



SPECIALIST ROBERTO “ROBERT” DELGADO UNITED STATES ARMY VIETNAM

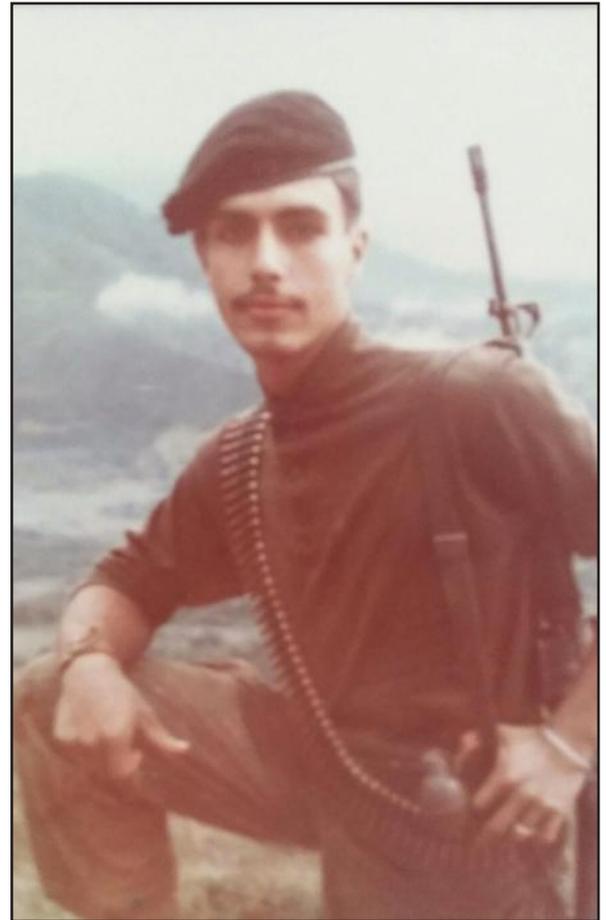
Roberto Delgado was born June 14, 1948, in Puerto Rico. His grandmother’s side of the family was descended from the Arawak-speaking Taino peoples indigenous to the Caribbean Islands, while his grandfather was of Spanish descent, from the Canary Islands. During the 1950’s, his family moved to Brooklyn, New York searching for greater economic and educational opportunities. Robert attended John Adams High School in Queens.

Before being drafted Robert was working during the day in the garment district in Manhattan and finishing high school at night. At nineteen he found himself already married. “I came home one day and found a letter in my mailbox. It was from the President of the United States, informing me I was to be inducted into the Army. There was a subway token pasted to the corner of the letter. There was one token which meant I was to report to them and probably wouldn’t be coming home.

“Truthfully, when the Vietnam War came to a high point I was not in favor of it. I wasn’t in the anti-war movement but I questioned some of our country’s policies. When my draft number came up, I



was torn between what was morally right and what was wrong. But I didn’t dodge the draft and I chose to go, and I served my country honorably.”



After being drafted Robert reported to Fort Hamilton in Bay Ridge in lower Brooklyn. “Before the induction you were brought into this room and examined by a psychiatrist.... They placed me in another room with a bunch of long-haired hippies. We all thought we might be rejected and sent back home. A sergeant walked into the room. I said, ‘We’re going home, aren’t we?’ He said, ‘Yes, you’re going to your new home. Fort Gordon, Georgia.’”

The next thing he knew, “I found myself at 2:00 in the morning at Fort Gordon. They gave me a uniform and some linen that didn’t quite fit right, and said, ‘Welcome, gentlemen. You are now in the United States Army.’”

“Two months of Basic Training....” They had not yet issued the M16 rifle into Basic Training. “So we were taught on leftover M14 rifles.... I had never fired a weapon before. I was into physical fitness but I didn’t know I would have to get up so early in the morning and listen to sergeants telling me to contort my body in ways I had never conceived of before.”

Through his Basic Training, Robert recalls some funny stories. “For instance, they made us police our area, which meant we had to line up shoulder-

to-shoulder in rows. I remember one morning someone had left a cigarette butt lying next to a post by the barracks. So they made everyone gather around this cigarette butt and stare at it. The master sergeant told us he didn't want the cigarette butt to escape. So we had to stand guard over the cigarette butt. It was done, of course, to instill discipline. The next morning they made us dig a hole to bury the cigarette butt and give it a proper funeral.

