

If you were in Vietnam and traveled Route 9 from Dong Ha to the “rock pile” and onto Khe Sahn, you traveled on the road that Oscar helped build.

Oscar’s story began on May 22, 1946. According to Oscar, “My parents resided in Oklahoma. My mom was pregnant with me and she was traveling through Texas back to Oklahoma. Fort Worth was as far as she got and that is how I became a native Texan. We lived in Calera, Oklahoma but we moved to Hearne in 1957. I graduated from Hearne High School in 1964.

“I enrolled at Sam Houston State but in 1965, I transferred to A&M. After almost two months, I realized A&M was a lot harder than I thought it would be. I decided I better join the Navy like my dad did in World War II. I figured that the Navy was my best option to avoid Vietnam. My Navy recruiter said I could choose three fields. I chose all aviation related fields so as to be sure I would be able to avoid Vietnam.

I attended boot camp in San Diego and near the end of boot camp I had to go through an interview with Navy personnel. My interviewer learned that I had been raised on a farm, drove tractors and used other equipment. He suggested that I apply to be a Seabee. I told him no thanks because those guys were sent to Vietnam and that was one place I was trying to avoid. I remember him writing something on his clipboard as I was being dismissed from the interview.

“When I graduated from boot camp much to my surprise, I received a Seabee stripe for my uniform. So much for recruiters' promises. I was now what I had tried to avoid being, and that was a Seabee. Today, I wouldn't trade being a Seabee for anything else in the military. I was sent to heavy equipment school and eventually to Camp LeJeune, North Carolina for combat engineer training. I suspected that the place I had tried to avoid, Vietnam, was in my immediate future. As soon as we completed our training, I received orders for Vietnam.

“I arrived in Da Nang in December of 1967 just before the start of the Tet Offensive which started at the end of January 1968. I would remain in Vietnam for the next 23 months and 11 days. I was in the place I had tried to avoid and was there during the most dangerous time of the Vietnam War. By mid-1968 I became a member of a newly formed company named Foxtrot Company. We were hauled, along with our equipment, to Cam Lo. Our job was to build a road from Dong Ha to Khe Sahn. We finished our road work at a fire base called the 'rock pile.' We were attached to the 3rd Marine Division and those Marines provided security for us while we built that road.

“We were mortared by the enemy on a regular basis, sometimes nightly. We also had an ambush about once a week and I remember one period where we were ambushed for seven days in a row. The Marines were wonderful and there

were a lot more of them hurt than in our Seabee unit. One other factor we had to deal with was land mines. We had one instance when we hit a land mine that was so powerful that it knocked the blade off our bulldozer.

“During this same time period, we were working on a site near the Laotian border. When we were returning to Cam Lo some of our equipment broke down. We requested some assistance in protecting our location. The Army sent several APCs with personnel to our aid. They formed a defensive perimeter around us. That night the NVA tried to overrun us. It was a night where it was their tracers coming in and our tracers going out all during the night. It was a long night.”

## **Part two**

Oscar Chappell Jr. was a Seabee in Foxtrot Company located in the I Corps area of Vietnam near the Laotian border and the DMZ. Their job was to construct Route 9 from Dong Ha to Khe Sahn and to help build and improve combat bases located or to be located in the area.

As related by Oscar, “The best thing about being in the military were the people you served with. My commanding officer of Foxtrot Company was Lt. Ivy from Irving, Texas. He was the best military man I ever met. He took care of me and the rest of the

men like we were his family. For the first 20 years after I returned home from Vietnam, we forgot about each other and did not attempt to stay in contact. Now that we are older, we have re-established our relationships and I enjoy so much getting to share time with those guys.”

“With that re-establishment of relationships and being together, it also brings back everyone’s memories and events we had forgotten or maybe had tried to forget. There were four of us that had served together from boot camp all the way through Vietnam. During the time after returning from Vietnam, I didn’t talk about my experiences with anyone. In 1993, my son and his teacher at Rayburn Middle School in Bryan asked if I would speak to his class about Vietnam. The first thing the kids asked after I had made my presentation was, “Did you shoot anyone?” I told them I couldn’t be sure but I had shot back at the enemy, but didn’t know if I ever hit any of the enemy.”

In combat it is not the enemy that you remember the most, it is those you served with. That is the case with Oscar Chappell. According to Oscar, “At Cam Lo I was the captain of our hut which meant that during an attack I was responsible for having to account for the boys in our hut. During a mortar attack I needed to make sure everyone was out of the hut and safely

into the bunkers. I guess this accounting for others led me to one experience that has always troubled me.

“We had traveled to Quang Tri Combat Base which was a newly constructed combat base near the DMZ. Just as we drove through the gate we came under a heavy mortar and rocket attack. We abandoned the vehicles and headed to the nearest bunker we could find. The one I entered was full of guys. It was so full that I had to back my way into the bunker.

“It was then that a guy came running up to get into our bunker. The guys in the bunker yelled that we were full and he needed to find another bunker. I said to him, “We can make room for you.” and I pulled him into the bunker. That left both of us near the entrance to the bunker. Our bunker had a wall in front of the entrance with an opening to either side. A mortar hit the side of our bunker and a piece of shrapnel tore this guy’s throat open. I put my hand in his throat to try and stop the bleeding but he died in my arms. I have always wondered, if I had sent him to another bunker would he still be alive today. To this day, I think about him and that moment.”

After Vietnam and discharge from the Navy, Oscar would return home to Bryan where he has operated his own businesses for most of his life, now owning and operating Oscar and Sons Body Shop with his family. When asked what his military experience meant to him, Oscar replied, “I never meet or pass by an active

duty service man without thanking him for their service. My time of service means the world to me. If I was able and was needed, I would go back and do it again.”

*Chappell's story originally ran in The Eagle in February 2015.*