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Remembrances: Autobee

I graduated in 1967 from East High School in Pueblo, Colo. My family has a military tradition that extends back seven generations. It includes Charles Autobee, who was a scout for the U.S. Cavalry during the Indian wars; Pvt. Andrew Autobee, who served in World War I; and Sgt. George M. Autobee, who was killed during the D-Day invasion of Normandy in World War II. Others in the Autobee family also served in Vietnam and are serving now in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

After graduation, I worked as an orderly and wanted to become a medic, so I enlisted in the Marine Corps. It was my mistake, and I was to pay for my lack of knowledge. I should have done my homework. There are no medics in the Marine Corps; they are in the Army, and the medical corpsmen are in the Navy.

I had enlisted in the Marine Corps, and I kept my word. I became a rifleman and a mortar man. Eleven years later, I would re-enlist in the Army Reserve and train as a combat field medic in the 406th Combat Support Hospital.

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I reported on Jan. 9, 1968, at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego, Calif., and was assigned to Platoon 109.

Boot camp was quite the experience; we were run through in nine weeks. The Marine Corps was short men in the field.

I went into boot camp in fairly good shape and was No. 1 in physical fitness (PT) and shooting the M-14.

The training was intense, and the discipline was what we were told it would be - hard and rough. Graduation was special in that our platoon was rated No. 1 in meeting the requirements of the Marine Corps.

After five months of boot camp and individual training regiment (ITR), I was given a 30-day leave to go home to Pueblo and then returned to Camp Pendleton.

ITR was the advanced training in your military occupational specialty (MOS). I was trained in the MOS of mortars. We trained on the 80mm and

60mm mortars and prepared for Vietnam in April and May 1968.

The first night back in Camp Pendleton after the 30-day leave was one of the hardest nights I had. I knew I was not coming back and had to prepare myself. I had to have a mind-set to go to Vietnam.

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We deployed to Vietnam and arrived in Da Nang on June 21, 1968. When we arrived, we met two Marines who had finished their tour and were going stateside. Were they out of it. They were pale, thin, shaking and wide-eyed, saying, "We were dead men walking." In 10 months, we would be saying the same thing to the new guys coming into the unit.

We were attached to Mike Company, 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division, located at An Hoa. We did our initial two weeks in Phu Bi. While there, we were under rocket attack every day. We spent the 4th of July in Phu Bi, and then we moved to An Hoa.

I was first assigned as the point for 2nd platoon. Our first action in the field was on Operation Mameluke Thrust in Quang Nam province. The first ambush operations we were involved with were at the bridges south of Phu Bi, Vietnam.

We were out every night on ambush and spent just a couple of days on the bridges out of Phu Bi. We patrolled during the day and set up ambushes every night. Sometimes we got them, and sometimes they got us.

I remember we lost a point man from the other platoons every other week or so, as killed in action or wounded in action. During my 10-month tour in Mike Company, I saw more than 19 Marines as KIAs and more than 50 as WIAs.

Walking point, being the first one, is an unforgettable experience. You are never the same after walking point in the jungles of Vietnam, and I was going to pay the price for being the first one. Every night was a test of all my senses.

The first ambush we were in, we heard movement and fired into the dark. The next day, I saw our first Viet Cong KIA. It hit me hard; I felt very empty.

Being point man, I was tasked to go out with a Kit Carson Scout (a former North Vietnamese soldier). We would go out on scouting missions about a click in front of the company. After scouting out the area and seeing it was secure, I would return to the company and lead the men to the site. The day we went out without the scout was the day I was wounded.

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I was point man and the first one wounded in the engagement for Hill 310

on Aug. 9, 1968. I had been ordered to take point about 10 a.m., and about noon I found a trail and followed it - big mistake - until a burst from an AK-47 automatic rifle hit the ground in front of me. Everything went into slow motion. The seventh round hit my right arm and sent my rifle flying into the jungle.

The bullet spun me around, and I fell on my back, getting my backpack stuck on a tree stump. Next thing I knew, I was on my back, stuck like a turtle, with my feet up in the air, unable to get up or move off the trail.

It was that point in life when you know it is over and you think, "Is this how it ends?"

Wow, what a rush. But guess what? I lucked out big time.

The tree stump broke, one of the guys grabbed my ankle, and the men dragged me back to my squad and bandaged my arm. Pfc. Rice, Pfc. Danny Armenderez and Pfc. Tony Ayala pulled me back.

While they were bandaging my arm, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) threw a grenade, and we hit the ground. It was close — I came off the ground and bounced when it exploded. We worked our way back to the platoon commander and reported what happened.

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Well, my job was over for the time being - I had found the NVA and was wounded without a weapon. The pain from the bullet wound in my arm was starting to get bad. I found a corpsman, and I was re-bandaged and given a pain medication. Next thing I heard was the thump of mortar rounds coming in. I was told to leave the area and find a medevac to Da Nang.

When I was working my way to the landing zone to catch a medevac, I looked up and saw the crew was using a hoist from a chopper to medevac Pfc. Ayala. I could see him while they were pulling him up. The chopper and Tony were taking enemy fire as they pulled him out. He had been badly wounded, and he died two days later. We had shared our stories, water and food and had been on patrols and ambush together for more than 45 days.

I took off down the trail and found a cliff where the helicopter had to lower its loading door and back up to the cliff, then we had to jump from the edge of the cliff into the chopper. I jumped in and turned around to see two NVA coming in behind me. They were POWs, but I did not see the guards and that their hands were tied behind them.

