During the Vietnam War, this bomb disposal specialist was tasked with disarming and removing horrific explosive traps capable of decimating American units

INTERVIEW WITH STUART STEINBERG, US ARMY RET.

WORDS TOM GARNER

Above: Steinberg pictured while waiting for extraction from FSB Rifle, 11 February 1970. The photograph is captioned, "The Thousand Meter Stare" This photograph
was taken of mass
detonations in the Qui
Nhon Ammunition Dump
as Steinberg and other
members of 184th EOD
arrived at the main gate

t is January 1970, and in a remote corner of Vietnam a bomb disposal team is flown in by helicopter to a dangerous firebase that has been booby-trapped by North Vietnamese forces. This team is part of the US Army's Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD), and among the specialists is experienced soldier Stuart Steinberg.

Steinberg's been destroying ordnance in Vietnam since September 1968 and has been called to every hazardous situation imaginable. Acute danger is an accepted part of the job, but while he is sweeping the firebase, Steinberg steps on something suspicious. He stops, digs down and finds a black wire that is ominously moving. When he looks up, Steinberg spots a North Vietnamese soldier in pulling on the wire in the distance. The two men lock eyes for a moment, and in a split second Steinberg realises that a large bomb is about to detonate all around him. His survival will depend on two things: quick thinking and a pair of cutters.

This incident was only one of hundreds that Steinberg had to endure as an EOD specialist during the Vietnam War. He was working in one of the most stressful environments in what was already an intense conflict, and his story is a raw, visceral tale of technical expertise, boundless courage and profound comradeship.

Enlisting for the EOD

Born in 1947 in Washington DC, Steinberg was only 18 years old when he volunteered to join the US Army on 28 July 1966. Although he was not unwilling to serve, he was keen to avoid being drafted. "I enlisted because I had flunked out of college and the draft order was after me. They were drafting people into the Marines, and I didn't want that because there was then

no doubt you were going to be an infantryman and sent to Vietnam. I wasn't opposed to going there, but I wanted to do something that would give me something to fall back on when I finally got out."

By 1966 American involvement in the Vietnam War was increasingly bloody and controversial, but Steinberg recalls that he was largely ignorant about the conflict: "I couldn't have even shown where Vietnam was on the map so I was not really thinking about it when I enlisted."

"STEINBERG WAS ASSIGNED TO UTAH, WHERE HE EXPERIENCED A UNIQUE HORROR THAT THREW HIM INTO THE DEEP END OF ORDNANCE DISPOSAL"

Steinberg underwent basic training before initially serving as a missile crewman in the Florida Everglades. He found himself doing a tedious job with bad colleagues. "What this job ended up entailing was rolling the missiles out of a barn, cleaning them and pulling them back in. It was a 'nothing' job, and a lot of the people that I was stationed with were racists and anti-Semites. The CO and sergeant were complicit in a lot of bulls**t that went on, including one guy who was a loan shark, and it was just horrible."

To escape his situation, Steinberg consulted a career counsellor, who suggested transferring to Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD). "I said, 'Why would I want to do that?' but he replied, 'You'll get a bonus for enlisting and you'll also get paid \$55 extra a month on Hazardous

Duty Pay'. At that time I was only making \$90 a month so 55 bucks was a lot of money. I re-enlisted and left almost immediately for the first phase of EOD school, which involved chemical and biological weapons in Alabama."

Following this initial training, Steinberg learned more about his new role at a naval ordnance station in Maryland. His program included courses in physics, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and learning about every kind of ordnance, including fuses and high-explosive rounds.

