

National Vietnam Veterans Recognition Week, May 1-7

Nam vet Trent and the 'Black Scarves' of the Big Red One

By **KIRBY ROSS**
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He served with the famed Big Red One in a battalion known as the "Black Scarves," so-called because of the embroidered garment the unit left behind on its fields of battle to let the enemy know who had been there. Dick Trent grew up in Phillipsburg and went to school with the Class of '66. Going from schoolboy to war veteran while he was still a teenager, he was leading a squad of American soldiers in the jungles of Vietnam where he was decorated once for wounds and five times for heroism.

Wanting to follow in his father's footsteps by serving in the military, Trent enlisted during his senior year of high school. In an era when fathers and sons often had a difference of opinion on whether to serve or not, Dick Trent Sr. and Dick Trent Jr. had a dispute of their own--- Trent Sr. wanted Trent Jr. to be a navy-man like he had once been himself. Trent Jr. had his own way and instead joined the army for three years.

After enlisting the younger Trent was sent for basic training at Ft. Bliss, Texas. Regarding his time in boot camp, Trent remembers "actually I enjoyed it--we were the first group--because of the growing war they had just started it back up so we had it easy."

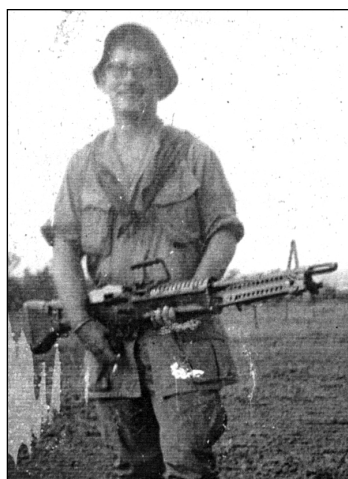
From there he went to Ft.

Ord, California, where he spent a little over a year training to be in communications. Afterwards stationed at Ft. Sheridan, Illinois, for another six months, this time as a military policeman, Trent states "I thought I had it made. It didn't look like I was going to end up in Vietnam because I only had a year and two months to go. But then they called me up...."

Departing from Oakland, California, in January 1968, Trent was supposed to be in communications when he arrived in Vietnam. And if he had left a little later in the day, he very well may have been.

However, the 1st Infantry Division--the Big Red One--had suffered heavy losses a few weeks earlier near its base camp of Quan Loi fifty miles north of Saigon. Being short of men for the division, the military determined the best way to replace them was to recruit them from the men who were coming in. Consequently, the troops on the first three planeloads arriving in Vietnam that day found themselves converted to infantrymen.

Trent recalls going through three days of "j.d. school"--jungle devil school. Here the new troops were taught how to survive in-country. They learned about booby traps, what to eat, what not to eat, and so on. School was supposed to last for seven days, but because of the shortage of troops it was



M-60 MACHINE GUN -- This tattered photo shows Dick Trent and the weapon he carried during his earliest days in Vietnam.

cut short after just three and Trent then found himself to be on a plane en route to the division. "They flew us to Quan Loi--that same day we were out in the field humping the boonies. The next day I saw my first combat. It was an ambush on us, a small one. All I remember is that I didn't know what the hell I was doing."

Trent learned quickly. Going in he was a Spec. 4 in rank. Within two months he was promoted to sergeant and seven months after that he was made staff sergeant.

"We were constantly going out on patrol," he says. "We would stay out one or two days sometimes. The longest we were out was 22 days. That was without a shower, hot meal or anything. They would fly in supplies via chopper. We would clear a



ON PATROL -- Armed with an M-16 rifle and a bandolier of spare ammunition, nineteen-year-old Sgt. Dick Trent, right, is pictured in this 1968 photograph out on patrol searching for Viet Cong during the monsoon season 50 miles north of Saigon near the Cambodian border.

landing zone and they would fly in supplies and take out our wounded.”