The POWs were young and as big as me. They were both wounded and very stoic. A transference took place while I was observing them. I realized this was

the wrong war and we were in the wrong place. They were not afraid of what they were facing. Hard to explain, but I knew we were gong to lose the war.

We arrived at the Navy hospital late in the evening. I was taken into surgery right away. The bandage had been tied so tight that there was no blood and my hand had become swollen.

I woke up in a bed with a pain in my back, an IV in my left arm and metal sutures in my right. It was the first bed I had been in since my arrival in Nam.

My Purple Heart was awarded at the Da Nang hospital.

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My first medal was the National Defense Service Medal awarded upon graduation from boot camp. My second medal was a Purple Heart. My third was a gold star - it is awarded for the second Purple Heart awarded.

The Combat Action Ribbon (CAR) is awarded to Marines and Navy personnel for engaging the enemy in a firefight. The Army awards the Combat Infantryman Badge (CBI), or Combat Action Badge (CAB).

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In September 1968, I returned to An Hoa from the National Security Agency Hospital in Da Nang and was assigned the 60mm-mortars section. My chances for survival were greatly increased. No more night ambushes and endless patrols - at least not every night.

On Sept. 11, 1968, my old platoon, 2nd Platoon, again had the honor of taking point — and walked into an ambush. I counted at least eight KIAs and more than 20 WIAs. I helped take care of Pfc. Armenderez. He had been shot and had a chest wound. I found him doing OK in California when I was discharged.

Other than the time in March 1969, when we were cut off for five days and had eight KIAs, this was the worst hit Mike Company took during my tour of duty, which was 10 months.

Pfc. Rice was the only one left in 2nd Platoon with whom I had served. After the Sept. 11 ambush, Pfc. Rice told me he was going home - yeah, right. Sure enough, that night he went berserk and was medevaced back to the States. I had last seen him when we had to go back to An Hoa, at the 5th Marine Regiment headquarters to get our orders and my duffle bags. I was returning to the States. That last night, we got caught up, and I learned he was getting a medical discharge.

We got inebriated and commenced to educate some new guys on what they

were going to experience. Pfc. Rice and I were the only ones left from the guys we were with in 2nd platoon. The others we came in with were dead or had been wounded so badly they had been sent back to the States. Pfc. Rice was getting a medical discharge, and I had been wounded twice.

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I became an ammo humper, then a mortar man when I returned to the field. Things got a little easier when I went to the Weapons Platoon, 60mm mortars. We still went out with the company on all operations, but we had more men to take guard duty and we did not have to go out on all the ambush patrols. I worked my way to A-gunner, then squad leader.

William "Smoky" Robinson was in the rack next to mine on the first day of boot camp. We would be in the same units from boot camp and ITR to Vietnam. We served in the same 60mm-weapons platoon until I was wounded the second time and he was injured in March 1969 and sent to Japan.

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One night while on night patrol, I heard shrapnel fly by my head and then felt the explosion of a booby trap. I moved forward and helped load the Marine who had stepped on the booby trap. I found his foot and put it in the poncho with him. I was told he died on the way to NSA Hospital. It was so spooky that night, it was hard to walk. My legs tightened up, and every step was a step into the surreal.

The next hit we took was a few days later, when we were sent on patrol and were getting ready to set up for the night. We started to relax when, 10 feet away, an automatic burst from an AK-47 caught a Marine in the gut. Another Marine was hit. I had seen a total 19 KIAs during my tour.

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In March 1969, I had just returned from Da Nang. While there I noted that all the streets were empty. I landed at the firebase, and that night we were hit with mortars. The next few days, again we were hit with mortars. One of the mortar rounds hit right next to our bunker. It was very close.

Of all the combat in which I was involved during my tour in Vietnam, what happened on this mission - Operation Taylor Common - was the most dangerous, and we suffered the most casualties of all the missions we carried out.

Operation Taylor Common resulted in 500 NVA dead and huge quantities of captured arms and stores. The Marines lost 183 killed in action and another 1,487 wounded. They had driven the NVA out of the area, for then. As soon as

the operation ended, the NVA returned in force once again.

I returned to An Hoa and received orders to return to the United States. I was eligible for an early out. I took it.

I returned to the United States and separated on May 15, 1969. I started college and graduated in 1973 with undergraduate degree and in 1976 with a master's degree.

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I re-enlisted in the Army Reserve 10th Mountain Division 3rd of the 87th, in 1980. It was under the 96th ARCOM, and I spent summer camp in Fort Carson as a Spec. 4 in the infantry.

I trained with the 80mm Mortars Weapons Platoon. I was tired of being a dog soldier and still wanted to be a medic, so I applied for a transfer and a commission in the Medical Corps.

I was transferred to the 406th Combat Support Hospital in the 96th ARCOM.

In 1981, I transferred to the 406th Combat Support Hospital as a Spec. 4 and office clerk to the first sergeant.

In September 1981, I was commissioned as a captain in the Medical Corps.

I served tours at Fitzsimons Medical Hospital in Colorado; Fort Ord, Camp Roberts and Fort Irwin in California; Fort Carson in Colorado; Fort Bliss in Texas; Camp Williams in Utah; and in Italy. The 406th CSH Reserve unit was assigned to Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) in support of the 82nd Airborne.

I served as a 67 Bravo, medical services officer, and had additional training as combat field medic 91 Bravo.

I was honorably discharged in 1988.

GEORGE AUTOBEE

Washington