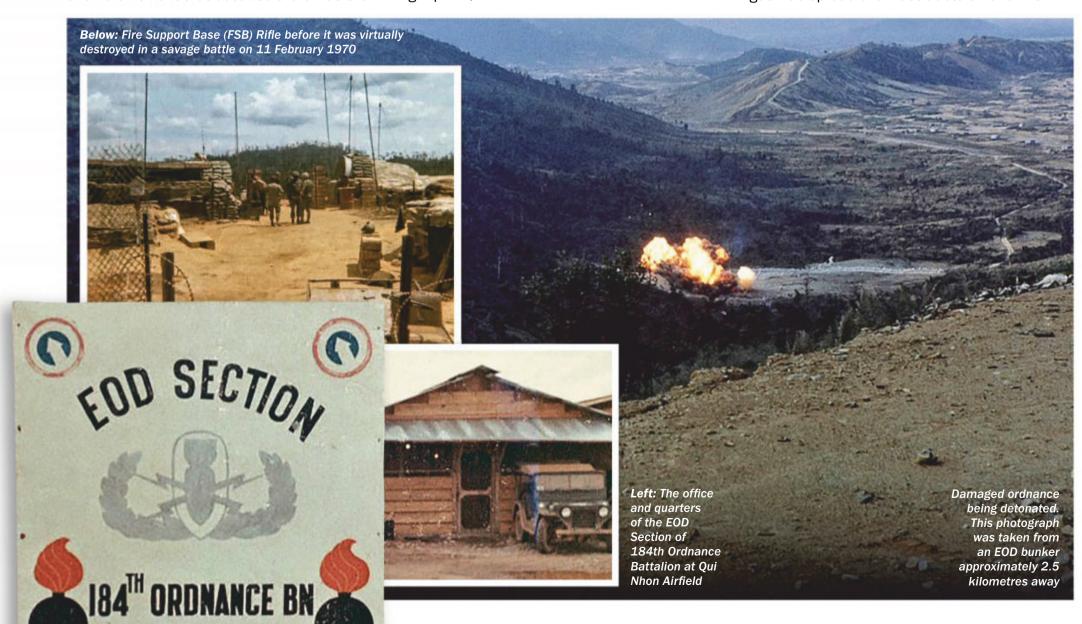
After graduating on 7 January 1968, Steinberg was assigned to Utah, where he experienced a unique horror that threw him into the deep end of ordnance disposal.

Dugway Proving Ground

Established in 1942 and located 140 kilometres (87 miles) southwest of Salt Lake City, Dugway Proving Ground was, and remains, a US Army facility to test biological and chemical weapons. In 1968 Dugway stored all kinds of ordnance, including leaking mustard gas rounds from WWI, and the job of Steinberg's EOD team was to "monitor all the different types of weapons systems, find leakers and then destroy them".

Dugway would be a gruelling assignment at the best of times, but on 13 March 1968 a terrible incident occurred when over 6,000 sheep and other animals were killed after a weapons test went hideously wrong. "They were testing a new delivery system of nerve gas. A pilot had flown out of Dugway and then made an arch to come back after dispensing the weapon. But the weapon malfunctioned and dumped about a ton of nerve gas on a sheep ranch."

Although no people were killed, the nerve gas was spread over vast tracts of land. "It



killed everything in a 40,000-acre [162 square -kilometre area. When I say 'everything', a lot of people know that cockroaches can survive a nuclear blast, but they can't survive nerve gas because they have a central nervous system. Everything that walked, crawled or flew in this area was dead."

Along with other specialists, Steinberg's task was to dispose of the animals' dead bodies. "Engineers came in, dug a huge pit and everything was shoved into it. We piled on thousands of tyres, set charges, tied it all together with detonating cord and then soaked it all in jet fuel. We set it off, and when the pit had cooled down after a few days they pushed all of the topsoil into the pit and put a fence around the area."

To protect himself from exposure to the nerve gas, Steinberg was heavily kitted out in protective clothing. "We wore rubber suits that covered your legs, top and boots, as well as a hood. You wore a gas mask, and we sometimes had to use an air pack so we could breathe clean air. Even though it was March and still fairly cold you were sweating like crazy inside these suits."

Such was the horror of the incident that Steinberg chose to go to war rather than remain in Utah. "The day we finished the cleanup, myself and the other guys on my team went down to the Enlisted Men's Club and got staggeringly drunk. The next day, three of us volunteered for Vietnam."

An "existential doctor"

Despite increasingly negative coverage and protests, Steinberg was resolved to serve in Vietnam. "At that time my feeling was that I was trained for a combat job. My country was

at war and as a volunteer I felt that was where I needed to be."