“The officers were given certain check points to go to,” he continued. “During the night would sleep on the ground--we’d dig a fox hole if we could. While on the move we would check out villages and Viet Cong routes. If we encountered fire we would keep on going.”

“We would go back to base camp long enough for a

shower and a hot meal. After one day or five or six days, then we’d go right back out again.”

Trent originally was armed with an M-60 machine gun when he first arrived. After he was promoted to sergeant and squad leader he began using an M-16, but by the end of his tour of duty he was carrying a captured Soviet-made AK-47 as his primary weapon. Regarding his choice, “it was reliable and you never had any trouble

finding ammo for it,” Trent said.

Trent also remembers a pet monkey named Nero he had throughout most of his tour. Another soldier who was going back to the U.S. gave him to Trent. “When I was using the 60 he would sleep on it at night. He could smell the enemy and would warn the squad when they were around. His warnings wouldn’t reveal us to them because that was how the jungle sounded, but he sure saved

us.”

When it came time to return home, Trent recalls “I tried so hard to take him back with me, but I couldn’t do ’er. I had to hand him down to another guy when I left.”

Trent spoke of how the Viet Cong would lay out ambushes for the Americans. “One was in what was called a ‘spider-hole,’ which was around 6-feet-deep. He had us laid down for quite a while before we got him. He was holding down a whole company.”

Other V.C. would “tie themselves into trees. If you could spot ’em you were alright--but spotting ’em was the problem.”

Remembering the men that didn’t make it home, Trent said “we lost a lot. I lost a real good friend of mine.” A newspaper report from the era speaks of how “in an engagement, Richard and one of his buddies were the only survivors in his platoon, riddled by enemy fire, and he was in a hospital in Japan for five weeks.” Trent also began recounting a story where his entire company--over 100 men--was involved in an especially bloody battle. Only 11 made it back physically unscathed. Still affected by this particularly harrowing encounter, Trent stated “I’ve never talked much about that before. I don’t know why I am now. Sometimes it’s good to get it out.”

Trent was complimentary toward the men he fought with. “In the service there were some good guys and bad guys. In my squad I had about the best guys there was. They knew what they were doing. A problem might come up when one would rotate out and a new one would come in, but they were all good.”

The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese regulars weren’t the only enemy out in the field. “There was always one guy in our squad armed with a shotgun loaded with double-ought buck. That was for cobras. There were some big ones there. Then there was the time a squad-mate of mine sat down and a big root next to him started moving. It turned out to be a ten to 12-foot-long python. You should have seen that guy jump. And there was so much vegetation, you spent a lot of time slumped over. Sometimes you would hit a tree with black ants that stung like bees.”

“There were also the water buffalo. They were used by the villagers to plow, and nine out of ten of them were okay, but some of them were pretty bad. Then there were rumors of what was called a ‘three minute vipers.’ I don’t know if they were true or not but none of us wanted to find out.”

Trent spent 368 days in Vietnam. “After the first month or so over there, you

get to thinking that maybe you might be able to make it through,” Trent said. “But when your time there is coming to an end and you become a short-timer, that’s when you get real goosy.”

With his tour of duty in Vietnam finally coming to an end in January of 1969, he boarded a plane full of other soldiers headed back toward the U.S. He remembers that “once the plane was on its way and we were sure it wasn’t going to turn back around,” that a bit of a party started up.

After a 16-hour flight, the plane landed back in Oakland, California, his departure point a year earlier. Within 24 hours he received his discharge papers and went over to the San Francisco airport to fly back towards Kansas and Phillipsburg. While sitting in the bar waiting for his flight, a war protester threw a drink on him.

Speaking without anger, Trent mentioned that event and noted that “the Desert Storm veterans got a heroes welcome. We didn’t get that. All we got was called names.”

While fighting in Vietnam, only to have a drink thrown on him hours after his return home, Dick Trent was awarded two bronze stars, an army commendation medal with three clusters, as well as a purple heart. And he was just 19-years-old when he earned them.