

“I’M JUST A SUPPLY SGT.”
My Life and Vietnam War Experience
by Donald M. Stout

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Editor's Note

When I drove up to a beautiful yellow ranch home in the middle of nowhere, Texas I never expected to leave with such a new understanding of the Vietnam War and its psychological impact on the soldiers who served through it. I was greeted by an excited red healer named Rusty and, shortly after, I met his owner, Don Stout. This was our first introduction and it would prove to be quite impactful. Don's hospitality and willingness to openly discuss his experiences pulled me into his story and showed the suffering from a horrible year in Vietnam. While retelling his story, he pulled out a small green diary and a stack of photographs; souvenirs of his service.

This diary was unlike any I had ever read. It was not a simple retelling of his travels or notes of his day. Instead, the entries spoke to the emotional toll and thoughts of a man fighting not only against an enemy in Vietnam but also against his own mind. Don's diary opens a lens into his thoughts during his year on the frontlines. As the year progressed, the entries became bleaker and his mood swayed into a dark place. Just when he needed it most, news from home would bring him back from the brink. Battles and the loss of men took its toll on his mind and the diary reflects this pain. As the year closed, his mind transferred to the paper as he grappled with the fear of dying and the feeling of hopelessness. Finally reaching the end of his tour, guilt began to take hold as well as a fear of returning to the civilian world after a year of pure turmoil and violence. Without a doubt, the diary provides one of the most unique perspectives on the war and tells

not only a history of his service but a psychological epic. Paired with the original photos taken by Don during the war, the full picture is revealed.

After speaking with Don, and enjoying some of the best chicken fried steak made by his wife, Deb, I convinced him to allow me to edit his story together in order to share it with not only historians, but with other veterans. One thing I have learned in my work with Vietnam veterans is that many carry a feeling of solitude as if their experience was unique and applied only to themselves. This makes it hard for them to express their feelings about their service and the pain that they continue to endure. But it was, and is, my hope that others will read Don's diary and see that they are not alone in dealing with these jumbled feelings of hopelessness, fear, excitement, guilt, and jubilation. Don has a gift of putting feelings into words that many of us cannot express.

My discussion with Don soon grew from a publication of his diary, to a full story about his life, feelings, and thoughts about the war and life. This book is a result of that. The story is told through Don's memories and the diary he kept during his second tour. The emotion and thoughts of the diary are true to his original entries with some additions in *italics* written in retrospect as he worked to process his thoughts on the experience. The diary gives historians and readers the benefit of seeing into his thoughts in 1968. The other chapters are written by Don as he recalled his long life and the lessons learned. Many of the memories are painful as Don led a hard life and I hope the reader can bear through the story to see that things can and will get better.

I'm Just a Supply Sgt. is a compelling narrative of the Vietnam war with a very personal, psychological perspective that is difficult to find in most histories. I hope that the readers are able to gain a little more understanding of the immense cost Vietnam

took from the soldiers who fought there and provide some closure or comfort to other veterans who continue to suffer from the memories of that terrible war. To all veterans, I am sorry that you suffer, but I hope you know that you are not alone and you are not forgotten. Your country owes you a debt. Thank you for your service.

Foreword

I began writing this in 2008 and this book is dedicated to my two sons, Donald M. Stout Jr. and James Matthew Stout, whom without their encouragement and support this story would never have seen the light of day. This is how I remember things. In addition to my two sons this is also for my daughter Lisa, that I have long since survived as she was taken by Leukemia at the age of 13 after a lengthy and painful illness. I know she can never read this, but maybe someday I can read it to her.

My two son's incessant quest for information about my life has caused me to dredge up memories long buried. Many of those are bitter but they cannot be changed so I shall endeavor to pen them with as much honesty as I can while trying to stem the tears that often creep from my eyes and down my cheeks. Other memories are on a lighter side and I shall endeavor to pen those as a sly smile creeps across my face. I also owe thanks to James Gregory for finally convincing me to finish this project and editing it together.

I will begin this literary endeavor with one event from the war in Vietnam from which I am not sure I ever returned. The war changed every aspect of my life and my perceptions of good and evil.

