

## Stevenson Bryant Eaton

Born: April 9, 1945  
Milwaukee

Died:

Period of Service: Viet Nam

Sources: Monument  
plaque, B10 F2, JG, Carol  
O'Neill interview

His parents were Conan and Eileen. His father was an Island historian and wrote several books on Island matters and events.

In the late 1960's Steve attended classes at Oshkosh so had a student deferment from the draft, so in the Fall of 1968 he hitched his way to Alaska where he worked on the North Slope until Christmas. He returned to classes in January and through the summer session, but was drafted at Thanksgiving. He opted for the Navy but that allotment was filled so he was inducted into the Army December 9, 1969.

He was sent to Fort Campbell, KY, home of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne, the "Screaming Eagles" or as some mockers called it the "Puking Buzzards." He was surprised to be sent home for Christmas, but commenced basic training in January which ended in february 1970 as a private E2 in the upper half of his class, though he wa suffering from untreated pneumonia. The last week of basic was spent qualifying on the M16 rifle in preparation for Viet Nam, though all through basic they had been using the M14.

This was the only time he was treated badly by the Army. The Captain in charge of his group thought Steve was faking his pneumonia and was "sort of sadistic" and hard on him. Everyone had finished cleaning his rifle but him because he could hardly see. At first the captain was negative and abusive, but finally realized Steve was really sick and had the drill sergeant take him back to the barracks. He was never treated at the infirmary because it was overwhelmed with flu cases.

Steve admired the drill sergeants. "We were all in ill-fitting clothes, so we joked that if God had wanted us to be in the Army, we would have been born with green baggy skin. The sergeants were wearing the same clothes but theirs were tailored and fitted like gloves. They looked sharp at all times. I wanted to look like them, to have their knowledge, to be like them. They were inspirations to me and I still admire them."

His next training was in the artillery at Fort Sill, OK. Because of his class standing, he was able to take a two week Leadership Preparation Course. Its relaxed discipline, informal barracks, good food (choice of omelets for breakfast served him well). "It wa a good place to recover from pneumonia". He said he wasn't an effective leader because he had "a more laid back style". He was supposed to act as a leader in the next course which was firing the various howitzers, but he "was not into that". So another member of the LPC class "with a more commanding presence" acted as leader and Steve "went along with the flow and took the training like everybody else." Occasionally, he absolutely had to be seen leading and "I could do that." This worked out well for all concerned."

Following this class was about a six week course in artillery mechanics which qualified him to maintain all types of howitzers: Field Artillery Mechanics Course FAMC 870. "I loved it. I went nuts over this mechanical stuff." He graduated in May or June of 1970 second in his class. The standing made a

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difference. The bottom of the class had a status of E3 but the top half graduated as Spec 4, equivalent to corporal.

After a two week leave at home he was sent to Fort Lewis Wahington. For five days they were supplied with jungle outfits for the war theater. He remembered the beautiful sunrise over Mt Rainier 50 miles away during morning formation. From there he was sent to McChord AFB near Tacoma and then sent to Anchorage, AK on Flying Tiger Airline, which was entirely troop transport though it was run as a regular airline, even having stewardesses. They flew from there to Yokota AFB, Tokyo, and then to Cam Ranh Bay in the middle of the night in a lightning storm. "I am nervous about flying anyway but the storm was so bad I prayed to get to Viet Nam and safety!" The plane arrived at 12:30 AM about July 10, 1970. It was 115 degrees the next day which was the hottest day he ever spent in Viet Nam. He spent the day painting a picket fence dark green in his stiff as a board new fatigues.

After a day he was sent to Bien Hoa, farther south in the III Corps Area. Then he went to Phu Loi, the home of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Artillery Group, northwest of Saigon. "I had bought an imitation Army Jungle hat from a civilian and wore it to morning formation. The sergeant made him take it off and wear the baseball type hat that the others were wearing because "the jungle hat had to be earned."

He was assigned to his permanent unit, Service Battery of the 1<sup>st</sup> /27<sup>th</sup> artillery (Motto: Beg, Borrow & Steel) in Cu Chi a little bit northwest of Phu Loi. They supplied the materials and howitzer ammunition to three 1/27<sup>th</sup> firing batteries in the field. While at Cu Chi Steve saw an impromptu baseball diamond and thought of Lonnie Johnson and the Island team. Amazingly, Lonnie had actually been stationed at Cu Chi and had started the field!! Steve thinks Cu Chi was also home to the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division ("Tropical Lightning") which may have come from Schofield Barracks, Hawaii.

