

1967

GUS

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I don't remember his name; but, his initials were SAM, so everyone called him "Gus". I'm not sure why we did; it just seemed like the thing to do.

The year was 1967 and I was a second lieutenant leading 46 warriors of the U.S. Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade (Separate) in II Corps area of South Vietnam. We were the second platoon, "Second to None". The men were all young. I was 21 years old; but, most of my soldiers were 18–20 years old. My platoon sergeant was the oldest: 30 years old.

Gus was a likeable, jovial kid from the South. He always had a way of saying things that made you snicker — if not out-right laugh. Sayings like, "It's hotter than the inside of a Mason jar in July," described what others would call insufferable heat. "If it itches, scratch it; but not in church" was his philosophy of acceptable social behavior. "They were thicker than acne on a teeny-bobber's face" was his description of how many enemy we had faced in a recent battle. "I'm prouder than the mother of triplets" was his reaction when the men remembered his birthday.

One of our challenges was eating C-rations. C-rations are composed of food canned up to a decade before they are eaten. They are highly salted because their function is to keep us alert and fighting. Gaining weight or having a heart-attack were not concerns when one is in a combat zone — and we were in a combat zone.

It was Gus who taught us that you could place the chopped ham pieces between thinly-sliced pieces of that tasteless bread, spread heavily with the cheese. Place these into a topless can. Place the can into a box. And burn the box. Voila! You've got "Vietnam Pizza".

If it sounds like a picnic, remember we were in a "free-fire" zone. That meant if you saw someone armed with a Russian or Chinese weapon, such as the *Kalashnikov AK-47* rifle or the SKS Assault Rifle, you shot them before they could shot you.

Gus volunteered for "point man" time-after-time. The point man was the first man in the column working its way through jungle or mountainous terrain. When the battles occurred, the point man — IF he survived — had the best

stories to tell. It was not a job for the meek and Gus — in spite of his demeanor — was not meek.

Time and again, I asked Gus if he wanted to take a break from being point man, but he declined. He felt that training and experience made him the best qualified.

One time, he was walking about 16 meters (50 feet) ahead of us in a densely jungle area. All of the sudden, a smiling Viet Cong (an enemy soldier) appeared, with his AK-47 slung over his shoulder, walking toward Gus. The terrain was so dense that neither man saw the other until both turned a bend in the trail. When they did see each other, they were about one meter (3-feet) apart.

The smile on the enemy's face and glazed-over eyes belied a man who was probably on "goof balls" — an amphetamine which made the user able to endure pain while fighting like a man possessed. The enemy was shocked as Gus opened fire. The man turned and ran. He dropped only when he, literally, ran out of blood. When my medic examined the body, it appeared that he had been hit in the chest with at least 10 rounds of 5.56mm, M-16 ammo. One round should have killed him; he momentarily "survived" and ran with 10 rounds in his body.

Later, when referring to the incident, he referred to the enemy soldier as his "dance partner". IF one did not know about the violence, one would have thought they had met on a dance floor in San Francisco. He said he had to decide whether to kiss the guy or shoot him. He complained that he shot him before he got to find out if he was a good kisser.

Gus had that way of belittling life-threatening situations.

Gus never got any mail that I knew about, so I contacted my girlfriend and asked if she knew someone who would write to him. She obliged and the two of them exchanged letters for quite awhile.

I don't recall exactly why but Gus asked if the girl could send the letters to me and if I'd mail his replies to my girl to give to him. I suspected it was because he didn't want the other guys to know that he had a "special friend" although why that was important I'll never know.

Sometime around Tet, the Vietnamese New Year, the humor ended.

Gus was walking the point. The terrain was mountainous and the vegetation sparse. He was about half-a-football-field in front of us. Because

of the terrain, from time-to-time, he would disappear from view only to return when the vegetation permitted it.

The fire fight, like so many before and after it, began without warning. Gus' weapon reported the bam, bam, bam of the American M-16 rifle. The crack, crack, crack of the Russian AK-47 replied and the fight was on.

Quickly, I deployed my men into a fighting line. Flank security was sent to both sides, the first squad formed the front line, and the third squad formed the rear security. The remainder of the company followed behind.

Chaos ensued. Bullets and shrapnel were flying through the air like hard-driven snow flakes in blizzard. Men were screaming and crying. Cries of "Momma" were intermingled with "God" and "Jesus" as men sought comfort, if only for a moment.

I had to grab a machinegunner from the third platoon as he rushed forward. He should have been with his platoon, but in his haste to taste battle, he had rushed forward. Holding his jacket's lapels, I screamed, "Get back where you belong. You'll get your share of battle."

For a moment he stared at me with the grimace of a man possessed. Then his eyes dropped and his shoulders shrank and he scurried back to where he should have been all along.

The Russian machinegun opened up on our left flank. It raked our positions relentlessly. Returning fire as best we could, we couldn't seem to stop its fire. "Frank" with his M-79 grenade launcher fired three quick shots, but made not impact.

Then I saw him.

There was Gus charging the machinegun oblivious to the threat to his own life. He threw a grenade and fired his M-16 until the bullets ran out. Then he jumped into the machinegun pit where I lost sight of him.

As quickly as it began, the battle was over. It's hard to tell how long it really lasted; but, it was in the neighborhood of 4-5 minutes.

Some of my men bled but all we found of the enemy was the dead. I counted 12 enemy bodies. While there had been more involved in the battle, they had retreated from the fury.

As we approached the enemy machinegun emplacement, we saw the body that moments before we had called Gus. His chest had been torn apart by the machinegun's shells. The barrel of his M-16 had been shoved into the

eye socket of the teenager who had been firing the machinegun. He had killed him with the only weapon he had left. Around that enemy soldier lay two others, each shot in the head and chest.

I ordered Gus' body covered with a poncho. I directed the men to move on and to secure the area. I sat, for a moment, beside the warrior — and friend — I had lost.

A helicopter arrived later and carried the empty shell of a body that no longer could constrain the energy of Gus.

The next day, I wrote a note to the girl who had been writing to him. The military had no obligation to notify her, but I believed it was my responsibility. I'm not sure that she realized the positive effect her letters had upon him; but, I tried to convey how glad I was that she had been a part of his life.

Gus, it turns out, had no family. There will be no one writing his memoirs or maintaining his memories. He died as so many others did in Vietnam: Unknown and unappreciated — save but by the men of the Second Platoon.

When my days are done and I've gone beyond, I know I'll run into Gus. He'll be leaning against some cloud, thinking out loud about all the greater mysteries that escape mortal men.

Gus was a warrior. Gus was a real man. Gus — the man whose real name I can't remember — was my friend.