I arrived in Vietnam on a rainy day in late November of 1967 and I found myself assigned to the 2/22 Inf. (mech), 25th Infantry Division. The 25th Inf. Division had a theatre of operations that covered an area northeast from Saigon to the Cambodian border and was known as war zone C. It was better known as the Iron

Triangle because the operation area formed a triangle beginning at Cu Chi then running to Tay Ninh and then forming the third leg of the triangle at Dau Tieng. Near this triangle was a singular mountain which stood out as both a landmark and an observation post for the US forces, at least most of the time. This mountain's name was Nu Ba Den which loosely translated means the Black Virgin Mountain. We owned the top and the area surrounding the mountain, but Charlie owned the middle.

During my second tour of duty in Vietnam in 1968 was the Tet Offensive. For those of you not familiar with the Tet Offensive let me provide a quick explanation. It was the largest coordinated, single assault by the North Vietnamese throughout the country. It was bitter fighting for weeks, but eventually the US and South Vietnamese prevailed. I was not an Infantryman and was actually assigned as a Supply Sgt. to this unit but being out there with them put me in the same boat. It was drummed into my head from my first day in the Army that no matter what your "official" job was, you were first and foremost a soldier trained to fight and that certainly came true for me during this war. As a result, I ended up with two Purple Hearts, a Bronze Star, eight Campaign medals, and several other less well known decorations. Saying "I'm just a Supply Sgt.," doesn't work very well when the bullets fly, mortars land, and it really dawns on you that someone is trying to kill you 24 hours a day.

I do not want to present myself in any way as any type of hero. I was privileged to see several of those and I do not consider anything I did remotely worthy of standing in their shadow. I just happened to have survived, although I'm sure a lot of my mind did not. The first chapter of this book is an event that took place in July of 1968 during the Tet Offensive of the Vietnam War. Actually, it took place on the 4th of July. A fitting place to start, as it was certainly a life altering event for me.

*“So you think you should have lost an
arm or a leg instead of your mind?”*

CHAPTER ONE :

July 4, 1968

THE WAR IN VIETNAM took on many strange faces during its course and one of them was the “pacification” programs which were instituted in order to help win the “hearts and minds” of a local populace and thereby encouraging them to support the US effort. The 25th Infantry Division’s 3rd Brigade forward support base was established near the village of Dau Tieng which, along with other outlying villages, was the target of such a pacification program during the summer of 1968. The mission of this pacification program was to go into these villages and provide food, medical assistance, and assurances to the local population that the Americans would protect them from attacks by the NVA (North Vietnam Army) and local VC (Viet Cong). In theory it was probably a good program.

Another policy that the “powers to be of American leadership” came up with was the establishment of three separate and distinctive fire zones providing a guide for fighting the war in a given area. Troops were always advised of whatever “zone” they were in and were expected to adhere to the mandates of said zone. The first zone was a “no fire” zone which simply meant that you could not fire a shot anywhere in this zone or you would be arrested, court-martialed, and jailed in that order. This was fairly cut and dry and there was no room for discussion about it. The second fire zone was a semi-fire zone which generally meant that you

couldn't fire first, however you could return fire if fired upon. The punishment for not following those guidelines was the same as the first. The third fire zone was a free fire zone that allowed you to shoot at anything that seemed hostile.

During the summer of 1968 the small hamlet of Dau Tieng (which was our base camp) and the surrounding area had been declared a no fire zone because it was adjacent to the forward support base and was undergoing an intense program of pacification, or so it was claimed. This was not a popular plan amongst the men on the forward support base as they had endured continual bombardment of rockets, mortars, and sniper fire into the base area for months and they could see no reason to declare this region a no fire zone. During this period, the main elements of the units stationed in Dau Tieng were in the field between Saigon and Cambodia acting as a fire break between Saigon and the NVA. There was only a small detachment of about eighty men left to keep the base camp open and to defend it, if necessary. I was one of those men.

