

Of Old Cars and Vietnam

1967-1968

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Base: Tay Ninh, Unit: HHC, 2/34th Armor, 25th Infantry Division
PFC, MOS: 11D, Armor Recon

Here's my story. Sorry no pictures since I left Vietnam on a stretcher. My old locker with camera, money, etcetera, was literally cleaned out. All I have are about four pictures I had previously sent home to my parents. What's this whole war story got to do with old cars? Well to me, my old T-bird was a symbol of a better, softer, and gentler time. A time before war, mortgages, unemployment and adult responsibilities.
Michael Walsh, Vancouver, WA

Strange title I'm sure. I grew up in S/E Michigan farm country, though not on a farm. Life was good back then. In the winter I loved to go skating at night in the flooded woods behind my home. I'd skate faster and faster weaving in and out amongst the huge silent trees. I now live in the Pacific N/W and miss many of the sights and smells of rural Michigan; the smell of melting snow, ice fishing, looking in the ditches for carp to spear, pheasant hunting in the Fall. What I missed most of all was my old 1955 Thunderbird.

My Thunderbird was severely rusted and though the heater was good the convertible top wasn't and the cold Michigan inter was my constant companion. One day, while driving through a suburb of Port Huron, my brakes went out. You see the *bird* had this small metal plate situated to keep the rubber brake line from rubbing on the drive shaft. Great, unless the metal plate rusts away. I managed to stop it by bouncing off snow banks. Another time I was driving along the freeway on the way to Port Huron when a guy fell asleep and slammed into me and ripped my whole left rear fender off. The guy had on Chrysler coveralls and had been on the graveyard shift; he said he just nodded off. A cop soon came along and while he was writing up the accident a car went out of control and hit a nearby overpass support. The driver was killed instantly. This guy probably also fell asleep and was wearing Ford coveralls. My car was repaired and I was soon back on the road.

For a while I worked at a marina. Man that was the life. I'd just sit in my bird until a boat showed up and I would hand the boat owner the nozzle and he'd pump his own gas. Funny thing about my car, I had one of those turquoise birds, many times somebody would say, "Nice looking green T-Bird," or "Cute little blue car you got." It always looked blue to me but – go figure. What I especially liked was driving with the top down along rural country roads. Those were carefree summer days driving alone along endless miles of dusty rural roads with the warm summer sun in my eyes. Yes life was good then – then came the Vietnam war. Since I would be in the army the next three years, my dad had me sell my beloved bird because he needed the driveway space.

I felt the Draft breathing down my neck, so I enlisted. The recruiter told me to sign up for 11D, Armor Recon. He told me it was an *almost* guaranteed cinch I'd be sent to Germany. Hey recruiters don't lie do they? Anyway I arrived in Vietnam in November of 1967. I soon found myself as a M60 machine-gunner on the back of an Armored Personnel Carrier (APC M113A1). Our unit was a recon outfit of a dozen tracks (ha, as if we'd have all 12 running at the same time)

and we'd act as convoy escorts. At O'Dark thirty we'd form up in our small fire base near the Cambodian border, then we would race down to Tay Ninh to collect a convoy. The formed up convoy would be interspersed with our tracks. Designated trucks would then be dropped off along the way; the French Fort, Rock Crusher and other names and places I've forgotten. We got ambushed a number of times but Charlie was after the trucks not us.

What I hated was our nightly patrol around our fire base. Since I was an M60 gunner guess what I carried. Our patrols got hit a few times. One time we surprised some NVA setting up mortars. We wiped them all out – about 35 of them. Sorry but that's war. Come January all hell broke loose – Tet 1968. Our base was abandoned and we were pulled back down to the 25th Infantry base of Cu Chi. We were in a huge convoy with gunships flying cover above us.

While going through some nameless impoverished village the transmission of our track burned out. The convoy went right on past; not one vehicle stopped. Soon they vanished in a cloud of dust in the distance. Our TC (Track Commander) (SGT Underwood) got on the radio and used some swear words I'd never even heard before. We were in a flat wide open area surrounded by rice paddies. The locals, especially the kids came out to look us over. We tossed them chocolates and joked with them a bit. It didn't take the villagers long to figure out we'd been left behind. The adults came out, shaking their fists at us and throwing rocks. Our TC let loose with a few M16 rounds in the air to scare them off. That did the trick. However, far off in the rice paddies you could see 30 or more figures moving towards us. True we had a .50 Cal and two M60's, but otherwise we were sitting ducks. Just before they got too close four or five tracks showed up and we were towed in to Cu Chi base camp.

We missed the first day of battle as we were in the motor pool helping the mechanics swap out our trans. We listed on the radio though. It was a real oh s--- moment when, while listening on the battalion net we heard the battalion commander order a complete pull back all across the line.

The next day (February 28th 1968) we went out to join our unit. I got a real shock when I saw all the bodies stacked alongside the road. There were even some of our own guys amongst them. Now and then you'd hear the *zing* of a sniper round just overhead. It was early in the morning when our tracks drove into a field of tall elephant grass. We were following some infantry guys from the Wolfhounds (a top notch unit). They went through the grass untouched. We made it in about half way through when our track was hit by an RPG (rocket propelled grenade). Our driver (SP4 John Hall) was killed instantly and the inside of the track was now on fire.

Somehow the other M60 gunner (PFC Coone) found an extinguisher and was frantically putting out the fire. Things were happening pretty fast you know. Just below me, in the elephant grass, stepped out an NVA (North Vietnamese Army). He fired from the hip and raked the track over good. He was too close for my M60 which was in a gun shield. Our TC tossed a grenade and blew him up.

By now the grass was on fire and most of the tracks had managed to back out. PFC Coone jumped off our track, hooked a tow cable to our track and ran through the burning grass and enemy fire to hook the cable onto a track safely out of the tall grass. We were then towed out of danger.

The next day (Leap year day Feb 29th 1968) and because our track had been destroyed, we were reassigned to various other tracks. Track drivers were in short supply (you think) and I was assigned to drive a track for another unit (I don't know for sure which unit, probably 1st of 5th Mech). Riding on my track was a mechanic acting as TC and one of the M60 gunners was an assistant cook. It was an online assault with armor spaced out and infantry walking behind, just like something out of World War II. The area was an old overgrown dried up rice paddy. In the course of the assault I drove over an old rice paddy dike, and when I did two RPG's were shot into the bottom of my track. The track was lifted a few feet in the air and slammed back down. Suddenly the driver's compartment was filled with fire and electrical sparks. My left ankle and part of my left leg were ripped open. To cut this short I left Vietnam on a stretcher – end of war for me.

These days you can find me sitting with my wife, a Hemmings Motor News in hand, and drooling over those Amos Minter or Hill's Automotive meticulously restored Thunderbird's, while she undergoes chemo therapy for stage-4 breast cancer. *Life sucks!*

UPDATE: Last PET scan showed wife's cancer in remission, not gone just dormant. Oh well, win one battle at a time.