

James Stevens Roach

A Short Introduction

Excerpt from book “Tiger Bravo’s War” By Rick Saint John.
This book is available on Amazon.com, and was written by my
Company Commander in Tiger Bravo (B Company, 2nd
Battalion, 506th Infantry, 3rd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division)

Page 13 December 1967 “Second Lieutenant Jim Roach joined the Company. Roach was a twenty-year-old transfer from Battalion Headquarters, who appeared more like a skinny sixteen-year-old wearing his older brother’s uniform. He had such a baby face that when he first reported to battalion headquarters, a call was placed to the personnel office to make sure it wasn’t some elaborate prank. Born and raised in a Catholic family in the suburbs of Philadelphia, his first calling was to be part of the Maryknoll Foreign Mission Society.

But after one semester of Maryknoll Seminary, Jim recalled “I wasn’t ready for college, so I dropped out. Then I realized that I was very likely to be drafted, so I went down to the Army Recruiter and signed up.” Two weeks into his basic training (Fort Polk, May 1966), all of the high school graduates (only 12 out of a Company of 130 recruits) were called into a meeting and asked to volunteer for Officer Candidate School (OCS). “I volunteered, and then asked, what was OCS?” Roach commented it was “Not an informed career decision”.

During the fall of 1967 (just before arriving in Tiger Bravo) Jim Roach was serving on the Battalion Staff where he became known as “Jesus Christ Roach”. Everyone was working long hours preparing for the Battalions Deployment, (to Viet Nam) and the work pace was hectic, with daily changes. On any given day his boss, Major Freddie Boyd, the Battalion Operations Officer, would appear in the office, look over Roach’s shoulder to see what he was working on, and in his signature way of communicating would roar “JESUS CHRIST ROACH, WHAT ARE YOU DOING NOW?” Jim was a young infantry lieutenant only a few months out of OCS, and was doing the best that he could, but knew that he had much to learn. After a minute or two, Freddie Boyd would calm down,

and would spend some time helping to fill the lieutenant's knowledge gaps.

But Freddie Boyd bellowed "JESUS CHRIST ROACH" so often, that it stuck; James Stevens Roach, a Catholic Boy and ex-seminarian from Delaware County, Pennsylvania, had been christened 'Jesus Christ Roach' by a gruff, profane US Army Major.

But it was "on the line" with a rifle Platoon that he made his mark. But the end of the battalion's first year in combat, Jim Roach would be the longest serving platoon leader in the battalion – leading three different platoons in combat, twice turning down transfers that would take him off the combat line – and considered one of its best."

Ranger Jim Roach Notes: In the Battalion, there were four Rifle Companies, each having four Rifle Platoons, and in addition to the Company Rifle Platoons a Battalion Reconnaissance Platoon. That's a total of 17 Infantry Platoons.

Each platoon was authorized a Lieutenant as the Platoon Leader. The 101st Airborne Division arrived in Viet Nam in December 1967 and by September 1968 our battalion had eight Platoon Leaders Killed in Action (KIA), and many more than eight Wounded in Action (WIA) and Medically Evacuated. By September 1968 I was the only Lieutenant, who deployed with the Battalion in December 1967 who was still serving as a Rifle Platoon Leader.

There were a few lucky Rifle Platoon Leaders who survived six months "on the line" and were then rotated to another duty position "out of the field". But most Platoon Leaders became casualties. I was very lucky to survive 1968.

"Tiger Bravo" Company had 31 Killed in Action in 1968, and about 150 wounded. To understand those numbers, you need to realize that even though Tiger Bravo was authorized 146 in the organization, the company normally only had between 100 to 110 soldiers "in the field". You never have all the men that

you are authorized, and there was a constant rotation of soldiers on R&R (Rest & Recuperation Leave), and lightly wounded or sick soldiers who would be in “the rear” for a few weeks recovering from whatever physical problem. So your chances of completing a year “on the line” were slim at best.

I didn't spend the entire year in Tiger Bravo. In about April / May 1968 I was selected to be the Battalion Reconnaissance Platoon Leader. I spent about four months in the Recon Platoon, and then was transferred to King Alpha (A Company 2nd Battalion, 506th Infantry) to be a Rifle Platoon leader. In early December when the Battalion completed a year in country, everyone who had arrived with the Battalion, DROS'd (Date of Return Overseas Service) back to the States. But very few of the infantry had completed the year-long combat tour.

As a Rifle Platoon Leader in Tiger Bravo (in the beginning of 1968) I had a Sergeant First Class (SFC) Platoon Sergeant (about 12 years experience) and half a dozen Sergeants (SGT) as Squad Leaders and Team Leaders. (each with between four to six years experience).

But Infantry duty is dangerous, especially for small unit leaders. Most of those Sergeants were wounded or killed.

In December 1968 when I departed Viet Nam I had no NCOs in my platoon. And I had the most Time in Service of any platoon member (2.5 years), and the senior enlisted member of my platoon, my “Platoon Sergeant” was a Specialist 4 (Corporal in traditional military rank) with about 1.5 years time in service.

It was at about this time that “Shake and Bake” NCOs started showing up in country. Sometime in 1967 the Army had realized that they had a serious problem with Infantry NCOs, and started to offer soldiers in Basic Training, the option of going through a three-month NCOC (Non-Commissioned Officer Candidate) course that focused on leadership and tactics, and upon graduation the young soldiers would be promoted to Sergeant.

During my second tour all of the NCOs that I worked with in two different Rifle Companies were graduates of this NCO development program. Although the “Shake and Bakes” didn't

have the years of experience of the traditional NCOs they were excellent, and played an important role in our operations and our success. Our success in combat and our success in keeping our young soldiers alive.