

# A VIETNAM REQUIEM

## Chapter 1: The Marine Way

Damn it was good to get away from home! I don't mean that in the same way a kid leaving for college means it. My brother Bill and I hated our stepfather so much that we couldn't wait to get out of the house. My brother had enlisted in the Marines and now that I was graduating from high school I was going to do the same. Anyone who joins the Marines does so because they're patriotic and want to do the right thing. I was no different but I would be lying if I said that was the only reason I enlisted. When I left home, I left!

In the 1960s (and maybe still today) the idea of spending August at Parris Island, South Carolina in Marine boot camp sounded terrifying. It had a reputation for pressing the limits of human endurance. The physical training, the mental assault of DI's (Drill Instructors) and the regime of detail were all legendary. But whether it was having a brother who already made it through or maybe just being so damn glad to get away from home, I didn't fear and rather looked forward to it. I was ready to get going with my life.

I was jolted awake when the bus hit another bump. The already sweltering heat of a humid August morning made me realize I was in the south. This bus ride was my "ticket to freedom" even though I was jam-packed in with a forty other eighteen year olds. We were all hot but I think the others were more nervous than me. My brother gave me this advice, "Do what you're told and keep your mouth shut."

The only familiar face was right next to me, my buddy John Spiegel. It was August 1965. We joined the Marines on "the buddy system" that would take us through

boot camp together. We had gone to the same high school and become good friends. We were probably at more parties our senior year than classes. Although John never hung out at my house (I don't think he was ever there even once) I used to go over to his house all the time. It was odd that we had become such good friends because our families were so different. His family was stable and loving and had a good income. Mine was none of those things. We had taken 'the oath' together and then were immediately flown to Charleston, SC. There we were loaded on a bus for Parris Island.

It was early morning and we stared out of the bus window as we approached the base. We noticed several moving dots of light. The sun was just rising as we entered the base. It was almost tranquil. We could barely make out the dim silhouettes of Marines we thought at the time, shining their flashlights on the ground. We found out they were only young recruits just like us. As the old airbrakes of the bus squeaked us to a stop we were startled out of our daze.

A Marine with a "Smokey the Bear" hat stormed onto the bus screaming that we were "shit birds" and "assholes" and said things about our mothers that amazed us. (I wasn't naïve but I thought it was a little overboard.) We grabbed what gear we had and stumbled off the bus as fast as possible. "You sorry sack a shit, who told you, you could be a Marine?"

With the Drill Instructor barking orders we assembled on a white line. Then he barked again and we followed the painted yellow footsteps that directed us to our next stop. We dropped our bags and emptied the things in our pockets out on a long table where they were examined. They decided what we could and couldn't keep (we were

allowed almost nothing) and everything else was sent home. We were told they'd give us everything we needed there and they meant it.

We got rid of our civilian clothes and changed into standard issue uniforms. We were examined by a doctor and then lined up "asshole to bellybutton" outside the barber shop. (We lined up that way for everything. We were so close to each other you could stick your tongue out and touch the recruit in front of you.) We all got our heads shaved and boy did we look weird. 'Individuals' got on the bus earlier but by the end of the day we were still like a herd of cattle trying to get our act together. It would not be until two months later that we became Marines. We looked the same: same clothes, same haircut, and the same belongings. They were beginning the process of breaking us down so they could rebuild us "the Marine Corps way."

We were divided into squads of 19 or 20 men each. They took us to our barracks and assigned our bunks. After a long day of being yelled at, stripped of all we owned and force-fed Marine regulations, we finally collapsed on our bunks. The drill instructor (DI) gave us a quick history lesson on Chester Puller one of the greatest Marines who ever lived. Protocol from that night on was that we all had to say goodnight to Chester Puller. "Goodnight Chester Puller, wherever you may be," we repeated. We were then instructed to sing the Marine Corp Hymn and then lights out.

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Dear Mother,

I am having a pretty good time down here. I am squad leader of 19 men. It's not as bad as I thought it would be. I arrived in Parris Island on the 26<sup>th</sup> of August. Right

now we're having free time. We have three good drill instructors. I have nothing to say right now. I'm fine, and please don't worry about me. I'll be sure to write a longer letter next time.

Love,  
John

What I couldn't say to my mother in the letter was that boot camp gave me everything I didn't get at home. I had plenty of food, clothes, and in their own way, they loved me. We were going to spend eight long weeks at Parris Island and we had a lot of training to do. It was training that was vital. At times it seemed ridiculous. At other times it was almost sadistic. In the past boot camp would have been 12-15 weeks long but they had found a way to cram it into 8-9 weeks because they needed more troops. It was training we had to have because we all knew that when boot camp was over we were going to Vietnam.

Things were beginning to escalate in Southeast Asia. In February what had been a limited US involvement began to change. The Vietcong had staged attacks against American installations. One of the US responses was the sustained bombing of North Vietnam under the designation of "Operation Rolling Thunder." More important for us, in March two Marine battalions had landed to defend Da Nang Airfield. They were the first official American combat troops in Vietnam. By July President Johnson had approved General Westmoreland's request to significantly raise the level of troops in Vietnam from the existing 18 battalions by adding 44 additional battalions. It was clear to us that we were going to be part of the new wave of fighters going to Vietnam even though we didn't know much about it or what was going on there.