"One morning when falling into formation, the sergeant said, 'Do we have anyone here who's a carpenter?' So one fellow, whose last name was Carpenter, raised his hand. The sergeant made him go get a hammer and a box of nails and fix the back porch.

"Another time we were on a compass course. They made us walk this course at night, shooting this azimuth they gave us, and if you did it right you should come out at just the right spot.... When we were done around four in the morning they did a head count and there was a guy missing. So they sent us back out into the woods. The guy was named Smith, kind of a screwball. Then we found out he was in the infirmary. Said he had been bitten by a snake. It turned out he had been in the mess hall, and he took this fork, bent the prongs, and stabbed himself to look like he had a snakebite. We threw him a special 'blanket' party to show him our appreciation."

After two months of Basic Training, Robert underwent Advanced Individual Training at Fort Jackson, learning about jungle warfare, and new weaponry. After his graduation, he was sent home for a last goodbye, before being loaded onto a plane headed to Vietnam. He landed at the Bien Hoa Air Force Base less than twenty miles from Saigon in June 1968.

"It was the tail end of the Tet Offensive. [We arrived] in the wee hours of the morning. We were all quiet. I was alert on the plane; there was a lot of anxiety. Knowing you were going to a place where you might be killed." About to land, they were told the air base was under attack. "So we had to fly around for a while until we got clearance to land. And then when we landed and they opened the hatch the heat that came in, rushing into our cabin. We just looked at each other.

"They had us grab our bags, then get on a bus to go to the 'replacement station' at Long Binh to be processed. Mind

you, when we arrived we didn't have any weapons. Just our light khakis and a duffle bag. When I stepped onto that school bus I went into immediate 'survival mode'. I said to myself, 'I am going to survive this war.'"

The soldiers were transported by bus to Long Binh, where there was more paperwork to fill out, and they were told where they would be sent. At 3:00 in the morning, they were allowed to go to sleep for two hours. "At breakfast, that's when the reality of the experience first set in. It wasn't TV any more. This was real.

"I remember hearing someone talking in a different tongue behind me. I turned, saw these women behind me, wearing traditional Vietnamese hats. I looked at them, they looked at me, I heard them speaking Vietnamese, and then it hit me. I was in Vietnam."

They were sent to the I-Corps Tactical Zone run by the Republic of Vietnam near the area known as Central Highlands south of Da Nang. "That wasn't the place you wanted to be. The terrain was very rugged, a lot more backwards, remote areas, underdeveloped. Straw huts called 'hooches'. Vietcong sympathizers. We arrived at Chu Lai along the South China Sea. They flew us in by helicopter from Long Binh."

They were in the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, Americal Division, assigned to Bravo Company. There was a lot of comradery. "We were pretty bad-ass....

"In Chu Lai, there was a combat center where they gave you a short refresher course. It was like a guy sitting in a locker room being told how to play football. It's not the same until you get onto the football field.

"Spent a little less than a week in Chu Lai. There was a USO club about a mile or two away, to help out the soldiers. They had recreational centers, refreshment stands. It was thought safe to go up Highway 1 everyday to go to this USO club, get a hamburger, buy some cigarettes at the PX. I remember one night I met some

guys from Brooklyn, some old neighbors. We persuaded this chaplain to buy us a bottle of whiskey, 'cause they wouldn't sell it to us. We got drunk. Remember, we were just kids, 19 years old or so, trying to deal with our fear. So we stayed out a little too late.

"We hopped a ride in a Jeep, driven by a lieutenant. Then we saw the combat center all lit up in bright lights. The lieu-



tenant told us we couldn't proceed any further. The base was under attack. The enemy was inside. The Vietcong were cunning, they were able to get into this Army compound. So a couple of guys were wounded, a couple maybe killed. It made us realize this was no playground. This was the real deal.

"Then I got orders to go into the jungle. I was to report to Bravo Company, the 4th/31st of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade. It was in a district called Hiep-Duc in Quang-Nam Province.

"We were then driven out in a convoy to a place called LZ Baldy, a medevac and supply center. LZ meaning 'landing zone'. The choppers would fly in and out. That's where they gave me my first weapon, my ammo, my canteen. I was a light infantryman. I was supposed to know what to do to survive. But I don't care how much training they give you, when they issue you this stuff it's like you're seeing it for the first time. It's all new."

