

"Soldier Returns To Protesters"

by Amy Sherrill, writer for the **TIMES RECORD**.

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When 22-year-old Tommy Moon was drafted in 1968 for the Vietnam War he eagerly volunteered to go in earlier than his draft date. He was excited and proud to be called to serve his country.

"Back then, if you were told to go in the military, it was an honor because you loved your country," said Moon who grew up in Pasadena, Texas, and now lives in Bonanza.

As he sat on a couch at the Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter No. 467 at Fort Chaffee, Moon's face twitched as he recalled his part in the war. He explained the twitch as his nerves.

Assigned to the 101st Airborne and attached to the 2/11 Field Artillery, Moon learned his trade as a private by loading guns or doing grunt work. Thirteen months later he was sent to Vietnam ready to do his part in artillery to assist the infantry.

Each night, as Moon and another soldier crouched down in a foxhole waiting for the Viet Cong to come, he knew death could occur at any moment. The soldiers, stationed near Cambodia, were ready.

Moon took his post as usual around 8 p.m. May 5, 1970, with Michael F. Brown, a good friend. Sandbags were piled high in front of their foxhole. Just ahead were claymore mines daisy-chained together and a 55-gallon drum of explosives and napalm, rigged with a detonator. Concertina wire was pulled across the perimeter. Several barriers were in place when the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army got ready to attack.

In the foxhole, Moon — dressed in his black combat boots, green Army fatigue pants and shirt, a bullet-proof flight jacket and a helmet — waited. The plunger to the claymore mine was there too.

Moon and Brown looked through their starlight scopes and scanned the perimeter for a sighting of the enemy. Trip flares on the concertina wire activated. Moon saw members of the North Vietnamese Army everywhere. The soldiers waited as instructed until the enemy crossed the wire. Moon hit the clacker on the claymores and then hit the plunger to detonate the gas drum. He heard the North Vietnamese men screaming and saw them shooting and falling everywhere.

Moon and other soldiers were firing their M-16s, blasting as hard as they could because the enemy soldiers were coming through the fire as they piled bodies on the wire and made a bridge across it.

"Fall back, we can't hold them," Moon remembers someone saying.

Rounds of AK-47s tore up the sandbags as Brown and Moon got out of the foxhole and traveled more than 100 feet back toward the gun unit. Moon heard something and, as he looked back,

saw Brown had been hit by a shrapnel from a mortar round.

"I turned around and grabbed him," Moon said. "His eyes were open, he wasn't moving, the blood coming out of his mouth."

Pandemonium ensued as opposing soldiers tried to kill each other. Moon made it back to his gun unit and was getting ready to help when a Viet Cong soldier came running back toward the 155 Howitzer with a satchel charge. Moon remembers it in slow motion.

"I knew what it was when it left his hand," Moon said. "I turned to take cover. When it exploded it knocked me up in the air.

A concussion hit Moon hard, as if he was slammed in the back with a two-by-four. His left eardrum cracked. Dazed and not hearing anything, Moon tried to get up off his knees. He looked around. The gun unit was gone. Bodies lay everywhere. As he attempted to get to his knees, a Viet Cong soldier came running over and pointed an AK-47 toward him and pulled the trigger.

"It must have jammed or it was empty or something," Moon, now 58, said. "It didn't go off. I thought that somebody was watching over me because I shouldn't have come back from that war."

The enemy soldier then turned his weapon around and struck Moon in the jaw with the butt of the weapon and cracked his jaw causing his teeth to fall out.

When he awoke, he saw blood and felt pain; someone dragging him. Later, he would learn medics were taking him to a CH-50 helicopter. He knew something was happening because his pain subsided and he wasn't scared anymore. Moon saw clouds after boarding the helicopter.

"All I could see was clouds," Moon said. "I thought I was going to heaven."

After being patched up by medics, Moon returned to his unit. Eventually, in December 1970, he returned home on leave. He continued to have hearing problems; continuous ringing like a telephone plagued his ears constantly.

Returning from Vietnam, Moon and other soldiers knew something wasn't right as they landed in Hawaii. They weren't allowed to go into the airport's main lobby to buy anything to eat. Instead they were "debriefed." Moon remembers being told to leave Vietnam behind him and being warned that the war wasn't too popular with some people, whom he should just ignore.

Moon thought the advice was strange, but he didn't get the full impact of public opinion until he attempted to purchase a plane ticket home to Houston at the San Francisco airport.

Dressed in his uniform and carrying his duffel bag, Moon made his way to the ticket line. His thoughts were on his family and hot American food. He heard somebody holler, "Baby killer."

Moon stopped and looked around because he had never seen a baby killer before. As he did, he noticed a long-haired, bearded man walking briskly toward him.

"He was staring straight at me," Moon said. "We didn't know we were being protested against the whole time I was in Vietnam. That's one well-kept secret that the Army did keep from us."

The man spit at Moon, but missed. Enraged, Moon grabbed his duffel bag and threw it at the man but missed as the man fled. Moon took out after him but was tackled by airport security.

This is one of many instances that pushed Moon to stay in the military. It was the only place he could make sense of what he had done in Vietnam.

However, the demons from the war were driving Moon toward a breakdown. He left the Army in 1981 and moved from job to job having various problems stemming from the war, like lack of

concentration and extreme guilt or anger. Moon, divorced twice, eventually married a woman who accepts his problems and tries to understand what he went through and how it affects his daily life.

The Vietnam veteran says he has come a long way in the last few years, as he finally was awarded disability from the military and began seeing a doctor he can relate to.

Today, he is still proud of serving his country, even though it has taken awhile for his country to be proud of him.