious, deep, and exploratory boning."

The French, who had controlled Vietnam since the 1800s, always saw the locals as "lower," and we never forgave them for refusing to give us independence. Ho Chi Minh was snubbed twice, and after the second time he reacted. My uncle also wanted independence and would do anything, including support Communism, to get it.

Once the fighting started, a lot of people died, well over a million on our side alone. For the war to continue, a constant stream of new fighters had to join up, and they didn't have the benefit of such luxuries as "functional equipment" or "the slightest idea what to do." Over 90 percent of these new recruits were teenagers or younger. Many of them weren't even particularly invested in the "cause" itself. Supporting Communism or the dream of a united Vietnam was less a motivator than wanting revenge for the death of a parent, loved one, or child. The Viet Cong (literally: the National Liberation Front or just "the front") were just a means for securing that revenge.

Most of them were aware that Stalin and Mao each had movements named after them (Stalinism and Maoism), so they just assumed Socialism was named after a guy named Social and Communism was named after a guy named Commun. A distressing number of my co-soldiers still thought we were fighting France. They knew of Ho Chi Minh, but only in vague propagandistic terms, not the man's actual history. When we told them we wanted a Socialist society,

The Other Side continued on page 3

The Other Side continued

they just said yes because they were mostly poor, grieving peasants living through a shortage of damns, and thus had none to spare for politics.

#7. We Were Just as Scared of the Jungle as the Americans Were

Your movies tend to portray the Viet Cong as deadly jungle warriors, blending into the foliage and melting out of the wild to launch continuous surprise assaults on various Rambos. That's all a big load of crap: Many of us (including me) came from border towns and grew up in the hills or the mountains. We had no more mastery over the jungle than a kid from Oregon has over Death Valley.

Your bamboo-frame bicycles and gluten-free kale fritters won't help you here, fellas. So the jungle was alien to many of us, and unlike most of the American soldiers, we were stuck spending our entire war there. My uncle and I didn't trust the tunnel systems many of the other VC used. They were prone to collapse, and if that happened over a barracks or a mess hall it was likely to kill more people than an air raid. So we did most of our moving around outside, under the questionable cover of grass mats. This meant we were not only completely open to rain storms ... but also to murderous animals. It's easy to forget, amid all the drama of war, that there were tigers in that jungle. Easy to forget until you met a goddamn tiger, that is.

Despite what *The Jungle Book* may lead you to believe, alpha predators are very rarely interested in singalongs.

Tigers may be shy, but every once in a while one of us would disappear in the middle of the night, and we'd all just sort of understand why. Tigers don't exactly do end-zone dances after every kill, after all. And so many people were killed by snakes. There were also rats as large as cats, mosquitoes, spiders, and centipedes to contend with. While you won't usually die from a centipede bite, one of my co-guerrillas committed suicide after being bitten because the pain was so intense.

Armed adversaries give you comparatively good odds of survival. Mother Nature has things uglier than bullets in her arsenal.

#6. The Fighting Looked Nothing Like the Movies

Movies always make the fighting between Viet Cong and American soldiers look like gruesome, close-up gunfighting. That kind of stuff happened, sure, but only when absolutely everyone fucked up. In

reality, even when we were shooting at the enemy, we usually couldn't see them. There'd be muzzle flashes or tracers in the distance, and we'd just fire at those. During more than a decade of fighting, I saw living enemy soldiers up close only three times.

The first time was right after a firefight, and we were shocked to see how blackened the bodies were. We thought they must have been charred by an explosion until we realized their skin was naturally black. None of us had seen a black person before. Some people thought they were myths. All of them were either dead or near-death. We shot the wounded survivors with a pistol. We were in no condition to provide them with medical care. It seemed kinder than letting them bleed out. We didn't torture them or take any pleasure in the deaths. The younger guerrillas, who were less attuned to death, even cried.

It's almost enough to make you wonder if the human psyche might not be built for life in a war zone. Thanks to Hollywood, you probably picture the VC as constantly popping out of holes in the ground like deadly gophers. But like I said before, my group avoided those cramped, rickety tunnels full of death traps like, well ... like cramped, rickety tunnels full of death traps. You don't need an analogy to understand why that sounds like a bad idea. But sometimes we'd have to go really far south, or there'd be exceptionally clear skies and we'd decide that the tunnel sounded like marginally more fun than a bomb. The tunnels were essential for a lot of the VC, though, especially around Saigon.