After a short time, Steve was sent farther northwest to Tay Ninh , his favorite spot in Viet Nam. It had been named 'Rocket City' because it had been very active before the Cambodia incursion April 1970. Members of his unit went into Cambodia to stop the incursions which originated there. It worked because the area was much quieter afterward. The men he met who had been to Cambodia said after that coming back to Viet Nam was like a picnic. Incidentally, Cu Chi was where there were the most tunnels in the entire country but they were completely unknown to Americans until after the war.

"About my first evening in Tay Ninh, I had to go with some other guys to retrieve some 155MM projectiles (95 pounds each) that had been left in a pile somewhere. They started throwing the "Joes" up into the steel bed of the truck and I thought 'these people are crazy! We're going to be killed any moment!! It does not seem reasonable that the fuses were still attached to their tips, unless there had been a cancelled fire mission.' I wouldn't have been that nervous otherwise but I can't say for sure. A fuse is armed by rotation and set back during firing and I think I remember wondering how much rotation and setback happens when a shell lands on metal. In any case, the guys seemed too carefree to me. They could have been stoned."

At Tay Ninh my job was to drive a 5 ton 6x6 truck to two fire support bases (FSB')in re-supply convoys. We carried 155mm projectiles and powder cannisters. On one trip they put 9 tons on my 5 ton truck, so I wanted to be careful about hitting bumps or over steering since the front wheels felt so light on the ground. The roads were narrow dirt roads which were sometimes mined and were sometimes ambushed. We would stay overnight, returning home the next day with the camp's garbage. This was

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literally flung into the empty cargo area of the trucks as it was, not bagged. Before we entered Tay Ninh we dumped the trash in the garbage dump outside of the camp. There were always people there scavenging, many of them children. You had to be careful that you didn't run over somebody.

One of the bases was FSB Lanyard, about 27 miles northwest of Tay Ninh and ½ a mile from Cambodia. On one trip there I was the last truck. There was usually a security vehicle, a M42 'Duster' like a small tank, having two 40 mm automatic cannons, going first. (These were used in World War II, stored, taken out for Korea, stored, and then used in Viet Nam.) At the end of the column there usually was a Quad 5 ton truck with four 50 caliber machines mounted to turn in any direction. (They had last been used in Korea against human wave attacks.) This time the Duster was last. It was getting dark. All of a sudden the power steering on my truck failed and I was in the ditch. I was too small to wrestle the steering wheel and get the truck out of the ditch.

It never occurred to me that if I was out there alone I was done for because the tree shielded enemy just waiting for a chance. (This was probably the most heavily sprayed area with Agent Orange place in the country. They cut down all the growth after spraying then treated it so there was a broad swath, maybe a couple of hundred yards of stumps on either side of the road, then trees.

The Duster came up behind me and attached the chain. They said 'we'll get you out, just steer it'. But I didn't have the weight to be able to do that. It was really noisy, so noisy that I had to be told that we were taking fire from the woods and to come hide on the Duster. The Duster shot into the woods and kept the enemy off while they were tethered to me by the chain which meant that we were both immobilized. A burly sergeant who could handle the wheel came up and we got free and slowly made it into camp. The Duster followed the whole way firing into the trees. At the time I wasn't scared but later realized how lucky I had been. If I had been alone the alternatives were death or prisoner. Incidentally, Bruce Atkins on the Island had been the gunner on a Duster during his Viet Nam tour.

The other base I went to was FSB Katum, about the same distance away. The road went around the base of the famous Nui Ba Den (Black Virgin Mountain) which was controlled by the enemy on its sides from caves and the Americans on both summit and base. Katum had a reputation because of its air stirp where planes could land with supplies. But for a long time, as the planes landed they were under mortar fire. So the pilots developed a strategy to combat this. The plane landed, opened the back doors, reversed, then speeded forward, which made the cargo slide out. In effect, they unloaded and took off at the same time in one movement.

Once the roads were washed out by heavy rain and supplies to these camps had to be carried by "Chinook" helicopter (CH 47). The supplies dangled at the end of slings from a sort of trolley, swinging from the bottom of the helicopter. I got to ride on one. There was a crew member who had to keep the load from swinging too much by using an electric traveler on the trolley. But he had to lay flat and look over the opening to be sure he was correct. Scary! (I would like to think that he had a tether but that would take away some of the drama!) One time we had just unloaded when all had to evacuate because the cabin filled with smoke. It was some kind of electrical or engine fire. I really did not like the Chinooks.

These two fire base had, in addition to our 155mm self-propelled howitzers the 8 inch one of the 2/32 Artillery (The Proud American, also a part of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Artillery Group), which used 200 lb. projectiles,

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Army engineers with their bulldozers, and ARVN (Vietnamese) infantry to guard them. There may have been a handful of our Korean (ROK) infantrymen too who were part of their own unit, 5<sup>th</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> something or other. Most of the Dusters and Quad had names. One Duster was the Iron Butterfly, after the acid rock group.