Steinberg would ultimately spend 18 months in Vietnam between 4 September 1968 and 24 March 1970. Six of those months were a voluntary extension of his original tour, and he would be promoted from the technical rank of specialist 4th Class (corporal) to specialist 5th Class (sergeant) during his active service.

When Steinberg landed in Vietnam he was shocked by the extreme change in temperature. "When we got off the plane it was so hot and humid it was like walking into a blast furnace. We landed at an air force base near Saigon and then were trucked to the main army base.

"MY FEELING WAS THAT I WAS TRAINED FOR A COMBAT JOB. MY COUNTRY WAS AT WAR AND AS A VOLUNTEER I FELT THAT WAS WHERE I NEEDED TO BE"

That's where they lined you up and sorted you out into whatever units you were going to."

During his time in Vietnam, Steinberg was attached to EOD units in different parts of the country, including 184th Ordnance Battalion and 25th and 287th Ordnance Detachments. Despite his various postings, the tasks remained the same. "The fundamental task was to identity, render safe and destroy any type of explosive ordnance, including improvised explosive devices. This included

any sort of ordnance that the US and its allies or the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong (VC) were using."

EOD dealt with all kinds of ordnance that were often found by special operations units. "Whenever there was an airstrike there were always going to be duds. Long-range reconnaissance teams or special ops guys like the Green Berets or Navy Seals would go out on assessments after these airstrikes and discover duds on the surface. We would then fly in on combat assaults, get to where these things were and blow them up."

Detonating ordnance was not the only method of bomb disposal. "On some bombs, the type of fusing they had made them extremely dangerous. A lot of the fuses, particularly the navy fuses, had antidisturbance devices, so when you approached one of these weapons you didn't touch it. When we destroyed them, we would lay charges of C-4 [plastic explosive] along both sides of the bomb, tie it together with detonating cord and then use a non-electric blasting cap with a 15-20 minute timer on it. You'd pull the fuse lighter and then use all your ass to get far enough away so that you wouldn't have to worry about getting hit by shrapnel."

Ordnance disposal could even change landscapes, which was evidenced when Steinberg helped to blow up a foothill in the An Loa Mountains. "We went into a sophisticated cave complex that was full of ordnance and weapons. We brought in 40-pound [18-kilogram] cratering charges that looked like a giant stick of dynamite and were maybe three feet [0.9 metres] long. Various levels of the cave were lined with these charges and put on

1969 NORTH VIETNAMESE FORCES ATTACKED SOUTH VIETNAM ONE YEAR AFTER THE ORIGINAL TET OFFENSIVE TO TEST THE WILL OF PRESIDENT RICHARD NIXON

The Tet Offensive of 1968 was one of the largest campaigns of the Vietnam War, and although it was a military defeat for North Vietnam, the offensive caused heavy casualties and shocked the US government and public. What is less well known is that the North Vietnamese repeated their offensive in February-March 1969.

The North Vietnamese considered 'Tet 1969' to be a test of the resolve of the newly inaugurated president Richard Nixon, who had promised to de-escalate the war in Vietnam. From 22 February 1969, NVA and Viet Cong forces conducted a series of 125 sapper attacks and 400 artillery and rocket bombardments against military targets in South Vietnam.

Tet 1969's concentrated, small-scale attacks included strikes against military targets near Saigon and Da Nang. However, there were a few risky operations to seize and hold ground, such as the Siege of Hue or the assault on the US Embassy in Saigon the previous year. American and South Vietnamese forces repulsed the offensive, but they suffered 2,640 fatalities during almost a month of fighting.

As a result of Tet 1969, Nixon concluded that North Vietnam had no interest in de-escalating the war to reach an honourable settlement with the United States. The offensive also convinced him that attacking communist sanctuaries in Cambodia would provide the best security for South Vietnam against North Vietnamese aggression.

