

# An Adventurous Day

Hugh Wilson

**W**hen Clyde 'Sgt. B' finally told me how my old man died, he spit the words out like pieces of plastic that had been bouncing around in his mouth for too long.

'RPG. It was an RPG. Hit that goddamn tree, I remember the nest of fire ants exploding. We was strippin' off our gear, hopping around. Dinks must have been scared shitless, bunch of half-naked white guys screamin' and dancin' in the bush.' His stories had funny endings.

My father and I share the same name: Hugh. Hugh wrote about Sgt. B—a four-tour soldier turned platoon sergeant—in his letters home. Those letters, along with folders of newspaper clippings, his high school yearbook, military correspondence, a cracked 'Roy Smeck' ukelele, blackened baby spoon, colorful medals and a folded American flag, filled two maroon suitcases that were given to me when Hugh's mom died. I'd had them for seventeen years and, somewhere along the line, I realized my dad smelled like old paper.

I hadn't come to Lytle, TX, in search of answers, but still my visit weighed on Sgt. B. He might have been one of the last men to see Hugh as they swung his body up onto the riveted floor plates of the medivac. The problem was that Clyde couldn't remember Hugh, which made it all seem worse. Over the course of the day he racked his brain, pacing the kitchen, hallways, bedrooms, and back, rummaging through drawers and closets and returning with gift after gift: Army pen, Marines pen, 1st Air Cavalry windbreaker, 1st Air Cav coffee mug, Army license plate holders, an old Turkish blanket, monthly calendars with scenes of Hawaii—his home state—and one with cuddly pets.

'For the kids.'

I joked with him, 'I hope you know I didn't come here for the free stuff,' trying to ease his burden. Instead he relayed war stories emphatically as if someone turned up the radio on a running newscast.

'Yeah, the worst stuff I saw was with the Marines. We was pinned down once real bad at Cua Viet—hop skip and a jump from North Vietnam. My guys were laid low huggin' their rifles, you know how I got em out of there? I told 'em,

'Well, you signed up for this shit. Let's go fight!'

Hugh died five days before I was born. I imagined children as the light produced from a binary star. If one star died out, the remaining star would be thrown off-kilter causing a tremor in the light. Much of my life has been spent trying to quiet that tremor like a tuning fork wrapped in felt.

Clyde seemed to know this and beneath his war stories lay an answer he struggled to find. It wasn't until the end of the day, when the gifts were exhausted and stories finished, and I was getting ready to leave, that Sgt. B pushed away from the table and snatched a small framed map off the kitchen wall, waving it in front of me while he finished chewing a bite of bread.

'Here.'

He waved the map,

'Here, up here this river'

He pushed it close to me and knocked on the glass with his finger

'This black line... See here, the bend above that triangle IKE. That's where the RPG hit that goddamn tree.'

The map was not official. It was a plain paper computer printout. A former chopper pilot had drawn small triangles on a faded section of the Tay Ninh Province, two hours northwest of Saigon. Next to the triangles he wrote in the names of firebases: Dolly, Becky, Ike, Carolyn, Vicky, Tina. A dark line snaked above them: CAMBODIA.

Tay Ninh Province had been the re-entry point of the Ho Chi Minh trail during the war. Uncle Ho sent troops and supplies down through Laos and Cambodia, then across the porous border back into Vietnam. The 1st Air Cavalry had been there to meet them. Platoons bouncing around the jungle in Huey's, rotating through firebases, weeks upon weeks living in the bush humping gear through tangled vines.

'We'd spend a few days on the LZs eating steaks,' Doc, a medic from California, told me with a Mexican twang, 'But most of our time, up to 90 days, we were out humping the jungle, blowing bunkers, hitting the VC. We'd dig little holes at night and burn peanut butter and C4 so the Scout planes knew where we were.'

I met Doc and other surviving members of Hugh's platoon, from 1st Air Cav's 8th Division, 2nd Battalion, Delta Company, at a reunion at the Marriott Herndon outside of Washington, DC. Former truckers, cops, car salesmen, real estate brokers and lawyers gathered in a windowless conference room lined with coolers and snacks. They shared stories about firefights and lost buddies, nine-inch centipedes, a month of straight rain and cases of warm beer, all in the way frat buddies might reminisce about the college days.

