

29 October 2006

To the Veterans of the 12th Evacuation Hospital:

This is a long overdue letter to the men and women whom played a very important role in my life 38 years ago today. My assignment in June 1968, as battalion commander of the 1st Battalion, (Mechanized) 5th Infantry, 25th Infantry Division, came as a surprise to me. I did not expect to arrive in Vietnam and out of the box receive a command. In fact, I was on orders as a Lt Col to be the Division G3, however, Gen Mearns changed all that and sent me off to assume command of the Bobcats then located outside of Saigon. His parting words were: "And by the way, have fun". Little did I know what I was about to get into. Subsequently, the battalion moved to Dau Tieng and the Michelin rubber plantation where things began to heat up. Our tracks were hitting mines and by mid-August we were engaging elements of the 33rd NVA and 275 NVA regiments on a daily basis. It is well known that an infantryman stood a 75% chance of being killed or wounded during his year in Vietnam and I know firsthand that many of my wounded soldiers passed through the 12th Evac.

The majority of soldiers were draftees and motivation for mission accomplishment at the squad, platoon, company and battalion level was extremely important. Unit commanders had to lead by example which meant sharing the combat experiences of the men they were tasked to lead. As a "lifer", I adhered to the adage: "Never ask someone to do something that you would not do yourself". So I rode on top of my command track just like all the soldiers in my battalion so they could see me. My crew consisted of my command sergeant major, artillery liaison officer, two radio operators, track commander and driver. I had a signature vehicle with four antennas and radios that allowed me to call for close air support and long range artillery fires and communicate with higher, adjacent and lower units when we were in contact. All of our vehicles had sandbags on their floors to help contain the results of a mine explosion.

On 29 October 1968, I was with my "A" company moving to link up with the Wolfhounds south of Dau Tieng. It was about 1700 hours and we were moving rather fast when an enemy soldier jumped out of a spider hole and fired an RPG 7 round at my track. The round struck just below my left leg and blew me off the top of my vehicle. My crew ran back, picked me up, and placed me on top of the sandbags on the floor of my track. I remember seeing thru swollen eyes, a fire burning the paint on the inside of the vehicle. As my guys raced to an open area where a medevac chopper could pick me up, I said to myself, if we hit a mine, I will be splattered across the roof of my own vehicle. Fortunately, I made it to the chopper and three of us wounded were placed on litters and flown to the 12th Evac at Cu Chi.

I recall my boots and clothing being cut off and then I passed out. I was fortunate in that the RPG did not directly hit me but I was bleeding profusely due to all the spall (metal fragments) that hit my left side. I lost part of my left foot, and had compound fractures of my left leg and arm. I also had multiple fragment wounds around my eyes. Due to many open

wounds, I had lost a lot of blood. Some time later, I awoke in a ward bed with shields over both eyes. I could not see very well but a soft hand held mine and I knew very well that it was not that of my sergeant major. Since that time I have always wanted to meet the men and women of the 12th Evac and thank them for their outstanding service. I did not stay very long at Cu Chi and subsequently was air evacuated to the 249th General Hospital in Japan.

After several weeks in Japan, I returned to the states in a body cast that included my left leg and arm. We were all litter bound and stacked three high. I recall the soldier on the bottom litter across the aisle from me cried for his mother while holding a teddy bear until a flight nurse put him to sleep with a shot. I spent seven months in the medical system and returned to duty in time to attend the Army War College at nearby Carlisle Barracks, PA. Up until my release from Valley Forge General Hospital, I had skin grafts and numerous changes of casts. I know how to bend a wire coat hanger and run it down a long leg cast to try and stop the itching. I also can marvel at a medical technician cutting off an old cast without cutting off my arm or leg with his saw. It was a most eerie feeling to see him at work and me wondering when that saw would cut skin and bone. And if I had to do it over again, I would put four antennas on every track in the battalion.

Yes, I have the utmost respect and admiration for medical personnel, especially those who played such an important role in saving the lives of so many of our severely wounded soldiers. That you treated more than 37,000 patients in four years, is a tribute to your professionalism and compassion. You saved thousands of lives and I count myself among that number. Your distinctive insignia's motto: "Skilled and Resolute" well describes the doctors, nurses and staff of the 12th Evac. How very fortunate our Nation's warriors are to have such outstanding medical services that dates back to your unit activation in World War I. And this remarkable legacy continues today with the 212th Surgical Hospital stationed in Germany.

It was fate that put me in a position as President, 25th Infantry Division Association and thus able to engineer the joint reunion we recently experienced in Hawaii. I hope you enjoyed the experience as much as I did. Your presentation to me of the framed print by Tropic Lightning combat artist Jim Nelson, titled: "12th Evac, Cu Chi, RVN , 1966-1970", will serve as a constant reminder of the many thousands of patients who received your professional and compassionate care. You will always be in our hearts and minds and please remember that you well earned a place as members of the Tropic Lightning family.

With my admiration and warmest regards,

MGen Andrew H. Anderson USA (Ret.)