The 3rd of July 1968 found me delivering the last of the new M-16A1 rifles to the troops which were loggred north of Saigon. Ours was a Mechanized Infantry unit which meant we used APCs (Armored Personal Carriers) to move to any given location and then deploy on foot with tracks in support. Resupply was generally done by helicopter and I was about to head back to base camp with a load of the older M16s that I had been in the process of replacing with the newer model. The old M16s were prone to jam if you looked at them wrong and on more than one occasion ended up being a better club than a rifle. The flight back to base camp late that afternoon was relatively quiet with the exception of a few rounds fired at us from hidden positions on the ground. As we drew closer to the base camp I began to notice a lot of enemy

activity outside the wire as we flew into the base and I thought it very strange that nothing was being done about it. After landing and getting to the company area I checked with operations about what was going on. I soon discovered that they were aware of the buildup of enemy forces outside the perimeter but could do nothing about it because we were in a "no fire" zone thanks to the pacification program. All proposed military actions by U.S Forces had to be passed by the local village chiefs before being implemented and they would not give us permission to fire into the area. Even though our intelligence had been advising the village chiefs of the buildup all day long and pleading with them for permission to begin an offensive, they steadfastly refused. It would appear that they were more afraid of the NVA/VC than they were of us, and for good reason. Everyone was incensed that we could not take the offensive before the enemy buildup got larger, and tempers were short.

Darkness was settling in and as the sun began to set the loathing of the no fire policy was the common, redundant rumbling among the troops. The word from higher up was not to fire and we knew the penalties. All we could do was to watch the enemy continue their buildup and wait. We began to feel like sacrificial lambs on an alter built of stupidity, but there was nothing we could do about it. It was estimated that there was at least a Battalion size element of NVA regulars along with an unknown quantity of VC coupled with artillery support surrounding us unopposed. As the night got darker our fear grew larger.

In the early morning hours of July 4th, 1968 at 2:15 hrs our worst fears became reality as a huge artillery, rocket, and mortar attack was launched against the forward support base at Dau Tieng. Just before the attack I had begun walking across an open area while hoping against hope that nothing would happen and

the sun would rise peacefully in the morning. You never went anywhere in Vietnam without your steel pot and your weapons, even from tent to tent in base camp and I had mine with me. As the rocket and mortar rounds began to drop all around me, I dove into the nearest bunker like a rabbit in a hole seeking the safety of Mother Earth. Rounds were landing everywhere and small arms fire was coming in from all directions. The sky was lit by explosions and flares and the noise was deafening. Pulling my helmet down over my head and trying to keep from being blown apart from rockets I observed several NVA about fifty yards to my right and they were moving my way as if they knew I was there. I immediately let loose several short bursts of rounds from my M-16, dropping two of them immediately and wounding several others. Now I had removed all doubt about whether or not they knew my position and it appeared that they were now intent on really coming after me. I began firing at them again as they took cover and I saw another group moving in from my left at about the same distance. I could see other men firing at the NVA from various positions, but my immediate concern was that I was being trapped between two advancing groups and I was on my own. It seemed like there was no way out as rounds began to tear up the ground and sandbags I was using for protection.

The artillery, rockets, and mortars continued to rain down in torrents of deadly steel and I was amazed at how the NVA seemed to avoid them as if they had a map of where the rounds were going to land. I knew that if I stayed where I was, my position would be overrun in short order. I was receiving fire from both the left and right sides now. The explosions from all the incoming rounds shook the ground as the NVA continued to fire at me from two different directions and I could not see any way out of my imminent death. I knew if I didn't do something right now

I would be dead in minutes. I emptied a magazine in one direction, dropped it from the weapon, slammed home another, and emptied it in the other direction. I scrambled out of the bunker and began my run back across the open area I had crossed just before the fight began. The ground was shaking from explosions and I could feel bullets whiz by in front of and behind me as I ran for my life. Somehow I managed to cross most of the open area through the barrage of rockets, mortars, and small arms fire by running a zig zag route as best I could.

With only about ten yards to go I would reach a washed out creek and some kind of protection. My mind started screaming "you can make it" when a thunderous explosion happened behind me and I was thrown into the air like a rag doll doing a back flip and coming to rest flat on my face. That was the last time I was to see my M16 as it flew into the distance. Lying there I could feel nothing. I could hear nothing. I could see nothing. I did not hurt anywhere.

Whatever logic I could muster or any ability to reason at that point dictated that I must be dead, but do dead people think? Not having a lot of experience to draw on in situations like this limited me to this basic question. Was I dead or not?