I was welcomed, but reticently. My presence seemed more a living reminder of broken things that couldn't be undone than of a continuation of life. I could see in some of their faces that stories like mine were better rinsed away to the unconscious.

None of them remembered Hugh; it made sense. He was 'in-country' only seven weeks when he died and had rotated in with one other guy, Benson from Coram, MT, who survived to only nine weeks. It's why the seasoned soldiers didn't consort with greenies, or 'New Guys' as they were called. My dad was put on point duty right off the bat—a low odds posting even for an experienced soldier—the theory being: if you're gonna go out, best to do so early on.

Some of Delta Co. did remember the event, however. The facts were blurry, but since the platoon only lost a couple guys a month, the hairy moments stood out.

'Yeah, I remember, a mortar hit our foxhole. It was night and I was on my way back when they started poppin. I slithered on my belly, like, you know, a snake, going head first into the foxhole, and I put my hands right through his belly. There was nothing there - he was cut right in half.'

I told him my dad lived eleven days in a field hospital.

'Oh, no, it must've been the guy from Montana.'

Another veteran thought Hugh had fallen in a well. A third had heard about someone getting killed but had been medevacked out a few days before. Then Doc brought over Sgt. B's second platoon sergeant, Joe from Tucson.

'Hey Hugh! Here is a guy who might have known your dad.'

Joe was shorter than I, bowlegged, also Mexican with dark jeans and sincere drooping eyes. He shook my hand and smiled.

'Now when was your dad there?'

'From July to September, '69.'

Joe nodded, thinking.

'Yeah, I was there.. what was his name?'

'Hugh Sarah. He was from Michigan, walked point. Sgt. B said he was hit with an RPG.'

Joe looked at his feet but couldn't come up with anything.

I continued: 'He died at the hospital in Tay Ninh. I never met him.' And as I said it, Doc slapped my shoulder with the back of his hand.

'Hey! You said you brought some pictures?!'

I reached for my manila folder and caught glimpse of Joe turning away. He buried his face in a handkerchief.

Doc smiled and put his arm around him.

'Yeah, he remembers. He remembers.'

I could make out only a couple of words: 'bamboo, call, radio.' It turns out what stuck in Joe's memory was the radio call informing the platoon of my birth. News must have passed from Michigan either to San Francisco or Saigon, or to DC, then Saigon, then Tay Ninh, maybe directly to Joe, maybe to the nearest firebase and then Joe. The platoon was resting out the heat of the day in a dead bamboo thicket when Joe got the call. Even though none of them was close with the 'New Guy' he announced the news to the troops. A baby boy born to a dead man must have made all the death seem that much crueler. Joe said the brown bamboo stalks had been bent overhead like a chapel.

In Lytle, it was dusk when I said goodbye to Sgt. B. We stood in the driveway. The crabgrass lawn was black and the kitchen light shone yellow. He wrapped his arm around me in a sideways hug, and, before I got in the car, gave me a copy of the map.

'We got overrun at LZ Becky. Whole battalion of dinks—ran right through us. We blew it to hell. Your dad, he was there.'

I landed at the Thon Sat International Airport, three calendar days after Hugh had 48 years prior. It was early in the monsoon. I went straight to the countryside between Saigon and Tay Ninh. I found a quiet *residence* owned by a Vietnamese French man who had inherited his citizenship 'from his mother's side.' An ancestor of his had worked for the colonial government.

Each morning I read Hugh's letters, smudged with the same red dirt that gathered on my shoes. He wrote almost daily to his parents, sisters, nieces and nephews, but mostly to my mother. I studied the staccato of his handwriting. It was less fine than mine. Hugh's words described some of what I saw as I biked into the countryside.

In-country it was difficult to separate the American lore of Vietnam from reality. Nam. There was little remaining of the war. I visited the tunnels in Cu Chi where villages had been dug underground to escape American bombs. A museum has been built for tourists but was more pastiche than monument. Military-garbed ticket-takers loitered at signless stations in the steamy jungle while tour guides dressed in army green blazed with the red star made fun of the tourists: jumping out in the dark tunnels, scaring the women with spiders, presenting 3-D displays with a cheeky humor.

The only obvious remnants of war were jacuzzi and swimming pool size bomb-craters spread out through the forest floor. All were now grown in with leaves and small trees.

