

August 1, 1998

It was August 1, 1968. The sun had been up for nearly three hours; rumor had it we were going out on a day sweep of the tunnel complex. This was always an interesting place. The Vietnamese had been digging tunnels in this area for years. The area was south and east of the main gate about 1,000 meters. The people use these tunnels to hide in, to hide their weapons in, and to live in when necessary.

The rumor was true. Apparently some activity had been spotted and we were going out to investigate.

The deuce and a half (2.5 ton truck) had dropped us at the main gate and was returning to our area to wait for us to call when we needed a ride back from the field. We were nearing the end of the monsoon season, the ground was damp from last night's rain and the sun showed signs in gaining strength to break through the light gray cloud cover.

We were walking single file along the road to where our point man, Stephen "Bear" Banko, chose to turn into the fields to our left, pass the brick factory, and into the paddies. Once we began the decent into the open areas, we moved from the column formation into a wedge formation. This type of formation allows the opportunity to defend all of our sides with the greatest amount of fire power. After the point man, the second man will either walk to his right or left the third will go the other way and so on until the squad forms a wedge. I was second and Earl was third; the rest followed.

Sometimes I would bring my camera with me on a patrol. This day I carried it because I wanted to get some pictures of these tunnels.

Earl was one of the guys who enjoyed the risk of going into spider holes and tunnels. The tunnels could be a shaft about 5 to 20 feet deep and open to a horizontal room that could hold a few people to a massive complex that ran for miles. A spider hole was a small hole in the ground just big enough for one person to hide with their weapon. They were also used for storing ammunition and other supplies. The Viet Cong would booby trap these places if they thought we would be entering them for a look around. One could not tell for sure which they were entering until they started into one. Many of them were difficult to find and were cleverly hidden. I remember one day we found one in the makings. Once the tunnel entrance was started it ascended to point about 5 feet above the entrance to the horizontal room. It was being constructed in a well. The dirt being removed from the room was being dumped into the water, thereby raising the water level until it covered the tunnel entrance.

Earl had just returned to Vietnam from a 30 day leave at home. I could tell he was not happy to be back. Every time he removed himself from a suspicious hole he would say "there no damned V.C. here anywhere." I guess if he had to be back he wanted to get into some action.

I took a picture as we worked our way through a small cemetery; many of the grave sites of the Vietnamese are made of their natural stone and have a parapet constructed around the family plot. Sometimes, these proved to be a great place for protection during a firefight.

As part of the patrol descended to another group of wet paddies, the other remained at a higher plane. The two parts of the squad soon became separated by an island of brush where we could no longer see one another.

Frank, one of our team on the upper plane, spotted a leg moving in the brush and whistled to Earl. Earl did not understand the message and started into the brush, only to be met with small arms fire. I could see where the enemy was firing from so I raised my M-14 and returned fire. Soon the air was filled with yellow smoke; this was no surprise. It is common for someone to mark where the enemy position is.

I had no cover and dove into the open paddy to keep a low profile. Someone shouted that Earl was hit. I then realized Earl was in my line of fire. I thought I must have shot him.

My only thought was to assist Earl; I needed to see how bad he was hit.

As I was running toward him I could see the water splashing around me, as the bullets from the Viet Cong rifles hit the wet paddy. I dove into the mud beside Earl, he was moaning and I told him, "It's OK, it's was not that bad." Of course, I had no idea at the time the nature of injuries.

Someone yelled at me to get down as another exchange of small arms fire cracked above my head. The Cong were also firing rocket propelled grenades at the patrol over the top of my head. The angle was too steep to get hit by the Cong, and the patrol were too good of shots to hit me.

The shooting stopped for a short time. I had pulled some of Earl's shirt away and found a small bullet wound in his left chest. This was the side that faced me when I was shooting my M-14. I felt sick. It was a small wound the kind made by a bullet entrance. Soon our medic, Ron DeStefano, arrived; I was glad to see him. I wondered how he made it through the firefight. I told Ron, "I think I shot Earl." Again, someone yelled to get down. Ron and I were doing the best we could to care for Earl and keep low. Just then a grenade flew over our heads and landed in the brush about 3 feet above our heads and about 10 feet to our right. At the time it seemed like no big thing.

Ron showed me a bullet wound in Earl's right side; it was a small hole. At the time it did not mean much to me. A few more grenades sailed over our heads as Bear Banko's grenades found their mark, and the shrapnel cut the air over our heads.

Someone yelled the gunships were coming in. Enough time had passed for some of the adrenalin to clear from my system, only to pump it back up again, knowing from the air we could be mistaken as the enemy and would soon have air to surface rockets pounding on us.

Everything worked out fine; their aim was good and the fire fight stopped. The medivac was hovering a short distance away, waiting for the fighting to stop. A few more of the squad came in to help carry Earl to the chopper and he was out of there. I don't remember too much more about the day. Most of us just sat quietly and thought about the event that took place and we would search ourselves for the thought what could we have done different to change the outcome. It always leaves everyone with an uneasy feeling.

It was sometime that afternoon Ron, our medic, came over to me and sat on my bunk with me. He knew what I was thinking. He said "Arne it was not your shot that killed Earl." The shot that hit Earl was so close it passed through his chest and the exit wound was about the same size as the entrance wound. I felt somewhat better. I thanked him, and he left.

The next day we attended Earl's Purple Heart presentation, and were told another presentation would follow that afternoon. I was unaware of anyone else getting hurt, but things happen and you don't always know about them.

That afternoon we were gathered in formation at the air field. The lieutenant asked that Stephen Banko, Ronald DeStefano, and I come forward. As the three of us stood in a file in front of the patrol, a chopper sat down front of us. An officer, General Ward, got out and walked over to our formation. He stepped in front of Stephen Banko and presented the Bear with the Silver Star. Ron and I each received the Bronze Star with the "V" device. The three of us had no idea and I'm sure we all would tell you we don't feel we were heroes.

All the medals in the world would not bring a single life back or prevent anyone from being hurt during a firefight.

Arne O. Espedal