

Keith Dohl Learn interviewed October 3, 2007

SP5 E5, US Army, September 1966 – September 1968

Keith graduated from High School in 1965 and went to work in the office of Berks Associates in Douglassville. In 1966, he received his draft notice for the Army. This was not unexpected. In September, Keith was inducted and sent to Fort Gordon, GA for boot camp. Stepping off of the bus, the drill sergeant began to yell at him because he was being “too slow.” He was also singled out as the “guy in the plaid shirt.” Of course, everyone else was being yelled at and was given their own little nick names based on what they were wearing or what they looked like, etc...



The first week was spent being issued uniforms and getting haircuts and shots, among other things. The shots were given via injection gun and as long as you followed instructions and didn't move, you would be alright. Some guys fainted and others came out of the “shot gauntlet” with blood running down their arms. During the three months of boot camp, they were given tests and Keith was told that he was “highly qualified” to be a

mechanic. On the last day of boot camp, they were given their next assignments and Keith's orders were to report to Fort Sill, OK for artillery school.

Keith didn't know anything about what to expect with artillery and, had he been asked, he would have requested an office assignment since this was his background in civilian life. Once at Fort Sill, he learned all of the various jobs related to the 105 and 155 howitzers. This was so he could take any job on the gun crew as needed.

Changing Jobs...

After taking leave, Keith flew to Vietnam via Alaska, which was surprisingly warm for March. When he landed in D'Nang, Vietnam, he was surprised by the large number of women in the military there. He continued his trip and reported to the 1st Battalion of the 40th Artillery in Dong Ha. Keith presented his papers at Headquarters and as the man behind the desk looked them over, Keith asked “Do you have an office job?” The man reviewed Keith's papers for another minute, saw he had office experience and told him to go over to an empty typewriter and type something. After about two minutes, he told Keith to stop and gave him an office job. Keith's Military Occupation Specialty (MOS) was now changed from “artillery” to “office.”

The Battalion was made up of three batteries: A, B and C and Keith was assigned to A. This battery, however, was not in the main camp and was across some fields and on a hill. Each area was fenced in and guarded and the drive between them could be dangerous so Keith was kept at the main camp until he was trusted enough to make the drive. The 40th had only been in Vietnam for one year so their base still had many temporary features such as tents on platforms instead of buildings. The bases were relatively secure at first, a situation that would later change.

Every so often, the base would take one or two hits from an enemy shell. During this time, the men would take cover in bunkers at the center of the base. One shell hit outside of the bunker where Keith

Keith D. Learn

had gained cover and shell fragments hit the sand bags on the outside of the wall where Keith was sitting. When the danger passed, he went outside and retrieved the fragments out of the sand bag wall and still has them today.

The military began to allow the local Vietnamese onto the base to do laundry and other tasks. A few weeks later, the shelling began to increase. Some of the Vietnamese base workers had been pacing off the measurements of the camp. After that, they were kicked out of the camp.

Upon arriving in Vietnam, all privates are elevated to the rank of E3 and receive extra combat pay. Keith quickly moved up the ranks to E4 and E5 within the year he was in Vietnam. When he reached E5, he was put in charge of one of the guard details. This would consist of supervising the guards at night (5 pm to 6 am) as well as setting out the Claymore mines (above ground mines facing out that could be set off by hand via a trigger inside the fence). Much of the enemy activity took place during the night. At least once a week, the Claymore mines would be turned around to face in toward the camp. This would have had a disastrous effect had they ever been fired. Occasionally, a Claymore would go off on its own due to weather or another problem. This would wake the whole camp and send everyone scrambling.

During one night when Keith was supervising the guard detail, one of the guards heard rustling in the field between the main camp and Company A's camp. Keith called for permission to fire off a flare. The flare revealed civilians in the field with their cattle. This was one of the ways the Vietnamese used to test the response time of the Americans.

One of the frustrations Keith felt was that they were constrained in how they could respond to attacks. As the shelling of their base increased, they would sometimes be able to locate the source of the shelling, but could not get permission to fire back because the shots would often come from a church or school. The refusal to respond frustrated Keith who felt that it was not possible to engage in a police action as the US was doing and instead should have taken an approach that this was a war and the US was in it to win. Keith feels that this approach lengthened the time the US was in Vietnam.