From March 1969, Cambodia was subjected to US airstrikes, which destabilised the country and intensified the antiwar movement in America. Nixon would later write that the greatest mistake of his presidency was not intensively bombing North Vietnam in the wake of Tet 1969.



A VISION OF HELL Steinberg pictured during his time with the 287th on Phu Bai Combat Base "YOU'D PULL THE FUSE LIGHTER AND THEN USE ALL YOUR ASS TO GET FAR ENOUGH AWAY SO THAT YOU WOULDN'T HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT GETTING HIT BY SHRAPNEL" 65

A VISION OF HELL

a timer, before we got in our chopper and took off. When they went off they literally brought down the upper third of this mountain. Looking back, it was pretty destructive to the terrain."

Another large part of EOD's role was to prevent ordnance falling into enemy hands. "We would blow them up because if the enemy found these things they would saw them open, steam out the explosives and then turn them into IEDs, Claymore or antitank mines... When we were called out to mines or IEDs we would actually disarm them and bring them back to our unit, before destroying them in our demolition area."

EOD was crucial for saving many American lives in the field, and Steinberg and his colleagues were highly valued. "I always felt that we were 'existential doctors' and we were really respected by other units, particularly the infantry. We were saving lives, not only of those people directly involved but other people who might get lost, or by preventing the enemy from getting hold of the ordnance."

Qui Nhon attacks

In early 1969, Steinberg was based at Qui Nhon Ammunition Base Depot in central Vietnam for four months. During this time, the base came under attack several times from the Viet Cong as part of renewed Tet offensives. "Everyone seems to think that the Tet offensives of 1969-70 weren't much of a big deal by comparison with 1968, but they were. The Tet of 1969 hit every major installation in the country, including the ammo dump, which was maintained by the 184th Ordnance Battalion."

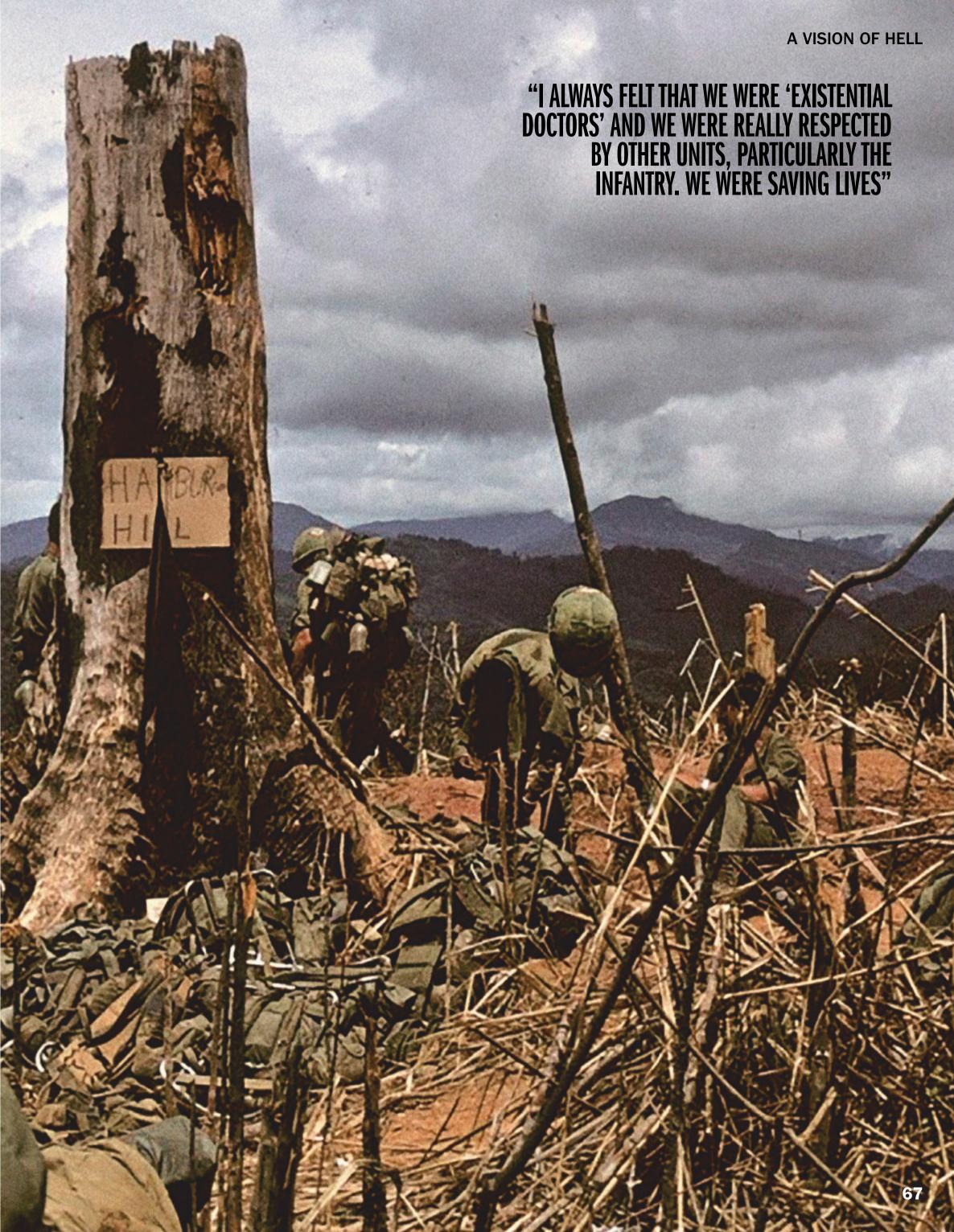
Steinberg was present when the Viet Cong attacked Qui Nhon on three separate occasions – on 24 February, 10-11 March and 23 March 1969. "They got into the dump, set their satchel charges and then disappeared. They managed to figure out where to come in and where they would not be in the line of sight of any of the guard towers, of which there were dozens. There were roving patrols including dogs, and outside the dump there were multiple ambushes."

