

ALABAMA VETERAN TY DODGE:

"It's an intimidating feeling knowing you're flying off to go to war and, to tell you the truth, that's exactly how I felt the June 2nd I left my family behind for Vietnam. My Mom, Dad, wife, and 18-month-old son were there to see me off. In keeping with my family's military history, I kept a stiff upper lip. There were hugs, but no tears. I guess we were all thinking positive, 'Everything was going to be alright.' After all, I had been trained in the Florida swamps and jungles of Panama and was more than ready.

"Truth was, though, no amount of training can really get you ready, because, on the day I left, I was scared silly deep down. I don't remember anything about my first couple of flights, but I recall our final flight in was comfortable, until I heard the pilot say, 'We are beginning our final approach, if you'll look through the clouds you'll see the Song Nja Be River flowing past Saigon.'

"As we broke through the cloud cover, I expected to see the dust and smoke of battle, but there was nothing. Then the passenger door swung open, exposing us to a chorus of catcalls and taunts from the seasoned vets who were boarding planes to go back to the 'world.' They had served their time and now it was our turn. We were the new guys, and they let us know it. It was just the beginning of our rite of passage into war."