

Vietnam experience...

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Welcome to the war

As the Boeing 727 approached the airport at Saigon, the pilot informed the passengers that other incoming airliners had been hit by ground fire. To avoid getting shot down, the pilot said, the plane would have to dive steeply onto the runway. Welcome to the Republic of South Vietnam.

After a week of indoctrination, Foreman received orders to report to the Ninth Infantry Division headquarters at Bien Phuoc. He arrived at his unit, where he was issued a rifle and medic bag and then introduced to the other medics. A couple of days later he went on his first mission — a vertical assault on a landing zone, then a sweep through enemy area.

"There I was in this helicopter with a bunch of guys I didn't even know," he said. "I looked down and could see flares popping off and helicopter gunships passing back and forth strafing the area."

After his unit reached the ground, the platoon moved out. About an hour later, firing could be heard at the front of the column and a rumor was passed back that "we got a couple."

When he reached the head of the column, Foreman learned that the "point man" had killed one enemy soldier outright and probably another whose body couldn't be found. The platoon commander, a lieutenant, told Foreman it was his duty to inspect the dead enemy soldiers and directed him to a water-filled rice paddy. All he could see was a hand sticking up out of the water. Another soldier helped Foreman drag the body from the water.

"He was a young guy," Foreman said of the dead soldier, "about 19. He was a medic, too."

Told that some of the other medics liked to perform autopsies on the enemy dead, Foreman declined. The unit took a lunch break and Foreman and some of the others began eating their C-rations "no more than a couple of feet from the dead soldier." Before leaving, some of the American soldiers stripped the dead man of his belongings, folded his arms over his chest and placed weeds in his hands.

Fear of responsibility

Ten days later Foreman was called upon to care for wounded for the first time. His unit was on a routine sweep when an explosion blasted through the jungle. A call for a medic brought Foreman to a place where three men were on the ground, covered with blood and screaming for help.

"They were looking at me, asking me to do something," he said. "I only had 10 weeks of training."

The wounded had been hit by shrapnel from an American grenade rigged to a trip wire. Foreman cleaned the blood away and dressed the wounds as best he could. A short time later a medical evacuation helicopter, or "dustoff chopper," arrived. The wounded were loaded aboard and then "back to quiet and we're walking again."

That episode demonstrated Foreman's biggest fear while in Vietnam. Responsibility. Not the Viet Cong. Not the jungle rot and diseases. Not being in combat. Responsibility. The worry that he would be thrust into a situation where he wouldn't be able to perform. Or worse, would make a mistake.

"They told me when I first got there that only the good medics made it out of Vietnam," he said. "The bad ones didn't even make it out of the field."

"When you're in a life-and-death situation like that, those guys want to make sure that you're going to take care of them. They can't afford someone who's going to be screwing off or on dope. Their lives depend on you."

Like nearly all combat medics, Foreman had the nickname of "Doc." The job and the name elevated his status among the other soldiers. They took care of him and expected that, if something should happen, he would take care of them.

Fortunately, Foreman said, he never had to treat anyone who was seriously wounded. His constant fear was having to treat burn victims. Little could be done for them, he said, except to try to relieve the pain.

"The worst thing I had to do was comfort the guys who were dying," he said.

It was something he did often.

Wounded and alone

And then, suddenly, Foreman's role was reversed. In February, just three months after Foreman arrived in Vietnam, he was hit.

The complexion of the war had begun to change, with the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong forces conducting major offensive operations.

Foreman's unit was sent to a base camp called Cai Lai. He'd heard horror stories about it.

"We got our asses kicked whenever we went there."

He can still recall with picture-perfect clarity the events which occurred the day he was wounded. He was riding in an armored personnel carrier with the platoon commander. Theirs was the lead vehicle. They had been sent to check out an area where some Viet Cong had been sighted. Foreman said he wasn't paying much attention since he had gone on many such searches with negative results.

Suddenly, a Viet Cong soldier "popped up" and started running toward some bushes. Bill scrambled for his rifle while another soldier fired an M-79 gre-



Lou Anne Zacek/Daily Nebraskan

nade launcher into the bushes where the man had disappeared. "That should've got him," the man said. It didn't.

In an instant, rifle and rocket fire came from the same bushes and struck the vehicle and the men on it. A powerful force knocked Foreman down. He clawed the back of the APC, trying to keep low. Rockets flew by just inches over his head. His arm was numb.

As he looked down into the APC he could see one of the other soldiers lying on the floor, dead. He knew he had to get inside the APC to be safe. He jumped in, landing on the dead man. While he lay there he put pressure on his shoulder to stop the flow of blood. He then grabbed the radio to call for help. No answer.

"All kinds of weird thoughts were going through my mind," he said. "I took a grenade out and held onto it. I was determined not to be taken POW."

He tried again and again to call for a dustoff chopper, each time without success. He worried that no one was within the range of the radio. Finally a voice, crystal clear, replied, "Yes, we can hear you." But still no help. And the sounds of the battle raged on outside the APC.

'In bad shape'

Later, his platoon sergeant stuck his head in the rear door of the APC. He appeared surprised to see Foreman lying there. "Doc," he said, "you're in bad shape." Then he left.