184th Ordnance Battalion was dispatched to an extremely hazardous situation. "My team was called out each time the dump was hit. We were actually inside as different pads of various types of ammunition were mass-detonating. It was nothing short of a miracle that none of the EOD people were killed or even wounded. However, during the third dump attack on 23 March, the Ordnance Battalion did lose three men."

Despite surviving the Viet Cong attacks unscathed, Steinberg was not so lucky when he was blown up during a cleanup operation at Qui Nhon on 13 May 1969. "A round I was trying to get to our demolition area went off in the back of my truck. We had done everything to see if it was going to go off before I tried to move it. I sandbagged it in the back of the truck, and what saved my life was the spare tyre because it absorbed most of the blast. In a matter of seconds I had been blown out of the truck. I ended up with second-degree burns on my ears and neck and a lot of shrapnel in my shoulders. The force of the blast actually hit me in the lower back and pretty much wrecked my lower spine. It was a miracle it didn't kill me."

Steinberg recalls his disorientation after the explosion: "I was lying on the ground and my





eardrums had been perforated. It was like the ocean running through my head, and I remember one of my teammates bending over me and asking if I was OK. I then lost consciousness and woke up in military hospital, where they fixed me up, and four days later I was back at work. However, I got wounded a second time four days afterwards from an incoming attack!"

A "friggin' nightmare"

After Qui Nhon, Steinberg went to the 25th Ordnance Detachment at a large base at An Khê before volunteering for a posting to Phu Bai in November 1969 with 287th Ordnance Detachment. The 287th had recently cleared ordnance left over from the Battle of Hamburger Hill in May 1969, and Steinberg soon found himself fighting his own engagements.

On 14 December 1969 Steinberg experienced his first combat assault, which he describes as "a friggin' nightmare". A Chinook helicopter was carrying a sling of ammunition and weapons to a firebase west of LZ (Landing Zone) Sally when it was hit by enemy ground fire. The jettisoned sling contained 150mm artillery shells that were armed with small antipersonnel 'bomblets' that had a variable time fuse. As Steinberg explains, "These things were really dangerous, and in the field you didn't screw with them, you blew them in place."