Unlike living under the mats, tunnel living was a whole different world. The big ones had a kitchen area, with a smokestack jutting out sideways so the smoke would billow out far away. There was always rice, usually along with a vegetable or meat (rat or monkey).

You may note that the rumpus room is conspicuously absent. But, as always, the great outdoors was the best bathroom. We generally had to wait for nightfall to relieve ourselves, but if it was an emergency, well ... you just kind of hope the bomb hits you direct, so nobody sees that you died squatting with your pants around your ankles. Once, in a tunnel near the Laotian border, we even made a fun game: The goal was to be the person who could finish their business outside first. We all got pretty good at this, but once a guy panicked when he heard the distant drone of a plane's engine.

The Other Side continued on page 4

The Other Side continued

He leapt back in, spraying piss everywhere.

It turned out the plane was North Vietnamese.

Everyone laughed, except the guy who'd sprayed us with his pee: He'd been the record-holder prior to that point, and now his record was irrevocably tarnished.

With pee.

#5. We Were the Biggest Threat to Our Own Safety

On a day-to-day basis, enemy soldiers weren't our biggest threat. We saw more American leaflets and trash piles than actual combatants:

"Your mother isn't entrenched here; please clean up after yourselves."

My group's job was mainly to observe troops near the Ho Chi Minh trail. Again, we only got into fights when someone screwed up. But we didn't need any help, American or otherwise, to get ourselves killed and mangled: Recruiting undisciplined kids and giving them more responsibility than a Tamagotchi will see to that.

Sure, there were VC training centers, but local recruits rarely attended. For every trained person we got through a camp, three more came from the surrounding area with only the vaguest idea of what a gun was. We provided on-the-job training to our guerrillas, and that led to disaster. I remember teaching one recruit, about 17 years old, how to throw a grenade. He pulled the pin then asked us what to do next. We were shouting at him to toss it, but he just waved at us, and watched the fuse burn up to the shell. It exploded. So did he.

Another recruit was given a Chinese AK to stand guard with, and then later that day he was asked to cut down a tree branch to give us better visibility for the night. Instead of asking for a saw, he flipped the AK on automatic and proceeded to shoot the branch down. The branch came down, but a bullet ricocheted off and killed him. So we had to bury him, as well as find a new position. His shooting had given us away.

#4. Our Best Gear Was Old Junk, and It Usually Came From America

Because we were on the front lines of South Vietnam, we were pretty far down the food chain when it came to getting weapons. Some came in through the Ho Chi Minh trail, but most of those went to the VC outside of Saigon. With the NVA above us and more critical Viet Cong below us, the guerrillas in the middle got the "short bus" weapons.

It worked like this: The Soviets would make a bunch of AK-47s and send them to China. The

Chinese would keep the Russian AKs and replace them with inferior knockoffs that they'd produced. The North Vietnamese Army got the Chinese weapons, along with whatever WWII-era crap they had left over. Since all of the "good" weapons from this already-bad lot went to the NVA and VC near major cities, we mostly wound up with antiques -- and not even the nice, collectible antiques that old ladies build nests out of. Just old junk.

Ironically enough, most of them were originally American made. M1s (I remember the iconic "ping" sound) and Thompsons were the norm in the early years. After fights, there were always enemy M16s scattered about, but we didn't touch those -- they never worked right. In one of the few true close-in fights we had with the Americans, they were actually using AK-47s against us. The American rifles were that bad.

Your tax dollars at work.

Toward the end of American involvement, we were just getting mortars and mortar shells. The North Vietnamese army was stockpiling everything else for an invasion of the South. In the jungle where we were, fired mortar shells could hit a tree branch and go off prematurely, killing us. So we had to find a way to use them, which required a lot of trial and error. I was in my late 20s by this time and by far the oldest living guy in my squad, so everyone else (all but one a teenager or younger) asked me to figure out something that worked.

What followed was a disastrous slapstick montage -- people were physically holding the mortar at chest level and firing horizontally (and then flying backwards from the force of the weapon). We eventually got the idea to tie them onto trees, with the backs of the mortars against the trunk. It made one giant 360-degree cannon. As long as it wasn't fired with another tree right in front of it, it seemed to work pretty well.