Life in boot camp is dictated by drill instructors, and we had three in our platoon. In the popular culture of the 1960s “Sergeant Carter” of the sit com “Gomer Pyle” had made such men cultural icons. In my eyes the DI’s were giants. They seemed 12 feet tall as they bellowed their orders at us. Their arms seemed as big as tree trunks and it seemed you’d have to be crazy to challenge one of them. Each DI was a sergeant and had been in the Corps for at least eight years and each had different duties in the platoon. One DI helped you adjust to life in boot camp. The second would make sure you were getting the training you needed. The third DI just yelled and screamed at us all day long (this was the type of DI “Sergeant Carter” made famous).

One day while we were marching with the DI shouting at us I got my left and right feet confused. He was so pissed at me that his face was nearly purple and the veins were popping out of his neck. He said, “Get out of my platoon!” I didn’t know what to do, I froze. “Get out of my sight! Go! Go! Go!” Not knowing what to do I just walked away. After I got about a hundred yards away he screamed, “Get your ass back here you shit bird! Get back into formation! (Everyone was a shit bird, maggot or mama’s boy to the DI’s.) I learned quickly how to keep in step and somehow was able to remain the squad leader till I left boot camp.

The eight weeks of boot camp stretched me to my limit. We woke up every morning at 5:30 and ran two miles before breakfast. My brother had also given me another piece of advice for the mornings, “Don’t lace your boots all the way so you can be the first one out of the squad bay” (what we called our barracks). This was because the last person dressed in the morning was forced to run an extra mile. After running, we headed back to the barracks to clean and make our bunks. The drill instructor would yell

out, "Portside head call!" Then all the recruits on the left side of the barracks would run into the bathroom (called the head in the military). In about two or three minutes the instructor would yell, "Starboard-side make a head call!" You had to get used to the fact there was nothing separating you from the others as you did your business and you had to do it fast. It was kind of humbling.

We had to relearn every part of our lives at Parris Island. Even getting to the chow hall could be a fiasco. Sometimes we wouldn't be marching in step and would keep running into each other that would mean the DI's would be doing more yelling. We would be so nervous and, to be honest, scared that we ate whatever was set in front of us. If we didn't, they forced us to. There were time limits for everything: not just for going to the head but also for eating. After chow we were off to our morning instruction. We had classes on history, hand to hand combat, and most importantly the M-14 rifle.

There were two ways they taught you what you needed to know about the M-14. First, we practiced and practiced how to take apart the rifle and reassemble it. We worked on this so often that we could do it blindfolded (and had to). Our fingers became our eyes. We used the feel of the rifle components to mentally construct visual representations that helped us rebuild the weapon. I can take it apart and reassemble it blindfolded to this day. The second way they tried to emphasize how critical our M-14 was (in case we missed it!) was a little crude but just the way men do things around other men. Every night they would have us hold the M-14 in our left hand and our penis in our right and recite in unison, "This is my rifle, this is my gun (referring to my penis), this is for fighting (M-14) and this is for fun." Maybe it wasn't very refined but you got the point.

Being in the military is a different world. Especially in wartime the necessity to learn discipline is non-negotiable. Learning “the Marine Corps way” was survival. It could be your life or someone else’s. So, they broke you down. It seemed like every thing had to be done their way. Our platoon was a no smoking platoon. The guys who came into boot camp as smokers were quickly broken of the habit. If they were caught smoking the DI would force them to smoke with a bucket on their heads and then hit it with a baton. It was rough for the smoker but pretty entertaining to watch!

I’ll never forget the day my buddy John Spiegel received a box of Butterfinger candy bars from home. He tried to hide them in his footlocker so he could keep them for himself. One of the Drill Instructors found them and made John sit there and eat them all. There must have been 12 or 13 left at that point. The entire squad had to watch and we all laughed at him. He was really sick that night and through the next day.

I didn’t get packages from home and I didn’t smoke but I did get in trouble. I was the squad leader and I got into a fight one day with one of the recruits in the squad who I didn’t think was making his bunk up to my expectations. One of the DI’s thought I was out of line. My punishment was that I had to go to another room and outline the Marine Corps Handbook. It took me over five hours to complete!

As time went on we adjusted to Marine life. It was strange to have our individuality ripped away from us and just when you thought you had adjusted you would be given more rules to conform to. I got so used to the early mornings that I could almost feel the DI’s finger on the light switch at 0530. We learned to endure a lot like the hot, humid weather, the sand fleas that would swarm in front of our faces and up our noses as we stood at attention, and the never ending tirades of the DIs.