"YOU WERE REALLY CLOSE WITH ALL THE PEOPLE THAT YOU SERVED WITH BECAUSE EVERY DAY YOU'RE ON CALLS WITH ANOTHER MEMBER OF YOUR TEAM AND YOU'RE WATCHING EACH OTHER'S BACK"

Steinberg flew with an aero-rifle platoon of the 17th Cavalry Regiment, who were "our security and real badasses". The EOD's task was challenging, and was made worse when the enemy opened fire. "We stacked up artillery rounds, hundreds of grenades and thousands of small arms machine gun rounds. We then set our charges, and most of the platoon men took off to secure the LZ. Just before I was ready to pull the timer we started taking enemy fire. This huge pile of s**t was about to go up, but we returned fire. Fortunately none of us were hit, and the enemy eventually broke off contact before we pulled the shot."

Decorated for valour

Not long after the incident near LZ Sally, Steinberg found himself in a precarious situation at Fire Support Base Davis on 27 January 1970. His EOD team flew into FSB Davis on an 'artillery raid': a rapid strike where artillery and infantry units would fly into a remote area, set up a temporary firebase and fire rounds onto a particular area in order to prevent a build-up of NVA forces.

Danger was soon discovered: "We were in the first helicopter along with the pathfinders and the artillery unit. We got off the chopper and told the pathfinders to hold the location while we cleared the area. Almost immediately, we found an enemy mine marker, which was four stones in a diamond shape and one in the middle. That told us that the area had been booby-trapped."

Steinberg and his teammate Jim Qualls worked 90 metres (100 yards) apart while they checked the area for mines. "All of a sudden, I saw something that didn't look right. It was a mound of dirt that looked fresh, so I stopped. I then felt something moving under my foot and thought, 'What the f**k?' I set my weapon and demolition pack down on the ground, pulled out my knife and started flipping the dirt off in front of my right boot."

What Steinberg discovered soon turned into a dramatic life-or-death situation. "I dug down



a few inches and saw a black communications wire. I then just happened to look up and saw an NVA soldier in a tree at the other end of the area. We were looking right at each other and he was pulling on something. When I looked down, this wire was being pulled away from me. Without thinking, I grabbed it and pulled as hard as I could. This jerked it out of the guy's hands, and I cut the wire with my side-cutters. I then threw a red smoke grenade, and gunships came in and fired at the tree line, which killed that guy and his buddy."

The encounter with the NVA soldier had not just been a close shave for Steinberg but for most of the American troops in the immediate area. "When we dug down we found that I was standing on top of a booby-trap, which was a 155mm artillery high-explosive round. Had it detonated, it would have wiped out a couple of helicopters and no doubt would have killed me, Jim and probably some of the pathfinders." For this action, Steinberg was awarded the Bronze Star with a 'V' device for valour, which was just one of several meritorious medals he received in Vietnam.

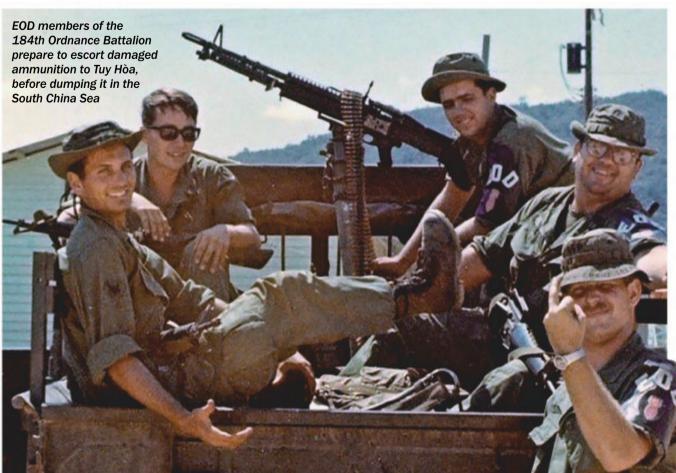
During his 18-month tour, Steinberg was called out to approximately 300-400 ordnance disposal incidents in extremely intense environments. He recalls that although EOD teams often resorted to alcohol and even drugs

to cope with the extreme pressure, they mainly helped each other to get through the war: "We drank a lot, and near the end of my time with the 287th some of us were smoking a little pot. However, the truth of the matter is, when you're in EOD you are all volunteers and you live together, including with the CO and first sergeant. You were really close with all the people that you served with because every day you're on calls with another member of your team and you're watching each other's back."