Time passed, I know, but I was immune to its passing. Whether it was five minutes or five years was subjective as I had no idea. I didn't know what to expect, if anything, and my mind was running but not making any sense. The thought of this being some sort of a final transition of my ability to reason or think and the nothingness of the beyond flashed into my mind. Not being a religious person, I did not expect to see God or the Devil but I was not prepared for this nothingness. I was at a loss for any kind of interpretation of what was happening to me when I began to feel myself rising from my prone position ever so slowly

in an effortless motion and began to see the battlefield as it was presented below me like a three dimensional map complete with action figures. What was this? I had no control.

I was slowly being elevated higher until I began to see the overall battlefield from ten feet, then twenty feet, and continuing up at a slow progressive pace. I could see the explosions on the battlefield and see the streaks of tracer fire like flaming tongues of dragons lashing out death to all. I could see my body lying face down with large amounts of blood coming from my back and most of my clothes blown off. How odd I thought that I should die on the 4th of July of all days, almost naked with only my boots, pistol belt, and .45 on my side, and even more peculiar to see it from this bird's eye view.

Something was beginning to happen that didn't make sense, as if anything did in this maddening kaleidoscope of insanity. As I continued to rise something began to lurk in the depths of my mind. I had some kind of choice to make but it wasn't clear what it could be. This thought began to gather momentum and flew into a full frontal view at what seemed to be an impossible speed and I was taken aback by its content. I was being given the choice to live or die! My mind was withering under such a sudden assault of this magnitude! Somehow it became apparent that if I wanted to choose death all I had to do was to allow this upward spiral to continue and let death take its course. There were no signs indicating what would await me after death other than what I was currently experiencing which was a void of all things I had known in life and no further assurances of anything good or evil. The second choice was to simply say "No, I'm not ready to go!" and somehow I knew the ascent would stop. I would live but as with the choice of death, there was no further assurance of anything good or evil.

There were no assurances of any kind or road map laying out a destination or purpose to my life if it were to continue. This presented a quandary with which I was ill prepared to deal. It's not possible. Do I really have these choices or is this just a final cruelty to add insult to an ugly death? I somehow knew that the choices that I had been presented with would be withdrawn as quickly as they appeared if I did not make a decision soon. Then I would most certainly be dead. There was a terrible tug of war going on in my thoughts about going or staying and I knew that I must have gone insane just before this happened to me. I felt no pain now and, strangely, no remorse or sadness about dying. The remembrances of war and the pain involved made a strong case for not living any longer and I strongly considered this path as the seconds ticked off the clock. It would be over for me and an easy way out. Suddenly, thoughts flashed to the front of my mind of a sunny spring morning with the sweet smell of honeysuckle dancing in the air, the warmth of the sun on my face, and the faces of my children growing up without a father. Those thoughts sobered me into some type of a reasoning capacity and I remember saying to myself, "I am not ready to go yet" and those words seemed to echo throughout my mind. I had no idea of what the future would hold as nothing had presented itself to give me any kind of clue during the short time I had to choose.

Almost at the same instance of forming those thoughts and screaming those words in my mind, I felt myself slowly descending back to the battlefield and toward my lifeless body. Just that quick, the course of my life changed and I knew it. I began to hear the sounds of battle again. I could see the explosions of rockets and mortars as they hit the ground releasing a colorful starburst that would be pretty had they not been designed for the death of men. I could hear the crack of rifles and machine guns and

the cries of men at war and it was sickening. I began to wonder about my decision to stay but I was on an irreversible course back to my body and whatever was to be.

Suddenly, I awoke from what surely could only have been a dream to see that I was lying on a battlefield, in the middle of a battle and in what seemed like an alternate nightmare. I decided that if I'm not dead now, I soon will be if I don't move to some cover. I tried to get on my feet and run, but my legs weren't there to support me. I could not get up. I knew at that moment that I possibly could have made the wrong decision by coming back. I could not bear the thought of losing my legs and being a burden on someone for the rest of my life. These thoughts raced through my mind and I could not bring myself to look and see if my legs were truly gone but my mind had no other explanation. The din of battle was getting worse and I was terrified of dying again as I'm not sure that I would have been afforded those choices again, but I couldn't move.

Desperation set in as I somehow brought myself to reach down and feel for my legs. I felt them still attached, but there was no feeling in them. My eyes welled up with tears as the knowledge that I still had both of my legs settled in, and the next second those tears of joy turned to tears of fear as I realized I could be paralyzed the rest of my life. I could feel no pain or anything else in my legs but I was bleeding so much from the wound in my lower back I knew I was in trouble.