But the DI's weren't always in our faces; we did have some down time. During the breaks you'd get to know more about the other recruits. We'd talk about what motivated us to enlist, things we missed at home and how anxious we were to get back to see everyone. I didn't share all those same feelings. I would have enjoyed seeing some friends and getting away from all the orders for a while and I really would have liked to see Mary Ellen but home I didn't miss.

Once a week we were required to write our families a letter to let them know how we were doing. The other guys had lots of stories to tell their families and girl friends. They wrote long letters and told them how much they loved them and missed them. I kept my letters short and told my mother not to worry. This was my life now and I was ready to leave my past behind me.

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Dear Mom,

We have two big inspections coming up next week and I'm devoting my time to get ready. We only have about ten days left before we graduate from Parris Island. John Spiegel's parents are coming down for his graduation. We graduate on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of October and out post the 23<sup>rd</sup> for Camp Lejeune that night. Everyone is excited. This week is going to be the hardest yet. Tomorrow we go on a three mile run with all our gear. I won't be writing anymore letters soon because I have a lot of work to do before I graduate. Say hello to the kids especially Glenn.

Love,  
John

P.S. I wrote a letter to Bill but no answer yet. It sure is the best way I have lived in a long time. Things just didn't seem right at home. I like the Marine Corps way better. I'm doing fine so don't worry about me. There are a lot of good guys here.

There was a special two week period when we focused almost exclusively on how to fire our rifles. The DI's no longer yelled at us but are very supportive and helpful. Later I realized the added importance of this training was so we could master our weapons and save lives when we were in combat. Even though no one talked about Vietnam the DI's knew where we were headed. It was like they knew the life and death situation we were headed for and they wanted to do all they could to prepare us. Finally all the training was complete and on October 22, 1965 we graduated. We had begun by having to throw out everything we had learned growing up and relearn everything the Marine Corps way. Finally at graduation when they put that insignia of the Corps on you, you knew you were a Marine. It was a real accomplishment and I felt great.



Graduation Day at Parris Island. Me (left) Rick Reed (middle) and John Spiegel (right).

My friend John Spiegel and I went through boot camp together as we had agreed. His parents came down and watched him graduate and were very proud of him. I was proud of myself and knew my brother would be proud of me also. We were also given

orders for our next assignment. John was sent to a mortar platoon. We chatted for a while and then said our goodbyes. (I only saw John once more on a hill in Vietnam. He survived the war and became a police officer in Washington, D.C.) I also said goodbye to the others. You get close to guys you go through such an intense experience with. But we were all off to various destinations.



Graduation Day at Parris Island

I was pissed off because most of the rest of the squad was going home and I had to report immediately to Camp Geiger in North Carolina. There wasn't a lot for me at home but I did want to try and see Mary Ellen and her mother. I was classified a 0311, a grunt. My orders were to go to a line outfit which was a rifle platoon. Camp Geiger is where I was to go for jungle training, training that in retrospect probably saved my life.

To be honest I wasn't thinking about Vietnam, I was thinking more about Mary Ellen. We had dated but I couldn't call her my girl or anything like that. She was beautiful. She had silky brown hair that fell over her shoulders and a smile that just made me feel warm. She could just radiate when you were around her and even though we had no understanding I was hoping I could see her. But that would have to wait, I was off to jungle training.

There was a lot happening in Vietnam at this point and most of it seemed good for the U.S. Nearly 200,000 U.S. troops had been sent to Vietnam during 1965 and they seemed to be making a big difference. In August the Marines that were securing Da Nang had staged the first big American drive of the war crippling the Vietcong regiment in the area. Then in October, when I was finishing boot camp, a U.S. airborne division had crushed three North Vietnamese regiments in the Ia Drang valley preventing them from sweeping through the central part of the country. This was an important battle for two reasons. First, it was the first time the strategy of using helicopters to take large units into battle accompanied by B-52 air support was tried. It seemed to work. And, second, the numbers seemed acceptable: while the U.S. lost 300 men the North Vietnamese lost over 2,000. General Westmoreland and other policy makers thought that was an acceptable ratio.

To be honest, we heard these reports but Vietnam was still very far away and hard to imagine. We tended to think more about our day to day routine. Each day was so busy that we didn't have lots of time to sit around and think about the future. But we were aware of what was possible. After all we were in jungle training or at least the best that it could be approximated in North Carolina.

Camp Geiger had forested areas that were massive. The hope was that they could in some way create an environment similar to the jungle of Vietnam. They had built bunkers that were almost identical to what we would see in Vietnam. They also had Marines stationed throughout the woods whose main purpose was to simulate the ambushes that were so prevalent in the jungle. This is when we learned the protocol for what to do when ambushed. And we practiced each time we were hit. It made you think and made you cautious. I learned quickly to stay on high ground to avoid as many of the ambushes as I could.

A frequent part of our training was forced marches. We would strap on our 50 pound backpacks and then have to trudge through shin-deep sand for 5-6 miles. It was exhausting. At the end of the march we were expected to set up a base camp with the things we had been lugging. Once set up we established a perimeter and then began other duties. Most of the time, we weren't permitted to sleep. We would often be awake for two to three days at a time, a skill we would need in combat. This was advanced infantry training. This was the life of a grunt. We were the ones who would be right in the middle of everything once we were in-country.