"Could we just eliminate the tube altogether and launch the shells out of a big slingshot?" And yes, we made traps, including those iconic tiger traps with spikes on the bottom. Those actually were made more with tigers in mind than any hope of spearing American GIs. It's, uh ... it's right there in the name, really. Seriously, tigers are fucking terrifying.

#3. Our Side's War Crimes Were Often Glossed Over

Whenever "Vietnam War crimes" are

The Other Side continued on page 5

The Other Side continued

mentioned in the West, people think of My Lai or Agent Orange being dumped over large swaths of forests. Those are both awful things. But, for whatever reason, my own side gets to walk away whistling suspiciously.

That shouldn't be the case: We committed war crimes on a regular basis. How do I know? I saw them. The North Vietnamese Army would purposely target hospitals and medical areas, because that was where they could do the most damage. I wouldn't have believed it if somebody had just told me back during the war -- but I saw it happen at a base in the Quang Tri area and heard the order given when we briefly came to an NVA area to get new orders. We were also occasionally called away from the trail to watch over a VC or NVA firefight -- having long-range rifles as support was effective. But many of us would stop firing when we saw villages going up in smoke or villagers being shot. The VC and NVA weren't always sure if people near the border were pro- or anti-American, so rather than take chances, they went by the "atrocities they all and let God cry it out" philosophy.

#2. No One Really "Survives" a War Intact

In 1974, with the U.S. out and South Vietnam operations winding down, my VC group was allowed to go home. I took the trails up to my village. As I approached, I started noticing odd things. Signs were gone, no kids came begging, no travelers walked the paths to and from the town. It all seemed too quiet. I remember running up to my village to find nothing. It was literally all gone.

I found only traces of burned buildings under the dirt. When I went to the hill outside my village I saw a new indentation in the land. It wasn't a crater from a bomb; it was a mass grave. And despite knowing what I was going to find, I dug it up. I found the remains of my neighbors and family inside. To this day I have no idea if the North Vietnamese, the Americans, or someone else was responsible. But the way everything was just covered by a bulldozer indicated the North Vietnamese. Everyone but my youngest brother was gone (and he would die during the Chinese War five years later). I'm not special. Ask any older Vietnamese person: They've all lost many, many loved ones. And not always due to America or its allies. I never expected to survive 10 years at the front. And, to be honest, I still don't really feel like I survived.

#1. Only Time and Support Can Heal Wounds

After the war, I moved to Saigon. At that point I'd never lived in a city and had spent half my life utterly detached from society. All I knew was how to hide, kill, and drill. It came out everywhere I went. I fought people because of the way they were carrying a loaf of bread, because it looked like they were smuggling a radio. I had the bathtub taken out of my apartment and built a custom one out of metal, tarps, and dirt -- to simulate bathing in a river. In hip U.S. neighborhoods, they'd call that something like "paleo bathing" and charge you a fortune for it, but I just knew no other way to be. I had to be reminded constantly to pay for things, because I was just so used to taking them. I struggled with PTSD and depression. I thought a lot about suicide.

In a weird way, Communism actually helped keep me alive. Workers in unified Vietnam were forced to socialize with each other during breaks and lunch. That's down to the whole "commune" part of "Communism." Lone wolves might have strange ideas; they might not be committed to the party. I started talking with others around me to avoid suspicion and found that, to my surprise, human interaction has some kind of value.

Many of them had similar experiences: They'd lived, but they had lost their family and friends in horrific ways. Over months and years of breaks, lunches, and trade meetings, my group of co-workers turned into a "Depression Anonymous" support group. Life is much better now. By the 1990s, the U.S., Australia, and South Korea all more or less apologized for their role in the war. Today, the U.S. is actually viewed favorably by over three-quarters of the population. The general negative feelings are actually aimed more at France and China than the U.S., since you guys at least apologized. I've personally forgiven the U.S. and everyone else for their involvement in the war. I lost my entire family, but I managed to start a new one with a wife who also lost nearly everyone, including her husband, in the war.

I went back to the site of my village a few years ago and found it to be a forest. The sunken area with the grave is still there, but there is a small memorial with trees growing over it. It made me feel oddly at peace: Death had been covered by new life.

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Milwaukee, WI 53218

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- Associate Life Member Installment Plan (\$50 Deposit; \$25 per month for 8 Months)

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