The rest of the land I saw was flat and horizonless. Scattered dwellings lined roads and levees. Chickens and pigs rooted in the dirt. A few cows grazed long rice paddies. The scene was more pastoral than ominous. I imagined how it must have looked to Hugh and the young men from towns I had never heard of: Squire, WV; Lorain, OH; Alcolu, SC; Garland, TX; Golden Valley, NM. These was not the familiar woods of Minnesota or the scrubland of Texas; rural Vietnam had barely entered the modern age. I pictured the platoon trudging in a line, diminished by the

whine of the insects and wet heat. No trenches of enemy to stand off against. No hoisted flags or tanks or fighter jets. Only the jungle and farmers going about their business of living off the land.

To me much of it was beautiful, and since I'd seen poems of Hugh's, I was sure he too found beauty in moments: the sun glinting off green fields stacked with rain, the dark sky-backed sunshine, men and boys casting nets into a rivulet, a static buffalo, ladies switching after their white flocks with long bamboo sticks blazed with fabric. I thought of him, Doc, Joe and the other young men most tenderly in the hour before each dusk, when the whine of the day died down, crickets took up, the frogs announced themselves under a flat sky. The light was often magnificent, pale and otherworldly, and it was impossible not to feel alone in your thoughts. Hugh's letters were often hastily scribbled then, before dark, dirt rubbing from his hands and knees, words falling off at the end.

After several days near Cu Chi I felt ready to go to Tay Ninh and found a young driver to take me. He had a boxy haircut, surprised eyes, and spoke few words of English. We crouched in my room and zoomed in on my computer to trace the route to the river. Surprisingly, the old map matched up with the current road system. New roads cut through the jungle, but the structure was there. A small dirt road led directly to the bend above IKE.

We loaded my bags into the car. I wasn't exactly nervous, but more concerned I'd uncover a crack in myself that had been neatly brushed over, that my experiences as a child would be called into question. He started the engine and turned to me drew his hands together into a rifle.

'You father...*bambambam*?'

He nearly shouted certain words for emphasis.

'Yes.'

'You *bambambam*?'

'No.'

'My name *Minh!*' Grinning, he showed me his driver's license - MINH. He didn't mention the war again, but turned to his mp3 player and clicked through bad pop music. For him, the war was a dusty old story.

We rode the straight road north. In-between roadside stands and repair shops and convenience stores the forest-green jungle buzzed by. I leafed through a booklet I had found in the suitcases: 'A Pocket Guide to Vietnam' stamped with the official seal of the Secretary of Defense and the year 1966. The Guide gave a summary of Vietnam, cultural traditions, religious beliefs, family structure, culinary preferences, and US involvement in the war. The writing was objective for a military document, though they might have had a different outlook by 1969.

I scoured the brief Vietnamese Language Guide section for words to make small talk with Minh. The selection was strange, and not fitting of a soldier in the bush. Missing were basic communications like: 'Good' 'Right' 'Left' 'Straight' 'How much further?' and 'Where are they?' Instead were many not-so-useful phrases: 'First floor' 'Second floor' 'It's a mango' 'I don't like to eat fruit' and my favorite '*Ong goi lam so* - You called the wrong number.'

I pictured a grunt radio operator pressing the grimy receiver to his ear under the buzz of machine guns.

'What?? *Ong goi lam so!* Motherfucker.'

Within an hour Black Lady Mountain rose over the tree line. It was a massive pyramid, an alien ship that had been dropped onto the Lower Mekong basin. Clouds wafted off its summit. Tay Ninh city was up ahead, and from there it was only another forty minutes to Cambodia.

We sped under a decorated arch.

'Tay Ninh!' Minh said with a thumbs up.

I took a photo, but realized there was nobody to share it with, nobody who would truly understand its significance. 'Tay Ninh' had taken on an almost mythic stature for me. The words has been etched across envelopes and military documents, newspaper clippings and letters home. The military base where Hugh died was long gone, but the jungles of Tay Ninh Province lay up ahead.

We skirted Black Lady Mountain and continued north. Before reaching Cambodia we made a right turn and arrived to a road crossing a low dam and a lazy, muddy river. Here was the black line on the map where Sgt. B. had knocked with his finger, 'This river here...'