"This is what hell looks like"

On 11 February 1970 Steinberg experienced the worst incident of his entire war when he was called out to FSB Rifle approximately 24 kilometres (15 miles) southeast of Hue. In the early hours of that morning, elements of 101st Airborne Division and 54th ARVN Infantry Regiment were overrun by NVA units. The North Vietnamese had planned the attack in advance. "NVA sappers had come into the wire one or two nights before the attack. They opened up all the Claymore mines and took out the C-4 before putting the mines back in the ground. Therefore, when the attack started and the infantrymen in their bunkers hit the Claymore chargers, nothing happened other than the blasting caps went off. That's how the NVA were able to get in."





EXPLOSIVE ORDNANCE DISPOSAL

THE US ARMY'S EOD SPECIALISTS HAVE THEIR ORIGINS IN THE WORLD WARS, WHERE THEY TOOK THEIR CUE FROM BRITISH DEVELOPMENTS IN PROFESSIONAL BOMB DISPOSAL

Bomb disposal became a formalised practice during WWI when the British Army dedicated a section of 'Ordnance Examiners' from the Royal Army Ordnance Corps to handle the growing problem of dud shells fired by both the Allied and Central Powers.

Nevertheless, the US Army had no bomb disposal apparatus until WWII, when they took inspiration from the British, who had specialised their bomb disposal units during the Blitz of 1940. American bomb disposal was therefore initially planned as a civilian function, but in the wake of Pearl Harbor responsibility fell to the US Army for military purposes.

From 1942, American EOD soldiers were trained in Britain and began actively operating during the invasion of Sicily in 1943. EOD has been an essential component of the US Armed Forces ever since, and its soldiers have served in every American conflict since 1945, including Vietnam.

Today, most US Army EOD personnel are part of the 52nd Ordnance Group, although some are organised under the National Guard. Despite the huge size of the army, EOD specialists number less than 1,200 soldiers and officers. This small size reflects their expertise but also the personal risks they are willing to take to dispose of dangerous ordnance.



Above: A British NCO prepares to dispose of an unexploded bomb in 1918 during WWI

Below: Lieutenant Mike Runkle of the US Navy (left) and Staff Sergeant Ben Walker of the US Army prepare charges to blow up stockpiled ordnance left by Al-Qaeda near Kandahar, Afghanistan, 23 December 2001





After the base was penetrated, the NVA attacked with mortars, rocket-propelled grenades and satchel charges, as well as AK-47 fire. A pitched battle ensued inside the perimeter with close-quarters fire and hand-to-hand combat, before American gunships arrived and forced the NVA to withdraw.

When Steinberg and his team arrived a few hours later at 7am, they saw a scene of devastation. "What happened at Rifle was so bad that I made it the title of my book: *This Is What Hell Looks Like*. This was actually a comment I made to my teammate Paul Duffey as we were flying over the LZ. We looked down and could see the destruction, carnage and bodies all over the place. I turned to Paul and said, 'Man, this is what f**king hell looks like'. There were bodies everywhere, both NVA and American soldiers. The defenders lost 10-11 men and the South Vietnamese unit lost men

too but I couldn't figure out how many. The NVA also left behind a couple of dozen bodies."

Gunfire broke out upon the EOD's arrival. "A gunfight broke out right after we landed because the NVA had sent a patrol right near to the perimeter where our chopper was, and they got ambushed almost immediately. We were returning fire with four chopper gunners firing into the area, and in the end the 101st lost two more men during that ambush."

After this, the EOD began the grim task of clearing FSB Rifle. "We then went about our business. We had to strip the ordnance off all the dead bodies, disarm a couple of rocket-propelled grenades, two Bangalore torpedoes and 10-15 feet [3-4.5 metres] of tubing that was filled with TNT blocks. They were used to breach perimeter wire and were duds."