The company had already been there maybe a year, some guys maybe six months. "I was the new guy. Brand-new jungle fatigues. Brand-new jungle boots. Everything I had on was brand-new. My steel helmet, my uniform, my rifle. Even my brain felt brand-new.

"Imagine this huge mountain, and we're on top. Bunkers went all around the perimeter of this base camp in strategic positions on top of this mountain, looking down over the valley at the villages, farmers working in the fields, and you're in this bunker, and here's the kicker: at some point that sun's going to go down. Once that sun goes down it's a whole different world. You're up on the high ground and the fog sets in. That night they put me in a bunker with two other guys, experienced guys. The bunker is made out of ammo boxes and sandbags, dug out in the ground. They told me it was very important, that if I heard anything while on guard duty at night, don't fire – the flash of your weapon will give away your position."

They had strung out concertina wire, put out Claymore mines. "That night I was asked to take the first watch. Two hours pulling guard duty, then I was to wake up the next guy. You have to imagine, I'm brand-new. I don't know jack, I'm just sitting in this position staring out into this dense blanket of fog. Suddenly an explosion goes off in front of me. I didn't know if they were firing at us, or what. I grabbed my weapon, went into the bunker, shouted at the guys. One of them says, 'Don't fire your weapon, at least until you see what it is.'"

Robert took a few hand grenades and started lobbing them

down the hill. Then it grew quiet again. "I thought to myself, 'Oh my God – I have to go through this the rest of the year.' But that wasn't the case.

"My first patrol off this mountain down into the valley was an experience I could never forget. I was ordered to go down with a squad or two, maybe 20 guys or more to go down through these hills, following one behind the other. Had to wear light gear to avoid noise. We taped down our ammo and dog tags. Now, this is my first experience patrolling with a group of guys, down into the valley, into the jungle, going into armed combat in the dark. We had to stay within arms'-length of each other. It was hard to keep my balance on those steep hills.

"So now we're down in the valley. It's all rice paddies. Narrow trails through these rice paddies, water and mud on both sides. In the dark. Someone behind me says 'Hey Delgado, you gotta move a little quicker else you'll lose the guys ahead of you.' I reached my hand forward and I couldn't feel anyone. Then I see this huge face in front of me. The next thing I'm firing my automatic, and then I fall in the rice paddy. Sergeant comes running up to me, saying 'Are you crazy? Why are you shooting?'"

"I had screwed up their ambush. Everybody was giving me dirty looks. But you gotta remember I was just a rookie. The next day the sergeant showed me what I was shooting at. I had killed a water buffalo... my first kill."

Robert was due to end his tour in August 1969. "About three-quarters through with my tour, they asked me if I wanted to extend it two months. They'd give me another specialty. If you agreed you wouldn't have to finish out your full enlistment back in the States. I thought, 'I could see myself a gunner, firing out of a helicopter.' I felt the adrenaline. When you're in that sort of environment, even if you were at first against the war, or even a pacifist, you adapt to survive.

"I put in for the two months' extension. But it never came to fruition. In June 1969 I was with a sapper squad. Our squad leader was an experienced sapper, a Green Beret. We were called 'the Bastinados'. When the other patrols were out we'd stay behind and guard their equipment, then when it was time for them to be coming back we'd sneak out to see if they were being followed and to watch for any enemy activity in the area. If we spotted anything our squad would go out to ambush them. That's the ugly part: direct confrontation with the enemy in close fighting."

June 1969. Their company was underway to a new location.

"People need to know what we went through. They must not forget. I pray to our Creator we will never have to repeat this experience again... Many guys coming back from war are left with open wounds, not just physical but spiritual wounds."

Delgado's squad had lost its radioman a couple of weeks earlier. There was another soldier, Dennis, who could do radio, whom no one wanted, rumored to have been up for a court-martial for having gone AWOL after being wounded and sent to a hospital. "But he had been decorated for heroism in an earlier battle. So I took him in."

They came across an empty village. "But the campfire was smoldering, there were chickens running around, it was



twelve noon so we knew there had been activity there. North Vietnamese regulars wore sandals made out of old tires so they'd leave 'tire marks'. We saw tire marks so we knew we were up against North Vietnamese regulars. We searched the entire village but found no one.

"We thought to ourselves, they must have just been here. A Huey chopper flew in, delivering food to us. We were about a hundred yards away from a river. As the chopper came in to land the enemy across the river started firing at it. So we knew where they were now.