A few cars were pulled off at either bank to watch the fishermen trawl the water. We rolled across the dam and once on the other side headed back downstream. I pulled a pint sized banana out of a baggie and offered Minh a piece.

'Banane!' He smiled, then gave me another thumbs up.

The dirt road that would lead to the bend was easy to find. We turned onto it and along either side of the car passed rural scrubland, sporadic rubber plantations, tapioca fields, a few houses. It was still mostly abandoned to nature. Clyde had cursed the French and their plantations,

'I still can't stand those Michelin tires.'

The road was pocked with muddy pools and a storm gathered above the trees.

Soon the horizon bent up to meet us and the river was there. Minh lifted his hands off the wheel and made a whooshing sound imitating a kid on a water slide.

'Yes, let's go!'

He laughed. We stopped short before the dirt got soft and I climbed out. It was far to the other bank. In the middle two blackened junkets dredged sand and pebbles from the bottom; golden mud poured back off their decks.

I looked around. The jungle unfolded anonymously in either direction. My father was half my age when he died. To be twice as old as my father—it was hard to fathom.

A farmer stepped to the doorway of a nearby home. He was old enough to have been a boy in 1969. I wondered if he heard the action.

English, Francais? I asked him. I had encountered few people who spoke either.

He shook his head. I didn't know what to do, where to go. There was a worn footpath leading into a small rubber plantation and I signaled 'Could I follow it?' The old man waved his hand on.

I slipped into the jungle. A storm began to blow in the leaves, birds called, I heard the putt putt of the junkets, also the distant bass of a Vietnamese club song. It was peaceful and I suddenly felt like walking a long way. A snake zipped across the path. I looked to the trees for signs of battle, broken limbs, shrapnel marks, tripwires, but found nothing. I didn't expect to.

I've cried at times about my dad but had no urge to cry that day. Maybe when I had cried it had been for my own loneliness or for his life cut short, or because the tragedy had been passed on to me by other people. But standing there in the jungle I experienced no sadness and I tried to understand why. This is where it had happened. The broken home, grieving town, abandoned wife, the forgotten son.

Instead my history seemed to have been left behind. News clippings, heavy suitcases, shrapnel-ripped photos, brittle telegrams, the awkward slope of Hugh's pen mark, which was the

closest thing I could come to knowing him in person, had managed to fall away, and I sensed for the first time it was just the two of us.

It started to rain. A fine rain that doesn't make you wet. I stopped and studied the gaps in the canopy and patches of light, the smooth ground, and believed I should do something, though I didn't know what.

I spoke aloud. Even if it was awkward to address a man I had never met.

'So what do you think of me? Of what I have become?'

I half-expected a booming voice to appear out of the leaves and pulp, and waited for a response. Nothing came. The wind picked up and the real rain commenced, and I ran in my flip-flops back toward the rubber grove and to the car. Through the grove I noticed milky rubber sap splattering on the red mud.

In the car Minh was sleeping with his seat back, bare feet clasped under the wheel, a Viet crooner singing a love song, or loss song. Maybe one can't exist without the other. Minh sat up blearily and turned his palms up. I shrugged. Did I see what I needed to see? It had been peaceful in there, different than I thought it would be. What had been an almost imagined story was now real and mine.

The rain pelted the roof and blurred the windows. I sat for a moment, seeing if it would stop. Minh waited patiently. It was almost two and I was hungry. I tapped my fingers to my mouth.

'C'om?'

Thumbs up.

'oKAY oKAY!' Minh started the car and we rolled forward. I took a last look around. The old farmer was nowhere to be seen.

I was not finished with Sgt. B's map or Tay Ninh but I would need another day and a translator to get any further. I had Minh drop me off at a Tay Ninh hotel on his way back to the *residence*. It was difficult to find anyone at the hotel who spoke English let alone understand the word English, but they arranged for her to meet the sole English-speaking employee on her day off. The next morning Thien was waiting in the lobby, hands clasped at her waist. Her hair was pulled tightly into a ponytail.

'I have my scooter outside.'

She was told we were headed on a tour of the local Tay Ninh sights. When I showed her the map, Thien smiled, teeth full of braces.

'Oh! We are going on an adventure!'

