

Captain Yore

My reenlistment conference II

The First Sergeant told me to get the jeep ready. I was going to drive you and him to either Hue or Camp Eagle, some well developed place with cold beer and affordable women although I'm sure that wasn't our official mission.

To get the jeep ready I not only filled up with gas and oil and checked the tires and the water but lowered the windshield flat to the hood and secured it with sand bags and then lined the floor of the jeep with sand bags, especially under the seats, one of you had told me to do that so that we didn't get our balls blown off.

Years later I was in the Cinerama Dome in Hollywood watching Apocalypse Now and Frederic Forrest asks a grunt in the chopper why he took his helmet off and sat on it. The grunt says, "So I don't get my balls blown off". Forrest laughs and then takes off his helmet and sits on it.

Everything was ready I pulled up in front of the Captains hooch, a dugout with sand bag walls and a corrugated tin roof with a three-sandbag deep ceiling which I and a few other Privates had dug, and I waited.

When I was approached by the First Lieutenant Executive officer about driving for you I was a little concerned. The kid who had the job before me for a different C. O. was not well liked among the gun crews and I had been on gun number one for two long months. When I showed up in September the numbers were real low on the crews so there had been seven or eight of us doing the work of twelve or thirteen. We had been humping two hundred-pound rounds and firing that eight-inch gun night and day and as a result we were tight, a band of brothers. From the little I had seen of the old driver he seemed to have gotten confused about waiting on the Captain and being better than the gun bunnies because of it. I had reservations about waiting on any officer. The Exec seemed taken aback that I would even need time to consider the job which was considered pretty cushy, especially compared to the guns, but I told him I needed to talk it over with my crew. They all seemed to think I was nuts for not jumping at the chance but when Smalley laid out the idea that I'd be able to get them stuff from town and take them along riding shotgun on trips, it was just about a done deal. I still had reservations. Then you had me called in and laid it out for me. "Early you don't have to kiss my ass you just have to do your job the way the First Sergeant and I tell you to and if you screw up and/or I lose my temper over something else you need to keep your mouth shut while I'm chewing you out, take it, and let it blow over, it will blow over." That was all you said that I can remember. I don't remember too many conversations. Usually you told the First Sergeant and he told me. Neither one of you were real verbose at least not with me. It was like hanging out with John Wayne and Yaphet Koto.

You came out of the hooch with your rifle and your pistol and First jumped in the back with his M16, which seemed to be an extension of his arm. I think I had an M79 grenade launcher for a while and I remember you gave me a rare AR15 M16 prototype to carry, which got stolen by a Marine grunt I gave a ride to. I didn't realize it was a prototype until I showed you the replacement he had left. It was a more up to date model, not historically significant, probably didn't jam as easily. I don't remember you being pissed over that either just disappointed at how dumb I was.

First, whose name I cannot remember, had been in the Infantry and had the Combat Infantry Badge and jump wings I think. Somebody said he had requested Artillery because he wanted a break on his second or third tour, wanted to take it easy. I think he just got tired of the Queen and wanted to see the King of Battle in action. Did you have a Ranger patch? You were both over six foot tall and certified warriors. I was a volunteer PFC without even dog tags. You told me where to go and we took off.

I rarely knew where we were in relation to the map or where we had been. I knew we had gone from the south, Nui Dat, out of Vung Tau the seaport, and up the South China Sea with a group of Korean Merchant Marines who ran the transport ship for the Navy, to the DMZ. I couldn't tell you what beach we landed on, but I do remember furiously digging in to the sand for cover in the dark and then waking up in the morning to dozens of Vietnamese selling cakes and cokes for breakfast. About a year ago one of the former FDC officers uploaded a group of maps to the 1/83rd web site. Forty years after the battle I finally understood what we were doing at the Calu River and what it had to do with Khe Sahn. Do you remember "fishing" for the villagers at the Calu? How about cutting logs with det cord? As usual I digress.

The three of us took off and I vaguely remember someone telling the First that we had to wait for a convoy and you waving him off and telling me to high tail it down the road. We were zipping along pretty good over that oiled, semi paved dirt road which was about one tank wide and then we came to another checkpoint and they made us wait until you talked them into letting us catch up with a convoy of five-ton trucks we could see about a half mile down into this valley. They made us ride at the back. Our good mood at being out and freewheeling with beer and mama sans in the near future disappeared in a cloud of truck convoy dust.

Then, a few miserable miles down the road while traveling through a narrow valley with hills on one side and jungle on the other we started getting shelled. Charlie must have had mortar teams in the foliage. The rounds started to land on the side of the road as they adjusted the range. You ordered me to get off the road and pass on the side going through the brush and over the cleared rough. We were passing everything in the convoy and racing towards the end of the valley when you saw that there was a bridge over a ravine and that the five-ton trucks were slowly going over the bridge one at a time leaving no room for us or anyone else. You yelled in my ear take the tank trail and I had no clue as to what you were saying with the explosions and the trucks and the machine gun chatter and you screamed again "the Tank trail to the right of the bridge" and then I could see the dirt path to the right of the bridge and drove for it. It was outrageously steep and as we slid, rolled,

down the side you shouted out that I needed to shift on the up slope into four wheel drive we bounced off the bottom and started to climb out of the huge ditch and you told me to down shift and then double clutch it as you threw the lever that would engage the four wheels. In the meantime, the front end was actually lifting off the ground like a speedboat going through the waves. The front wheels cut in and the top of the ridge was close and then bam! we were over the top and on flat ground, out of the kill zone. We were all feeling pretty good, flush with that adrenaline rush you get when Keres, Thanatos's sister comes screaming with glee at the action of violent death. I even imagine the First Sergeant slapping me on the back with approval. That's when you said, with this huge grin on your face, "Early You get out in September don't you?" I shook my head emphatically "O yeah" and you said, "Well before you leave the service your commanding officer is supposed to call you in for a re up talk about making the Army your career." We were still bouncing down the road moving pretty fast and I wasn't real sure that I understood what you were saying. I looked over at you and you nodded back toward the bridge and said, "That was it, that was our talk." Then you just sat back with that big old grin on your face looking satisfied.

Do you remember the shower you built? How about when you gave me the Purple Heart? You were quite a trip Captain and I'm going to write these stories out as a self-improvement exercise. Most of them are about you like when you jumped out of that helicopter just before it exploded at Con Thien, which is where we spotted targets in the DMZ and raced against the Navy computers. If you like, I'll cc them to you. Bill Taggart has asked for a history of the 1/83rd, 67,68. He was with the unit when they built Nui Dat after the boat ride from California. My imagination is fanciful and my memory, like all of us, selective, so if you think you might want to see some of these memoirs feel free to correct the record. If you'd rather not see the tales I'll understand. I teach High School English and there are a lot of poorly written papers I don't read.

Pax tecum,
Stephan Early