Finally another medic arrived and helped him out. The two walked upright past men crouched in fighting positions. Small arms fire buzzed around them. Slowly, painfully, they made their way to the helicopter landing zone. A short time later he was air-lifted to Dong Tam and the Third Surgical Hospital.

Soon after he arrived he was rushed into surgery. "You know you're going to lose your arm, don't you?" asked the doctor.

"No, I didn't know."

Foreman woke up freezing, although the temperature was well above 90 degrees. He was surprised to find he'd had a tracheotomy, that is, a hole had been cut in his throat and a tube placed there to help him breathe.

Foreman spent seven days in intensive care. Two or three times a day the area would come under artillery fire. Foreman and the other patients would be put on the floor with flak jackets on their chests and helmets on their faces.

Just behind the hospital an enclosure for Viet Cong POWs had been constructed. When Foreman could walk, he had to go by it on his way to the latrine.

"If someone had given me a gun, I would have killed every one of them," he said.

From Dong Tam, Foreman went to "Bear Cat," the code name for the Ninth Infantry Division headquarters, then to Long Binh and finally to Ton Son Nhut for transport back to the United States.

As he was waiting to be loaded onto the plane, Foreman watched a number of GIs in a staging area waiting to leave. He remembered a time a few weeks earlier when an enemy rocket had landed in the same area, killing 50.

"Only after the landing gear came up I thought 'I finally made it,'" he said.

Physical and emotional handicaps

Foreman was transported from Vietnam to Travis Air Force Base in California. The next day he flew to Denver for further medical observation and rehabilitation. He was reunited with his family and began the "strange transition" back to normal life.

"People were going on as usual," he said. "But only a few hours away by air, other people were fighting and dying. They just didn't know. And didn't want to know. I tried to tell my brother, but I felt like he just couldn't understand. It was mind bending."

Foreman stayed at the hospital in Denver for six months. He began a rehabilitation process that dealt with two handicaps. Physical and emotional.

Physically, Foreman had to learn to live with one

arm. The doctors fitted him with a prosthetic device, a metal arm with a pinching mechanism. More difficult was learning to perform simple, everyday tasks with one hand. Tasks like cutting fingernails (he puts the clippers between his heels) and tying shoelaces (he steps on one string). But, little by little, he progressed.

Emotionally, it was another story. Soon after Foreman arrived in Denver he began some "hard drinking and carousing." He spent his nights drinking and his days abusing any prescription drug he could find. He was kicked out of bars for fighting. He avoided jail only by the good graces of the Denver police.

"It was all a rebellion . . . against the military and society as a whole," he said. "I was really pissed about losing my arm."

For Foreman, the disabled veteran status was a "license to raise hell." The drinking and fighting reaffirmed his manliness, which was compromised by the loss of his arm. The rebellion continued after he was discharged and returned to Nebraska.

Foreman went back to Peru State College to finish his education. He began to identify himself in the role of hero. Often he went to the VFW club in Peru, wearing his Army fatigue jacket. He swapped war stories with other veterans.

Marriage a 'conquest'

Not long after Foreman returned to college, he began dating the woman who would be his first wife. Dating and marrying her was a "conquest" for him. He had known her when he went to college earlier, but she wanted nothing to do with him. She was a cheerleader and went out with a basketball player. But Foreman returned from the war a hero in her eyes. They were married just 15 months after he was wounded.

"It wasn't right, but I was feeling like 'Now I can win her,'" he said. "It was the ultimate challenge."

Foreman graduated and he and his wife went to Beatrice to teach. The marriage was all downhill from there. Foreman kept up his hard drinking and late nights. And worse, he joined a local motorcycle club. His wife didn't think it looked right for a school teacher's husband to do such things. The resulting strain disintegrated what was left of the marriage.

"The motorcycle club was a rebellion, too," he said. "I needed to reestablish my identity and thumb my nose at society."

The other bikers considered Foreman to be pretty tough. He was a veteran of combat in Vietnam. He'd had his arm blown off. His club nickname was "Hooker."

While the other bikers were getting in trouble with the law, Foreman started seeing another woman, Marcie. This one didn't try to change him. Rather, when he went drinking, she went with him. When he went on the road with his motorcycle, she went with him. Later, when he decided to go to graduate school, she went with him.

Foreman decided to continue his education after reading a catalogue from the University of Wisconsin at Menomonie. Of particular interest was a master's program in vocational rehabilitation. The catalogue explained that participants should know about disabilities. Foreman knew about that, all right.

And so he went. He and Marcie. With his first marriage ended and under the burden of the graduate work, Foreman's drinking and carousing gradually lessened. He began to feel a sense of responsibility, a need to accomplish something positive.

Foreman received his master's degree and went to work as a rehabilitation counselor in Rockford, Ill. He and Marcie were married shortly after they arrived. They stayed there about eight months and then went to Lacrosse, Wisc. where Foreman worked as an alcoholism counselor. Since that time, he has worked exclusively for the Veterans Administration. He has had jobs in California, Michigan, Texas and now, Nebraska.

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