We were taught other vital skills for combat such as navigation skills. We learned how to read maps and how to get places by referencing the stars. To test our skills they stuff as many of us as they could into vehicles we called "cattle cars" that took us deep into the woods. There they would drop us off and expect us to be able to make it back to camp with the skills they had taught us. It was a month of very intense training. And like boot camp, I developed a real camaraderie with the other Marines (and it was still better than home).

Pvt. Barber, John W. 2157765  
Camp Geiger, North Carolina

Dear Mom,

Boy, what a hell of time we're having down here at Camp Geiger. We've been here for about two weeks and hardly got any sleep. 0311s have been extended for advanced training and I'm a 0311. I'll be coming home around the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> week of December. I guess I'll miss Thanksgiving.

Got my orders yesterday and I'm reporting to 2<sup>nd</sup> Bat 5<sup>th</sup> Marines Hotel Co. 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division. From here I go to California to Camp Pendleton and wait for more orders there. Won't be writing for a while, too much to do.

Love,  
John

I guess I complained as much as the next guy about Camp Geiger. Later on I realized that what I learned there was critical. But as much as I learned there were important things that Camp Geiger couldn't teach me. All the training in the world couldn't get me ready for what I would face. War changes you. Your eyes are opened to tragedies you'd never want to see. You had to carry out operations you never thought yourself capable of performing. We learned the things we could and later realized there were some things you could only learn through experience.

I finished the advanced infantry training at Camp Geiger and was ready to go home. There's something about Marine training that people outside the Corps don't completely understand. It is grueling beyond description. It pushes you to the very limits of what you can endure. But when you complete it, you have this sense of amazement that you could take all that was dished out and still be standing. You realize that very few people will ever get tested the way you were in Marine training. Part of the Marine camaraderie is sharing that accomplishment. I had succeeded. Growing up I had never been told I was good at any thing or that I had plenty of potential. I wasn't good at

school either. But I had made it through the rigors of Marine training and I was proud. I was a Marine.

## Chapter 2: Jungle Fever

Even though my home life wasn't very good there was a lot of my growing up that was just like everyone else. I had finished advanced training at Camp Geiger and I was going home for a couple weeks before shipping out to Camp Pendleton. I still couldn't get Mary Ellen out of my mind. As a young man still in his teens I didn't try to analyze my feelings. Was I in love? Was I just infatuated? I didn't know. How many young men stop and analyze those things? I just knew she was very special and I couldn't stop thinking about her. So I was headed home and hoped I could see her.

Toward the end of my training at Camp Geiger I had impulsively picked up the phone and called Mary Ellen. In my mind I had imagined we would see each other during the couple weeks of my leave. I was pretty excited about it, after all I thought about her all the time. But even on the phone it doesn't take long to realize you've made a mistake. This was a mistake.

With great anticipation I dialed her number and waited for her to answer. I had great news. I'd be home for a couple of weeks. However, when she picked up the phone I realized immediately that something was different. The tone of her voice was not what I hoped for. Her short answers, "good," "fine," "yes," and "no" spoke volumes. She gave me no indication that she was glad I'd be home or that she had any interest in seeing me. So I headed home to see my mother, some of my friends and maybe Mary Ellen.

I told myself that I could've been over reacting to the phone call. Maybe I surprised her with the call or it could be that she was just having a bad day. I convinced

myself that it would be worth trying to see her despite her lack of enthusiasm. After I got home I went out with some of my friends. We were having a good time when I noticed that Mary Ellen was on the other side of the room. I thought this was perfect until our eyes inadvertently met. I think every one knows what it's like to be excited to see someone and not have that excitement reciprocated. In that moment I knew she was done with me. She had moved on and I wasn't in her plans.

I spent a couple weeks at home and then I was off to Camp Pendleton. It was sort of odd being home. I had become a different person in the Marines but it seemed like folks at home had pretty much stayed the same. When it was time to leave my mother told me to be careful. She had no idea of the hell I was about to enter, but in all honesty, neither did I. In 1965 no one knew what was about to unfold in Vietnam. People really weren't very aware of what was taking place over there. If we had known I'm sure our goodbye would have been more difficult. In her mind I would be home shortly and would get on with the next phase of my life.

I arrived in sunny California at Camp Pendleton in the middle of the afternoon on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 1966. I was assigned to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion 5<sup>th</sup> Marines Hotel Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division. I was placed with the second squad. I met guys from all over the United States and we were pretty close as we ate and slept together for the next three or four weeks. I don't remember a lot about Camp Pendleton because we were mainly getting ready to ship out.