"We hung around that village for a while. We had a Hawaiian forward observer, a lieutenant. His job was to spot the enemy, call in their position, and we'd fire artillery to where he directed it. We didn't get any return fire back. But that didn't mean they weren't still there.

"You have to imagine 175 guys trying to move along this river bank, knowing the enemy was just across the river, just before the sun's going down." Their flank was exposed. "All of a sudden from across the river the enemy started shooting at us.... Now the sun's gone down and it's dark. All you see

are green tracers, red tracers crisscrossing back and forth. As it got darker we moved up closer to the riverbank. The radioman comes up, says 'someone wants to talk to you.' I told him to stay back. But then he came up again to see me. He was shot in the neck."

Robert was holding him but there was nothing he could do and he died in his arms. Delgado and three others carried him on a poncho, reaching safer ground while the rest of the squad covered them. Their full-bird colonel came down in his chopper, with his gunner, firing away in order to recover the radioman.

Dennis was from Wisconsin. Later, back in the States, Robert located his family, to tell them he had been Dennis' squad leader and to let them know he didn't die all alone, that his buddies did all they could to comfort him.

Delgado himself was wounded about a week after Dennis was killed. Robert and his squad had been pulled back to LZ West, their new base camp, for a shower, food, clean clothes. From there they got orders to go back into the field to another location outside of their normal area of operations to do a sweep.

"We went out during the day, to reconnoiter, to study their routes to see who was coming in and out of their villages. But the mistake that we made, which led to my injury, was not seeing them using a trail hidden by vegetation. That was the same trail we ended up going down that night.

"There were about seven of us, I was the fourth guy. We were



trained so that when we saw something, we'd touch the guy just ahead of us, and we'd all drop down and get our guns ready. Our point guy was a Native American, part Mexican; we had a new radioman behind me.

"Now here's the deal: there was a rule in these villages that there was supposed to be no fires or lights allowed at night. So I'm going down this trail with my guys, with high vegetation shoulder high. The first two guys are shorter than I am, I'm the tallest one in the squad, and I can see what they can't – a flickering light, like candle light, and I look again and there's this Vietnamese guy staring straight into my eyes. He had a green uniform. I didn't have time to think. I put my gun on rock-'n-roll, automatic fire and I got a couple of rounds off, striking him, but I was hit in my left arm. One or two bullets went through my arm, severed the nerve, broke a bone. I felt something hit my leg. I

couldn't fire any more, my arm was numb.... Then the whole village came out, firing at us. I was bleeding heavily. I felt very drowsy. I was afraid if I let myself fall asleep I wouldn't wake up."

Delgado and his squad managed to escape in the darkness to another village nearby. He smoked a cigarette to focus on something while he waited. "It was only about ten minutes but it was the longest ten minutes I've ever experienced." The medevac helicopter came and picked him up to take him to Da Nang. The doctors on board the medevac immediately shot him up with morphine. Delgado awoke in the hospital right before he went into his surgery.

The doctors sent Delgado to the Army hospital in Okinawa, then on home to the States, where he wound up at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland. There he had his first dish of steak and eggs for breakfast in a long while. From there he flew to Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn and went by school bus to St. Albans Naval Hospital in Queens. Seeing all the people driving by, he thought to himself, "These people don't even have a clue where we've been, what we've gone through. No podiums, no brass bands."

Delgado admits he had a lot of pent up anger, sometimes depression. After the service it was difficult to find work. He

hadn't been able to finish high school; his parents were poor and his prospects were poor. But he managed. He didn't grow up in a tough Brooklyn neighborhood for nothing. "But today I can say I have, at least, a large sense of peace and serenity in my life."



It hasn't been easy and it came with a price. He still suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress. "People need to know what we went through. They must not forget. I pray to our Creator we will never have to repeat this experience again... Many guys coming back from war are left with open wounds, not just physical but spiritual wounds."

Robert's interest in his Taino heritage, along with his Spanish ancestry, has continued to grow over the years and he is a strong believer in preserving the cultural heritage of the Native American peoples in the Western Hemisphere and promoting awareness of their traditions and languages.

Delgado is proud of his three successful children, and his six grandchildren. One grandson has enrolled in the Air Force, joining the Combat Air Patrol, an elite – and potentially dangerous – outfit. Although hoping his grandson will never face the ultimate challenge, he respects his grandson's desire to carry on the tradition of his family in the service of his country. "And so we pray.... Amen."