Seconds passed and the war kept getting closer. I decided I'd better try to crawl to cover and I began dragging myself using my arms for the final ten yards or so to the small washout in the creek for which I originally had been heading. Making it to that wash, I rolled in and up against the rim and there was still no feeling below my waist. I pulled my .45 out of the holster and

shakily held it in front of me not knowing if I had the strength to actually pull the trigger.

I was a physical wreck and mentally terrified. Drifting in and out of consciousness as the battle wore on above me, I knew I was out of it, or at least I thought so. Time wore on and the battle above me raged for what seemed to be an eternity and then the sounds of war began to become more sporadic. Feeling started to return to my legs and my left foot was beginning to experience pain from what I was later to find out was a broken ankle. The boot was still intact however. It seems that when the rocket landed behind me it picked up something and threw it with the force of the explosion against my left ankle breaking it.

Pain began to radiate from my lower back as if my body had been cut in half and I was to find out later it was the result of about a quarter size piece of shrapnel that had lodged in my spine just below the beltline. Blood was flowing freely from the wound in my back and I could taste blood in my mouth apparently from the concussion of the exploding round. The combination of the pain from the wound in my back and the broken foot was excruciating. Suddenly I began to hear the voices of NVA soldiers moving toward me with what seemed to be a great sense of urgency. I really thought they would pass me by as I was tucked into the side of the wash and it was pretty dark, but such was not to be. One of the NVA soldiers had entered the wash I was hidden in and was using it for cover as he moved through the area. Although he had apparently not seen me, he was rapidly closing the distance toward me. My heart thundered in my chest and I was sure he would hear it. His silhouette came into view and I watched his stride in what seemed to be slow motion as he began to move past me, without ever seeing me.

Closer and closer he came as my heart pounded like an oversized base drum. Then it happened. Almost passing me completely he kicked my broken ankle which I had not pulled far enough back into my hiding place. This removed all doubt about my presence. When he kicked my broken ankle, I was immediately made aware that all feeling had come back into my legs including my feet. I let out a scream that I sure sounded like it came from the dungeons of the Spanish Inquisition.

Instantly the NVA soldier twisted around and leveled his AK47 at me at the same time a flare lit up the sky behind him. His silhouette was a mask of death set against that ghostly red glare. I fired one wild, desperate shot that caught him in the right side of his forehead and he fell instantly to the ground. That was the last action that soldier ever did as he laid dead next to me. It was a lucky shot and if I had missed he would have cut me in half with his AK47. Fearing the return of his comrades I grabbed his rifle, but to my surprise they didn't return.

We lay there together for what seemed to be an eternity. I watched the blood run from his head and what was left of his brain laying half way out, my thoughts turned to my earlier experience and I wondered if he was going through the same process of having a choice that I did. Of course I had no way of knowing, but I'm sure this will cross my mind every time I see death in the future. Is this something I will experience in my life when I face death again?

That's a question that can only be answered at another time. As we lay there together, one in life and one in death, I listened for other NVA soldiers but heard no others and it sounded as if the battle was beginning to wind down. My thoughts wandered to what his life had been like before we met and I ended his existence. Tears filled my eyes but I'm not sure if it was for him

or the fear that had taken control of my body as I was shaking uncontrollably. The rockets and mortars slowed to a stop and the gunfire became lighter and finally ceased altogether. Time passed in what seemed like endless hours and I was terrified of not knowing the outcome of this battle, and I had no idea of which side had prevailed. I couldn't imagine being taken as a prisoner of war and as long as I had any way to resist, I would. I began to hear voices through the ringing in my head and slowly they materialize into American voices. In a voice as loud as I could muster, I tried to alert them to my location and to come get me. They did.

As the medics showed up the first thing they did was take my .45. That was a good thing, because I would have shot them for pulling me out by my broken foot. It appeared that I had survived another day of the war. I'm not sure if that was good or bad. There are possibly many days in a person's life that could be life altering, and for others there are but a few, if any. This day has been one of those days for me. I'm sure that my mind will never be the same. The war went on and the no fire policy was still intact.