We took a city taxi instead straight to the countryside and crossed the river again, LZ Becky was not far from LZ Ike, and was marked on the map along a stretch of deserted road that shot north to the hamlet of Bo Túc. I estimated the distances: less than 20km to the Cambodian border.

I signaled the driver to stop at a roadside cafe.

Thien didn't like the looks of it and was nervous to get out of the car. 'These kind of people...'

She didn't finish her sentence. Maybe she didn't know the word in English, or was too sweet to disparage the rural folk scattered around plastic tables. The cafe did look a little rough. Shirtless men clinked Saigon bottles, several generations of women slapped playing cards, a plump boy fished for Dong notes from the folds in his grandmother's dress, and sleeping bodies hung in hammocks. The ladies glanced at our green and white city taxi and snickered. We left.

Down the road we found a young family gathered on their patio. The foliage rose above them. The husband was cordial and informed us of a local one-legged soldier who hung out at the cafe just up the road. We returned to the roadside cafe and again the ladies snickered.

Thien approached the table of card players and inquired about the soldier. The cafe burst into laughter. A wiry man sat up sleepily from a hammock and the ladies pointed. He swung his peg leg to the ground.

'Oh! He is here!' Thien proclaimed.

The soldier's face was aged but he looked younger than he should have been. Thien introduced me and the soldier eyed me suspiciously. I showed him the map and pointed to LZ Becky. He held the paper and scrutinized closely the roads and triangles. Finally he looked up and spoke. Thien translated.

'He knows this place. He says he will take us there.'

I hesitated. It had happened quickly and seemed a bit too easy. He lilted onto his wooden leg as if to say, 'come on,' and signaled toward the taxi. We cautiously helped him into the front seat. As I closed the door I asked Thien quietly,

'North or South?'

'I think Viet Cong.'

The car ride was brief and I studied the man from behind. He had thick hair, a shoulder blade was visible beneath his faded polo. I've never been a nationalist or thought of people as enemies, but now my imagination kicked in. I envisioned him setting tripwires and firing rockets, squatting in the bush, gaunt, hardened by months of war. I saw him and hundreds of other young men, dark skinned and foreign, running down jungle paths singing unintelligible songs. I heard the rattle of AKs and thought of the young American soldiers fighting to get home.

We pulled up to Becky and the soldier presented it proudly. The ground was wet with rain. Two brown cows grazed in the center of a field ringed by trees. Their ears drooped by their jaws. Thien had many questions of her own and the soldier did his best to answer them, though he directed his answers toward me. I wasn't really listening; I wanted to walk out in the grass. The mythology of my father had returned: the adored son with the half-cocked grin. Had he really walked this ground?

A stranger in Hong Kong had once told me Hugh's spirit had stuck around to watch over me. The stranger knew nothing about me so I had to consider what she said. I imagined what that would look like—his spirit extending out in all directions like an endless horizon, both before and after, space but not empty. Life seemed little more than a tiny colorful interlude, a TV commercial or miniature diorama appearing out of the darkness and playing for two minutes or five feet or however you wanted to measure it, and from that view it didn't really matter whether one lived 24 or 49 or a hundred years.

I wondered if the soldier was right, that this was Becky. The ground did feel churned up, unnatural, as if the bunkers and command center and howitzer positions never got fully flattened. I strolled out into the field and the soldier tried to follow but he had trouble with his peg leg and stopped on a clod of grass. Thien called out.

'Same side! Same side, you are both on the same side!'

The old man chuckled a raspy chuckle. It turned out the soldier had fought on the side of the South. The mood lightened. He wanted a picture together so I went back to where they waited and stood close to him. He smelled like damp cotton and smoke.

'All of this, he says all of this was dirt. All these trees you see, rubber, they are all young trees, after the war.'

She pushed her glasses up on her nose.

'Oh, this is *very* interesting. This is my *history*. I am on a history tour!'

I spoke for the first time.

'Ask him if they ever find things in the fields, in the ground?'

'Oh yes, all kinds of things! Boots, uh, shells, C-something, cans? And the things from the necks.'

Thien struggled with the vocabulary.

'Does he have any?'

He shook his head. They all end up in markets in Saigon. He appeared disappointed, as if he couldn't deliver what I had come looking for.

'He says there is another firebase nearby!'