They gave us our packs, helmet, web gear, and flack jacket. Most importantly they gave us our M14 rifle. We were told never to let it out of our sight. We were expected to have it with us everywhere even while we ate. We were told to dye all our

skivvies (underwear) and tee shirts green. Besides, all that I can remember is packing my sea bag to put aboard ship. I had never been on a ship before and I couldn't wait to go. They gave us 48 hours to get ready and then we shipped out. We were to stop in Hawaii on our way, then on to Okinawa and finally to Vietnam. (As the war went on almost all the troops would be taken by aircraft but at this point we were transported by ship.)

We left aboard the USS Bexar from Long Beach, CA on the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 1966. I thought being aboard a ship was going to be great but I was in for a shock. I was sick the first three days. Nothing stayed down in my stomach. I had my head over the side of the ship all day long. I couldn't think of much of anything except how lousy I felt. After the third or fourth day I began to feel better. In addition to being sick, our sleeping quarters were a challenge. We slept in bunks that were about five feet long and they were stacked five or six bunks high. The bunk was the only place we had to put all our gear so there was barely enough room to curl up and sleep.

It's hard to describe how crowded a ship like this is. It was very confining and there was no privacy. There were men everywhere. A lot of guys, just had to have a little more space, so we would go down to the hold of the ship where jeeps and trucks were stored and sleep there. There were about seventeen hundred Marines and two hundred sailors aboard ship so it took about two hours to go through the chow line. By the time everyone made it through the breakfast line it was time to start lunch!

There wasn't much to do aboard ship so we'd think up things to do to keep from going crazy. We would still get paid while we were aboard ship and we'd spend our money at the "geedunk" that is, the ship's store. Mostly we spent our money on "pogeybait," (Navy term) cigarettes, candy or other food items. During the day we

would exercise or clean our rifles over and over. Every two or three days we held target practice between the Marines and the sailors. They would throw a 55-gallon drum into the ocean and wait until it was three or four hundred yards away. We would then open fire and see who could hit the drum first. The sailors were good but the Marines were better....we won every time. At other times we would watch movies they set up for us or we'd have boxing matches, anything to pass the time.

We stopped in Hawaii to replenish our supplies. While the ship was being serviced we had two days leave. I had been born in Hawaii so it was great for me. I got to visit my aunts and uncles and eat some great Hawaiian food. I took a buddy with me and he really appreciated the visit as well. (This friend got shot in Vietnam and I never knew whether he made it back or not.) We re-boarded the ship and were off for Okinawa our final stop before we hit the killing fields of Vietnam.

When I arrived at boot camp it was the beginning of a process. It was as if we were at the wide end of a funnel. As the months wore on it was like we were moving always toward the narrow end. The Marines knew what had to happen, for us to survive in a setting of war. Our training intensified and at each point they were moving us a step closer to being ready to kill when we had to. Some might see it as a process of depersonalization and in some ways it was. But they also knew what we had to do to survive. At Okinawa our training would end and we'd have to be ready for war.

The trip seemed to take forever but finally we were at Camp Swab. We were to be there for about three months. Camp Swab was pretty compact. It had row after row of barracks, an Officer's Club, a NCO Club, and a theater. The food was OK for a Marine

base. Actually we heard that the Air Force base about 10 miles away had better food so we would eat there whenever we got a chance.

One of the things that I remember most vividly in Okinawa was the weather. It was hotter than anywhere I'd ever been. In the sweltering heat we began our last round of training for Vietnam. The hills and jungles were unbearably hot and the rain came down in buckets. In the jungle it was dark, really dark. Even in the middle of the day you could barely see the man right in front of you even though he was only two or three feet away.

We knew how serious things had become. In our training we learned more intense map reading skills and did both day and night patrols. We also learned to fire our weapons a new way. We were told that we wouldn't have time to aim and fire in the jungles of Vietnam the way we were trained so they showed us how to use our index finger on the side of the rifle as a way to point it at the target and fire. They also showed us a number of other ways to kill the enemy by making all kinds of booby traps and even kill with our bare hands. On one of the training exercises we weren't permitted to sleep for three days.

One day we were on a training exercise when ground just started to shake. My first thought was, "Hey, what the hell is going on?" It turned out to be an earthquake, my first. Even for us tough Marines it scared the hell out of us.

After these exhausting training exercises we'd head back to the base. We had been training in the jungle, marching, simulating combat, and "playing in the mud." Once we came back to camp we only had about an hour to get showered and clean our gear before inspection. It was almost an impossible task. So we'd get these old villagers

