

From: John Temple Ligon
Sent: 4/9/2015 10:32:50 PM
To: John Temple Ligon
Cc:
Subject: Watch out

You did it, kid. Congratulations. Now pick out your favorite watch.

In August 1969, I arrived at Cu Chi, South Vietnam, where the U. S. Army's 25th Infantry Division had its headquarters and where the Viet Cong had its unbelievably complicated tunnel system. I didn't see any of our side's flush toilets, the mark of luxury and convenience for us line troops, but I did see numerous officers clubs, more than enough to get silly drunk for my first 24 hours.

Following my opening drunk, I was put into Charm School, as they called Orientation Week. Actually I bet it was also known as acclimation week, enough time to adjust to the tropics. I came over from a South Carolina summer, and before that, Ranger School in May, June and July, finishing up in the swamps of the Florida Panhandle. South Vietnam for me was a cool breeze compared with all that Southern stuff.

But you had to worry about the boys from Chicago and Minneapolis in February. They couldn't even breathe when the 707s first opened their doors to the Saigon air. Those fellows had been home in the blizzards for a month before coming over. Charm School was meant for them and their adjustments.

In my second week I was assigned to C/2/27 Wolfhounds, better known as Charlie Company, Second Hounds, and I had to leave the comforts of division headquarters for the forward fire support base called Jackson. My first patrol as an artillery forward observer was three platoons out of Jackson on September 5, 1969.

First day out beyond the wire, and we got hit. The enemy opened up, and we

couldn't tell where the hell they were for the first few minutes of contact. In the bright daylight, the flashes coming out of the enemy rifle muzzles couldn't be seen. My radio-telephone operator (RTO) was only a few feet away from me since I was on the horn, pulling the wire on his radio while I talked with the artillery. The nearby platoon leader's RTO was staying close to him, too, with no more umbilical cord than what I had. I was maybe 15 feet away from the platoon leader's RTO when I saw he had taken a hit in the head.

He was through. Had I been walking closer to him, had I run ahead to talk with his platoon leader...

War stories abound. We had a busy day, but that's not the point in this recall. The point is a quick consideration of what a body is worth. Had we been wiped out, the enemy would have walked off their kill zone with me in it. They would have checked us out for weapons, unopened cans of C-rations, cash, bracelets, boots, all that had value and could be carried off. Watches were typically keepers. We American capitalists wore better watches than the communists. Some of us wore fine jewelry, not just timekeepers.

In my case I wore an affordable water-proof job that looked comfortable in the mud or on the river bottom – a piece of middle-market mush that meant nothing other than accurate timekeeping.

Having just missed an opportunity to contribute to a junior communist's cause, having just missed my demise by about 15 feet, I decided to dress for the occasion next time. I got my hands on a mail-order watch catalogue, an outfit called Presto (really) in Hong Kong. The catalogue had Rolexes, and my friend who lent me the catalogue assured me I would be ordering from a reputable and reliable firm. Fine, I said, let's get the big one, all in gold.

So I ordered a Rolex GMT Master in 18k gold, a quarter-pound of gold, actually. As best I can recall, I spent a little less than a thousand dollars. Back in the World, the same watch was selling for about \$1,250. Don't forget: This was September 1969. Gold was still fixed at \$35 an ounce, and the dollar had real strength.

The guy I hoped I would never meet, my killer, would get a good watch for his troubles. Poor kid, probably left his new girlfriend and humped the full 600 miles of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, eventually getting through all of Laos and coming from Cambodia into South Vietnam about where we patrolled regularly along the main avenue of approach from the Angel's Wing to the road to Saigon.

I wore that watch, that hunk of gold for the next year and a half, two tours as a forward observer for both the 25th Infantry Division and then the 173RD Airborne Brigade. I even had a few months in Cambodia as an artillery battery fire direction officer and another couple months as an artillery battalion liaison officer in the Central Highlands. I never had a death wish – hell, I was not nuts, after all – but I brushed up to it often enough. Still, I kept the watch.

In the summer of 1973 I was living at the corner of College and Pickens just before Pickens was dug up and College was closed to automobile traffic. I was working on my TR-4A, a mid-60s job with knock-offs holding the wire wheels to the car. I put my watch, my death wish commemorative, on the top of the gas tank lid so I wouldn't scratch it or get grease on it. Then I ran inside for less than a minute to get the hammer to hit the knock-offs. I was changing brake pads that afternoon.

I came back outside before the minute was up, and my watch was gone.

Seen an 18k gold Rolex GMT Master lately, one with the Jubilee bracelet also in 18k gold? I still have the accuracy certificate from the Swiss government with my watch's number, so I can prove purchase.

My enemy visitor from greater Hanoi, the teenager with the new girlfriend, I hope he did all right. He's gotta be 62 or so today. He never knew what he missed, although I sure did.

I called Sylvan's this morning. Got the nomenclature straight. Rolex still makes it with a quarter-pound of 18k gold. Checked the price of gold lately? My watch just like the one taken off the gas cap of a TR-4A convertible, including 8% sales tax,