



Transcription: Letter from Louis Piatetsky, May 11, 1966

11 May 1966
Chu Lai Hill "69"
Vietnam

Dear Ralph,

I hope this letter finds all at home in the best of health. How are things at the store? Good, I hope! I bet the kids are driving you and Bess nuts. Well, what can you expect, after all we drove someone nuts in our own youth also. I received letters from Jeff + Andy some time ago, I will answer as soon as time permits.

Well, let me describe to you some of the mess I'm in at the moment. Our company is camped on a dirty hill called "Hill 69". We are located in a mountain range a few miles north of Chu Lai. Thus far our company has been involved in a couple of village sweeps (searches) and mountain sweeps also. Let me tell you they are no pleasure trips. I'd like to describe a typical mission. Boy are they caotic!

Round about 4:00 AM some sergeant might wake us up and give you about 10 minutes to get all your junk together for a five day mission. What a mad-house of activity results from that time on! It's a wonder we can find all the junk and supplies we're supposed to have. But somehow we all get ready. Then we march about ten miles to some primitive village, only to collapse from heat exhaustion. If you think I'm exaggerating – you've got a kick coming. I'm not! I've never seen such a group of ignorant people in my life. The Viet Cong watch us stagger along in the heat of day, while they laugh at us from their hiding places.

Sometimes we capture a couple of V.C.'s who take "Pop Shots" at us from the rice paddies. So far one of the Marines was killed by a "sniper" ("pop shooter"). They look like farmers in the daytime, then at night they hide in the field and shoot at us. I've had bullets go a few inches over my head and a couple of feet to either side of my body. But I guess I'm one of the lucky ones so far – or maybe I shouldn't talk too soon! My best friend has been shot through the legs. A corpsman, from a company we were helping, got shot in the head and died instantly. We had just jumped out of the helicopters when a machine gun aimed at us shot the corpsman. He was treating a Marine with a bullet wound of the leg when he died. We have had our Marines step into "punji" pits (holes with sharp pointed bamboo sticks, dipped in human waste, that penetrate the feet when stepped on). Some of our company became casualties after stepping on a mine in one of the rice paddies. Everywhere you go there is some kind of danger to watch out for. I hope we avoid contact with the Viet Cong mortars – that's their favorite weapon. They are deadly accurate with them also! One Marine became a hero when he jumped into a hole in the river bank with a knife (my knife) and a .45 pistol and shot the head off of a Viet Cong who also through a grenade at the Marine. We thought both were killed by the grenade, but the Marine dove into the river just in time. The Marine may get a "silver star" for his actions. I stood only a few feet away from the action and saw the whole thing. I got a leech on my leg in that same river when I jumped in to give the Marine my knife.

I had to help an 8 yr. old girl who was shot in the arm and had half her left thigh removed by a bullet. What a horrible mess. I stopped the bleeding, and had her evacuated to a hospital by helicopter. She was one of the lucky ones to live.

② I see many burned bodies and other horrible sights that I don't care to mention. All these civilians have to suffer because of the lousy communists.

You should see how poor these people live. Most of them live crowded together in two room straw huts. It reminds you of a scene in Africa. Their main diet is rice and some kind of potatoe. They also have wild coconuts and bananas. I've eaten both when desperate for water. I refrain from eating native foods because they use human waste for fertilizer. When the villagers do save a little extra rice the Viet Cong come down from the mountains and steal it for their troops. Many times I go through the villages and see the little children naked with swollen bellies from malnutrition, and covered with sores. I tell them to wash and keep clean, but I wonder what good it does. They don't have soap or medicine. Some of the sights are very sad. Here are people who have been hidden from [progress?] and used for personal gains. The land looks like it could produce a lot of food if only the people had the know-how and equipment. It's hard to feel for these people unless you actually see the way they live. When we (Americans) sit back on our easy chairs and turn on a T.V. set and enjoy a cool beer; somewhere here a baby dies from malnutrition or a Marine collapses from heat exhaustion and our morale dips to the depths of disgust.

Here I sit and complain because my feet hurt and my head is hot. I'm thirsty, tired, and confused. There are 105's, 81's, 80's and [Outos?] (all big artillery) being fired all around me. The tremendous sounds is enough to drive you mad. But I have one consolation. Thank God, I can return to civilization in about one year and hope that I have my sanity. I can take advantage of the good life, for I certainly have seen how miserable life can be. It is a valuable lesson I'm being taught. Please keep this letter personal. I don't want to worry Mom too much. I've told her everything is O.K.

Maybe I sound depressed, well my present environment leaves me no choice. I've had a haircut and a shower my first for a month – aside from one rain storm the other day. I'll sleep more comfortable tonight whether it be in mud, dirt, [?] ant hills, or on a cot (if I'm lucky) at least I'm clean tonight.

It's too dark to write more, so I'll quit.

Best Wishes Keep Well,
Lou