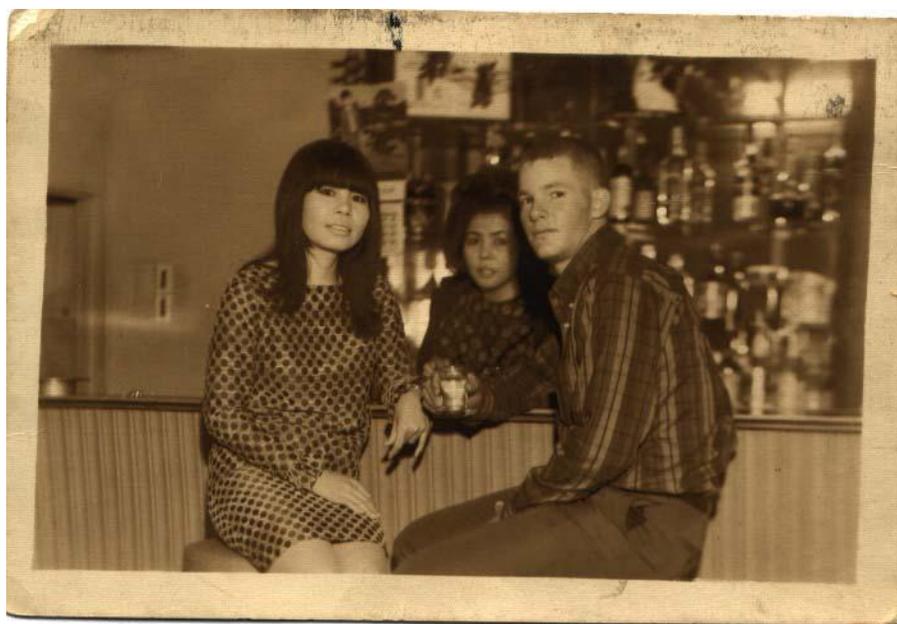
we called “mama-sons” who would hop right in the shower with us and help us clean our gear. For a couple bucks they’d help us clean everything even our rifles. There’s no way we would have made it to inspection otherwise.

While I was training in Okinawa my brother came there for more training also. I was really glad to see him. In Vietnam he had been in “Force Recon Marines” (they did the same thing as the LRRPs in the Army). Force Recon Marines would go behind enemy lines or would be parachuted deep into the jungle. They supplied the information for the grunts (like me) so we’d know where the enemy was, what we were facing or where we needed to go. Needless to say this was a remarkably dangerous assignment. He had some time in Okinawa but he was slated to go back to Vietnam. I could tell he was different. I’m not sure how I would describe his change but Vietnam had done something to him. (It would do the same thing to me but of course I wouldn’t know that until later.) It was sobering. He didn’t want to talk about it much. Still it was good to see him. We had survived a lot together at home and now we would need to survive a lot in Vietnam if we were both going to make it.

Things were continuing to develop in Vietnam. On Christmas day of 1965 President Johnson had suspended the bombing of North Vietnam to try and get the Communists to negotiate. Nothing had developed so on Jan. 31 the bombing resumed. Soon after there was a joint communiqué issued by the Johnson administration and the South Vietnamese government emphasizing the need for pacification in South Vietnam. That meant that ground troops like us would be more needed than ever. We would be charged with doing the “pacifying.”

College fraternities sometimes say they study hard and play hard meaning that after several days of hard studying they're ready to blow off some steam and party. Well if you think studying hard makes you ready to play hard you should try combat or combat training! We would get back from our training exercise, get cleaned up and have inspection and then we were off to town as quick as we could get there. Camp Swab was about 10 miles from a tiny place called Kim Village. It was like a Wild West town. It was lined with bars and brothels. The streets often smelled of urine, the buildings were rickety, and the locals were ready to make as much money off of Americans as they could. They had dealt with the military for a long time and they knew when we were coming. They could suck the weekly pay right out of our pockets!

The local cabs were not permitted on the base so they would wait right outside the gate for the Marines who wanted to go to town. The cabs were tiny built to hold only three people. But we'd squeeze in five or six Marines because it was cheaper and we were anxious to get to town. Sometimes we'd have the driver stop along the road (whether they wanted to or not) and we'd put the driver in the back. Then one of us would drive the rest of the way while we all laughed and carried on. This made some of the drivers so mad that they wouldn't come back to the base to pick us up. But others didn't seem to mind and got a laugh out of it themselves. There was also a military bus that would take us to town and pick us up but the cabs were a lot more fun.



A bar in Okinawa in 1966.

The village was packed with military. There would always be Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines there. I don't think you have to use your imagination much to understand how wild and reckless this village was. As soon as we hit town we'd be in the bars getting drunk. With so many military (mostly young men) drinking and carrying on it was only a matter of time until a fight would break out. Punches were thrown, sides were drawn, chairs thrown and broken, it was mayhem! The Military Police (MPs) would bust in, take charge and restore calm. They'd take the guys who had been in the fight and send us on our way. But we'd be off to another bar and it would break out all over again. The MPs would run in, restore calm, send us on our way, and then the cycle would start all over.

When I look back on it I realize that we could have been arrested or put on report. But it seemed like the MPs had been given orders to let us have our fun. As long as things didn't get too out of hand they seemed content to settle us down and move on. Part of it was that they knew where we were headed and some of the military were there

on leave from Vietnam. They knew very well that we could be in life and death situations in a few weeks and weren't about to make too big a deal out of us being a little crazy.