The smells and sounds that come to me are: the damp night air of the swampy vegetation and mud, the wood campfires of the ARVN's at the perimeter, the clouds of white ammonia rich smoke of the guns during the night fire missions, the long periods of only the sound of the frog chorus, the gun blasts in the probably amplifying wet air, and a few times a night 'mad minute' when unexpectedly Duster, Quad, machine, rifles and parachute flares go off together a deterrent to perimeter probes.

After two months at Tay Ninh I became a clerk in the orderly room at Service Battery's compound in Cu Chi. I was also the jeep driver for the captain and first sergeant. I made mistakes, but they saw I had a good heart and liked me anyway.

One night one of my co-drivers from Tay Ninh rushed into my room in Cu Chi and said: 'Eaton! Turk fell off the truck! Sid and the sergeant who showed me how to drive to the field had gone to Long Binh or somewhere. Turkey got deliriously stoned and then, riding as a passenger at 40-50 MPH, got out and went from the running board over the bed to Sid's window. There he fell off. Sid retrieved him from the highway and got him to the hospital. He survived and was evacuated to the US for treatment. He later sent us a postcard telling us he made it all right.

In November of 1970 my unit was preparing to leave Viet Nam, they even had a standing down ceremony. The 1/27<sup>th</sup> had been there from 1964 and said they had never lost a person. Since they were leaving they had to find other assignments for those of us who still had time to serve.

I spent a month taking reassigned battery people to Phu Loi and other places and delivering small weapons and equipment we turned in. This was quite a project. Each item had to be returned in exactly the condition it had been when issued. With vehicles, if something was no longer in or on it, we had to find a replacement. First we went to the dump and searched till we found the part. Then a mountain of paperwork to take it out of the dump and reinstall it. Then it had to be steam cleaned along with the vehicle. The cleaning was so thorough it took forever and even included the undercarriage.

Finally, I was transferred to another 23<sup>rd</sup> Group unit, 5/42<sup>nd</sup>, based on Little Camp Price between Long Bien and Ben Hoa Air Base. They used older type 'towed' 155 mm howitzers. I was a vehicle mechanic at Camp Price from November 1970 to February 1971. (Christmas Day of 1970 when the temperature was 106 degrees, I went to Lon Bin to see the Bob Hope show, which I enjoyed.) Then I was a vehicle mechanic briefly at FSB Oldham, still in III Corps but east of Xuan Loc, not far from the South China Sea. A new firebase was being established in the area only two or three miles from the ocean and town of Ham Tan and I became its main mechanic. This was the FSB Sylvia on a sandy hill where there had reportedly been a French base. Routine there was a relatively relaxed, almost self-indulgent. The three gun crews had their one or two fire missions every night. They had details of sand bagging at first and then stringing concertina wire around the perimeter for a while. Ration run, trash run, and the water run did not take much manpower. Enemy activity was almost unknown at this site. So there was much idle time and many spent it smoking dope or drinking. Some made trips to the beach or to the village. Morale was only fair and pettiness and cattiness began to rise. It wasn't helped by the basic suspicion between 'heads' (laced dope) and juicers (beer). I knew of one failed 'fragging' of a gay lieutenant at

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Sylvia, as I had at Cu Chi. (Any veteran of that war knows about fragging.) I don't know how many friendly fire tragedies in Viet Nam were caused by stoned crews, but I wondered then what we might have done that we never learned about.

I used my time differently. I never requested R&R because I really hated to fly. Eventually, though, I half planned to go to Bangkok. While I was in the shower one day, the girl who cleaned our quarters stole my \$880 that I had been saving to send home. Since I was now low on funds, Bangkok was now out of the question. I had my second camera (the first one had been stolen) and I was fascinated by both photography and the country which I still think of as beautiful. Most of my spare time was spent wandering around taking slides of the scenery, people working and also military ingenuity. I enjoyed this so much, it was one of the reasons I turned down the chance to be an E5 (sergeant.) Had I taken it I would have been transferred to another area where I couldn't take pictures.

In order to get my '150-day early out' I had to extend my tour for 4 days. I then left Sylvia, Camp Price, probably Phu Loi, and flew from either Bien Hoa or Tan on Nhut Base to Japan, Alaska, and maybe directly to Oakland, where active duty ended. My two year obligation ended December 9, 1971.

On my return I finished my B.A. degree with sociology major and a double minor in Spanish and psychology. I returned to Washington Island. Loved my experiences in the Army but I didn't want a career in it.