Despite the carnage, worse was to come when a large American helicopter came to collect the

NVA dead hours later. "They took all the bodies, put them in a sling, flew them out over the jungle and dumped them. I have never, ever got over this, and it's a picture in my mind that's always there. It was a war crime because enemy dead are supposed to be repatriated. What they should have done is taken the bodies outside the perimeter, wind them up somewhere and allowed their soldiers to take their dead away."

Leaving Vietnam

The horror at FSB Rifle came towards the end of Steinberg's tour, which ended on 24 March 1970. He was called out to dispose of ordnance even on his last day. "I went out to two simple incidents the morning I left, before I got on the chopper and flew out. My CO (Andy Breland) had tried to stop me going out on calls during the last fortnight, but I said, 'Andy, that's not going to happen. I'm not going to sit here on my butt while other people are taking the flak for me not being on calls'."

A large factor in Steinberg's dedication was worrying about leaving his colleagues. "There's an old adage that you fought for the men beside you. I really loved those guys in the 287th, and most of us are still alive. I felt guilty about finally leaving them because by then I knew I was really



NATIONAL VETERANS RIGHTS ASSOCIATION

Stuart Steinberg is the chairman of the NVRA, which provides educational and administrative assistance to physically and psychologically wounded US veterans who are seeking medical and financial support for injuries suffered as a result of military service. For more information visit: www.nationalveteransrights.org



Above: Steinberg and Jerry Culp (left) working on 184th EOD Section's new building at Camp Vasquez



Above: The bunker for 25th EOD Ordnance Detachment at An Khê Combat Base



Above: A pile of damaged ordnance prepared for demolition at Oui Nhon



Above: Steinberg pictured during an operation with 173rd Airborne Brigade in the Central Highlands of Vietnam



good at this job. I was afraid that if I left people would get hurt, wounded or even killed because I wasn't there. That never happened but other guys on the team got pretty seriously hurt afterwards."

Steinberg's guilt manifested itself on the plane journey home from Vietnam, where he and other returning soldiers felt unable to celebrate. "When we took off there was this huge uproar with everybody cheering and clapping. They were leaving and getting out of there alive. I did not take part in that and pretty much stuck to myself, but within a couple of minutes the plane was deadly silent. It was like that all the way back to the States. A lot of us were probably thinking about members of our units that we had lost and some of them, like me, may have been feeling guilty about leaving."

After leaving the US Army in 1971, Steinberg led "a very chequered life" but thrived professionally and became an attorney who specialised in capital murder investigations. He even went back to war many years later when he served with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime between 2009-10 in Afghanistan.

Steinberg acted as an advisor in counternarcotics work to a brigade of Afghan police on the Iranian border, and was struck by the similarities between the conflicts in Vietnam

"I WAS AFRAID THAT IF I LEFT PEOPLE WOULD GET HURT, WOUNDED OR EVEN KILLED BECAUSE I WASN'T THERE"

and Afghanistan. "Vietnam was asymmetrical warfare. The enemy was everywhere: 360 degrees, seven days a week, all year long. In that regard it was very similar to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan because of the enemy's ability to use terrain to their benefit. To me, whether it's a jungle in Vietnam or some desert area along the Iranian border it's pretty much the same. You're out there looking out for bad guys or doing the job you were assigned to and hoping the enemy isn't going to be there."

Now active in veterans' affairs, Steinberg reflects that although the Vietnam War was a traumatic experience, he established friendships among his EOD teammates that have lasted until the present day: "It was the best time of my life because of the men I served with. They're just the greatest bunch of guys and you could never ask for better friends. Any one of us would do anything we could to help one of our own that was in need. Today, we're just as close as we ever were."

To read more about Stuart Steinberg's incredible story, you can purchase his autobiography, This is What Hell Looks Like: Life As A Bomb Specialist During The Vietnam War, which is published by Fonthill Media.

For more information visit: www.fonthill.media