We drove with him to the other LZ. He swept his hand to the distant trees. Even though I had no experience of war, he talked to me as if we shared a common language. Maybe he believed his knowledge could shine a light on my path, though I hadn't told Thien my father had died, so the soldier couldn't have known for sure. Or maybe he was simply looking to pass on a piece of his past onto someone who would listen.

We stood on a berm looking down at a vast swath of cassava, a section of which had been plowed up. I didn't know this base - it could have been Tina but Hugh didn't write about it. He smiled hoping we could feel what he felt but even Thien began to run out of steam. When we drove back to the cafe he seemed dejected. For a moment the old man and I had connected as strangers but now we had separated. I said to Thien,

'I have a philosophical question, for you to ask him.'

'Okay.'

'Ask him what he thinks about war, the concept of war.'

The man responded enthusiastically and Thien tried to keep up.

'He says: It's civilization. When his government calls, he goes. He is not afraid. He lose his leg fighting in Area One, not here. He is not afraid. He go to Area One and lose his leg. It is duty. If it comes, it comes.'

As she talked I thought of Hugh; he never came off as dutiful. In group photos from his childhood he often looked away from the camera. Maybe the Army made a patriot out of him. I hoped so, so at the end his death didn't feel like a waste. What I saw more clearly than anything was that he didn't get to live his life as a man.

We dropped the soldier off and I shook his hand. It would have been nice to stay longer; he had more to share and our parting felt unresolved. But instead we left him standing amongst the gamblers and drinkers and pulled out to drive back to Tay Ninh city.

'Youngsters here don't treasure old people like this man; they spend their time gambling and drinking.'

Out the window the landscape bled by. The land of the LZ's. Good for growing rubber trees or tapioca. People had fought to the death here. I was happy to have Thien with me, she was full of enthusiasm for the future. She showed me her braces again.

'Oh you are too lucky to have already found this soldier! Too lucky!'

We arrived back at the river, not at the bend, but at the low dam. On the far bank long narrow sampans were tied in bunches; fishing was done for the day. I wanted to go out on the water. We crossed the dam and stopped the taxi. A couple young men stood on a concrete bar-

rier slinging nets into the churning channel. I helped Thien scramble down the bank and we lingered by the boats. Thien glanced around worriedly. Finally a shirtless man appeared on a bluff and I waved him down but she didn't like him.

'This man, he smells like alcohol.'

'It's ok. Just a couple Saigon's.'

We crawled onto the shallow sampan. It rocked from side to side and I positioned myself at the bow. The fisherman tottered to the back and eased us off onto the water, carefully, then ripped the cord to start the engine. We pattered downriver. The water was just below the rails and smooth.

I reviewed the events that surrounded my birth. Hugh's bus ride into Fort Dix for boot camp, his future uncertain, possibly perilous, and even so his comment on the quality of the setting sun. I thought of the stranger who heard the comment, a Harvard-educated son of a diplomat, and the improbable six-week friendship between him and my father, the small-town son of a machinist. I thought of their parting promise to take care of the other's wife should tragedy befall and then the telegram my mother sent a year later to the Disposition Branch, Memorial Division of the Army, requesting 2nd Lieutenant Kent Ronhovde, a man she had never met, escort the body of my father home. I marveled how six months after that, when Kent returned from Vietnam, he would invite us to his home where we would meet his best friend from childhood, a man who would fall in love with my mother, and after years of dogged courtship, marry her and become the father who raised me.

Out on the river one-room huts tottered on stilts. Huge nets, strung between poles, stretched out from the bank like primordial insects. Our boat skimmed along the surface. It was nice to be on the water, quieted by the heavy clouds and the buzzing motor.

The fisherman swung us around a curve and there were the junkets again. They were still dredging sand. I saw the dirt road and the cassava lining the bank. The view was quite different from the river.

I admired the jungle from afar. Somewhere in there it had happened, my life pivoting on a filament of wire, the pop of a fuse, hiss of a rocket.

I turned to check on Thien. Her smile was broad with youth. It was impossible not to smile back.

She shouted over the motor,

'Oh, this is a very adventurous day!'

**Hugh Wilson** is an artist and writer. He documents remote and marginalized cultures through painted portraits and is working on a book of his travels. His work can be seen at [www.hugh-wilson.com](http://www.hugh-wilson.com)