The batteries were not set up to fire from the base, but would go out into the field for three weeks at a time, rotating their crews so the base was always staffed. One time, Keith had to drive up to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) to conduct some business. He went as part of the convoy in a jeep with a canvas top. As they approached the DMZ, they could hear the sound of mortar rounds being dropped into the mortar and then fly through the air and hit. On the way back, Keith was driving with a 1st Sergeant in the front seat and two other men in the back. As they started out, they could hear the click of a mortar round being fired. The 1st Sergeant dove out of the jeep, but the men in back had nowhere to go. The round missed them, but Keith had to stop to retrieve the 1st Sergeant and then catch up with the column. After that incident, their commander ordered the canvas tops removed and sandbags placed on the floor of the vehicles.

Keith's duties included preparing the morning report of who was there with the battalion, who was injured, etc... as well as conduct any correspondence. Keith had turned 20 a few days after arriving in Vietnam. This gave him the feeling that he would survive his tour because he was between being a

Keith D. Learn

teenager and a man. Once with the 40th, he set about doing everything he could to help out. He would serve as a set of ears who would listen to the men who were returning from or about to go out into the field, he helped run phone lines, ran the movie projector, fixed snacks and stepped in anywhere else he saw a need.

It was because of his willingness to do whatever was necessary that he earned the Army Commendation Medal. His Warrant Officer supervisor recommended him for the medal before being rotated back to the States. He asked Keith to type up the paperwork so he would be sure it was taken care of before he left. Part of the citation read that he “spent many arduous hours” above his normal duty making sure the base and men were taken care of. Keith’s skill and dedication were further proven by his quick promotions to E4 and E5 as mentioned earlier. Part of the requirements for moving up in rank was spending “time in grade” before moving on to the next rank, but Keith was promoted without fulfilling this requirement. The move from E3 to E5 was supposed to take at least one year, but Keith made it in less than one year.

The weather was not particularly hot where Keith was in Vietnam, very similar to Pennsylvania. The rainy season created a lot of mud. Mosquito netting was used over each cot. During Keith’s time at the base, building supplies were delivered and the men set about building more permanent structures for sleeping and living. Buildings with tin roofs were set up and a shower was built.



An Unusual Christmas in Australia...

Keith did have a seven day of Rest and Relaxation trip during his tour. He had his choice of going to Hong Kong, Tokyo or Sydney, Australia. Keith chose Sydney and went during Christmas time. The flight was free, but he had to pay for the hotel and food when he got there. Because he had been sending most of his money home, he had to borrow some money from friends for the trip. He got off the plane and hailed a taxi while still wearing his uniform. The taxi driver asked if he had a place to stay. Keith said “no” and the driver said they were so appreciative of what the Americans are doing that he would like for Keith to stay with his family. So Keith spent the week with an Australian family seeing the sights and even playing golf on Christmas Day.

[Keith Learn's Army Commendation Medal](#)

At the end of January 1968, the North Vietnamese launched the Tet Offensive, striking simultaneously at targets all across South Vietnam. Now, the shelling of the base increased and the attacks were no longer limited to night time. Battery A was out in the field when Tet started and two of the men were among the first casualties. Because information didn’t move as easily in Vietnam, Keith didn’t know that the offensive was so wide spread until he returned to the States.

Now it was getting near Keith’s time to leave Vietnam. He had a small walking stick with notches and would cut off a section each day. He was also training another clerk to take over his position. In March

Keith D. Learn

of 1968, it was time to leave. On the hour of Keith's departure by plane from Cam Ranh Bay, the airport was being shelled. The pilot said "...it may be rough, but we're leaving anyway" and off they went.

Arriving Home...

Keith eventually arrived at Philadelphia International Airport around 3 am. He walked up to the Hertz rental car desk and asked to rent a car to Pottstown. The man behind the counter looked at him and said "We don't have any cars, try Avis." Avis did have a car for him and Keith ripped up his Hertz card and threw it away. Keith arrived at home in Pottstown and went to the back door of his house. His brother, Leslie, answered the door and Keith recalls that he seemed to fill the doorway. Leslie said to his Dad who was standing behind him in the Kitchen: "Better wake up Mom." Early the next morning, he heard a commotion in the hall with his sisters and his brother warning them to not get to close when you wake him (because he would be jumpy after his tour in Vietnam).

After one month of leave, Keith had to report to the replacement company at Fort Dix, NJ where he worked as a Personnel Specialist until his enlistment was up. This was not a particularly fond memory for Keith as his supervisor was not the nicest of men. Because of his position, Keith would sometimes handle mail and he happened to see the arrival of his Commendation Medal, the process for which had been started back in Vietnam. The E6 in charge said you can take the medal now or pretend you didn't see it and we'll all have to go out and have a big parade and ceremony for you. Keith decided to just take the medal.

In September of 1968, Keith was discharged. While he didn't see a big change in himself, attitudes about the war had changed and people were unwilling to talk to veterans about their experience.