Local women for hire were everywhere. We used to say they were a dime a dozen and not be too far off. Their rates were basically two dollars for a half hour and five dollars for an hour. They were also willing to barter so if you didn't have any money you could have them for a carton of cigarettes. We were told to be careful who you had sex with because the estimate was that 80% of them had venereal disease. You could sit and talk with them if you wanted but most of the Marines I knew took them upstairs and didn't do much talking. The one thing we were warned about was that we could not talk about Vietnam at all. We figured, "what the hell, we don't know anything about Vietnam anyway," what were we going to say? The local women knew about Vietnam because of the Marines who had come back from there but all we knew was that we were being sent there to fight.

We would go into a bar and try to act like men of the world. It was obvious to the women that we just wanted to get laid. They weren't really interested in us, they just wanted our money. Everyone knew what was going on but we played along anyhow. The routine was that we had to buy them three drinks and we'd have three as well. Later on we'd find out the woman's drink was just colored water but we paid the same price. We wanted sex, they wanted money. And they knew how to get as much of our money as they could.



Me (back left) and my buddies  
from 2/5 at a bar in Okinawa.

Like most of the other Marines I decided I'd encounter one of these Okinawa women even though I didn't know much about how this kind of thing worked. Another Marine and I picked up two young women in the town of Naha. We acted like we knew what we were doing and they took us to a local hotel. We got two rooms right next to each other and realized the walls were paper-thin. You could hear everything that was going on in the room next to you.

In the room they each asked us if we had condoms and we said, "no." Horny Marines don't think. They asked us for twenty dollars so they could go down to the front desk and buy the condoms. We were lying naked in the bed waiting with great anticipation. Ten minutes went by and then fifteen. Then one of us yelled through the paper-thin wall, "Hey, did your girl come back yet?" "No, did yours?" "No, ...oh shit!" We realized at the same moment that the women had taken our money and left. We were really pissed and searched all over town for them but never found them. Remember the

going rate in Okinawa at that time was two dollars for sex so they made out pretty well. We ended up that night in a bar drinking beer and laughing about how we'd been had.

That was the cycle we were in while in Okinawa: hard training in the jungle and hard partying in the town. As it got closer to our time to leave for Vietnam they took us down to the beach and put us on LSTs, the watercraft we used for landing on shore. These craft could travel on land or water and held thirteen or fourteen Marines. After we got in the LST they would take us out in the water and circle around for a while and then come back so we could practice a landing. These craft were enclosed and where we were was hotter than hell. The driver had a small hatch that he could put his head through and view the beach. I was sitting right behind the driver and it was so closed in, I felt I couldn't breathe. I was gasping for air and couldn't stand it a second longer so I pulled the driver down and stuck my head through the porthole and grabbed some fresh air. I thought I would die if I didn't get some air. I really got reamed out for doing that but I didn't care, I had to breathe!

The day we were waiting for finally arrived and we were off to Vietnam. This was what all that training had been for. Our Battalion was eager and ready to go. We thought we could get to Vietnam, kill as many Viet Cong as we could, and bring the war to an end. Boy, were we in for a big shock.

We got what gear we had and boarded the USS Clymer for Vietnam. The war was escalating. There were demonstrations against the war by Buddhist priests that had begun in March and were widely covered in the US. It was April 1966 and we were ready to go to war even if we didn't know all of what we were getting in to.



Hotel Company 2/5 – Leaving Okinawa for Vietnam – April 1966

(Me – top left corner)

It took about eight days to get there. By about the seventh day out on the ocean I started to really think about where I was headed. I had trained intensely for over six months and I would see if it would all pay off. Everyone was nervous. We were on edge. We listened to “Hanoi Hannah” while we were on ship (the “Tokyo Rose” of Vietnam). This, of course, was part of the propaganda of the war. She knew the name of our ship and would tell us that we should just go home because the ship would never make it and we would all be killed. But she was wrong and we knew it. We were Marines and we were ready to do what we had been trained for.

### Chapter 3: Taking the Lid Off of Hell

I spent some of my childhood in the Pittsburgh area (mainly my high school years). For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was known as the center of steelmaking. But early in the century the smoke and soot and open fire of the blast furnaces were so awful that one visitor to Pittsburgh said, “It looks like someone took the lid off of hell and allowed us to look in.” Maybe that’s why one of the most famous Vietnam movies, “The Deer Hunter,” started off with mill workers in Pittsburgh. But on its worst day Pittsburgh wasn’t like what we were walking into.

4 August 1966  
Vietnam

Dear Mom,

Well right now I’m on hill 69 again resting before we go on another operation. Its supposed to be bigger than Hasting was. But don’t worry they had church service for the guys and I went to confession and church so nothing is going to happen to me, so don’t worry.

You know Mom I don’t know what to say any more. It seems like I’ve lost all words. But I want you to know that you’ve been good to me in many ways. Say hello to the kids for me and all my friends. I won’t be writing for quite some time so don’t, please don’t worry. Sorry this is so short but I’m lost for words.

P.S. See you soon

Your Son,  
John

Wars are fought by grunts (0311s in the Marines). Often history books focus on great strategies concocted by high ranking officers and their advisors. Or they remember some key battle that turned the direction of the conflict. But war isn’t like it’s told in

history books. It is the day in day out drudgery of fighting and killing. And when you're in a war like Vietnam that was fought against an often "invisible" enemy combined with a political straightjacket that didn't allow us to attack North Vietnam, the life of the grunt became a strategy of kill and survive.

The preceding letter was written five months after I had been in Vietnam. In it I told my mom that I didn't have words to describe what I was experiencing. It wasn't that I didn't have unbelievable sights and sounds to describe but how do you tell the horrors of war to your family? I tried to write about friends who were killed and the intense combat I was in but couldn't. But what I didn't have words for at that point was nonetheless locked in my memory. For Marines and soldiers alike I think this will remind them of what we lived through.

From aboard the USS Clymer we could see Vietnam in the distance. It was April 13, 1966 when we prepared to go ashore at Chu Lai (in the northern part of South Vietnam). The air sort of had a rotten-egg stench to it. All the Marines were unusually quiet, you could hear a pin drop. We were in a fog or dazed or something when someone shouted, "OK, get your gear ready." With that they handed us live ammunition and grenades. As I got ready to climb into the landing craft I had an M14 rifle, two canteens of water, seven magazines of ammo, two grenades, a helmet, a flack jacket, and a K-bar (knife). In addition, in my pack I had two hundred rounds of ammo, a pair of dry socks, some c-rations, and a pack of cigarettes. The sailors were really serious as they watched us get ready. They knew some of us wouldn't come back, so they wished us good luck and we were on our way.

We lined up company by company and squad by squad at the side of the ship ready to disembark. Hotel Company was first to go over the side of the ship into the landing craft. The netting on the side of the ship was hard to climb down with all our gear wrapped around us. This had been easy to do in training but now that it was for real everyone was nervous. With the ship rocking back and forth we had to make sure we didn't get our legs caught between the netting and the ship. We didn't want to be the ones who screwed up coming down the net!

Once down the nets we were ready to hit the beach. The ocean was as smooth as glass and the sun was beating down on us. The heat was more intense than I had ever experienced. My shirt was drenched with sweat and I felt like I was at the beach in the sun with no shirt on. I couldn't tell if the sweat was from the heat or being nervous or both. My heart was pounding as we approached the beach (it was just like you see when Marines hit the beach on TV or in a movie).

We scurried onto the beach expecting to hear shots ringing out around us but all was quiet. We dug in that night and were on "50% watch." (50% watch means that there are two men in a foxhole and one sleeps for four hours while the other one stands guard. After four hours they switch.) Not many Marines slept that first night. I think we were all pretty nervous. Besides, how can you sleep when you hear continuous explosions in the distance and the sky is lit up with flairs only a mile away? It reminded us of the Fourth of July only this was no celebration. It rained hard that night. The big, hard rain pellets soaked our shiny new jungle fatigues. By the morning our boots and uniforms were wet and muddy.

The next morning we gathered all our gear and began to move inland. We were headed for a village about four or five miles away. We started walking early in the morning and already the sun was beating down on us. The area appeared pristine, almost like a picture postcard. We walked along small trails and roads. The rice paddies were lush and green and there were large mountains in the background. There were little kids on the backs of water buffalos riding through the rice paddies and old men and women up to their knees in brown, muddy water planting rice. It was beautiful but it was also deadly and we had to keep telling ourselves that. The irony was that rice paddies just like these would soon be places of combat and death.

As we walked the trails we only saw old men, old women and young kids. The young men were conspicuous by their absence. Little kids ran up to us and tried to sell us, of all things, Coke a Cola! How about that a good old American bottle of Coke! Some guys bought a bottle and drank it straight down. They sort of made a face after they drank it and said it tasted flat and had no kick. Usually in the States if you drank a bottle that fast it would make your eyes water. But most of the Marines agreed that when it was 105 degrees anything tasted good.

We finally arrived at our destination which was a bridge just outside a small village. Our job was to take charge of the bridge and do five things: patrol the area, keep our weapons clean, fill sand bags to make our position more secure, eat c-rations and keep the rats from eating them, and listen on the radio for other patrols in the area that needed help. As we stood guard we would hear the 105 mm and 155 mm cannons shelling the mountains not far away and we'd wonder who was out there.

The bridge was on a dusty, red road that was traveled by a lot small busses packed with Vietnamese. The mini-buses would be filled with as many as twenty people with some of them on the roof. We would stop everyone who crossed the bridge and check their ID's. Just like in the States everyone who was old enough had an ID and if they didn't we would consider them Viet Cong (VC).

We would send four or five Marines into the village to buy food and look around. It was safe during the day. They had a nice cool well where our canteens could be filled. Water was essential in that kind of heat and we had to make sure we had enough.

Hotel Company (my company) was on the bridge while Fox, Echo, and Gulf companies were in different areas around us. We all did patrols in the area. It was quiet the first few days then we started engaging the VC. Our engagements usually started as firefights from a distance. Most of our wounded weren't from the firefights but from booby traps. The enemy was hard to see let alone find. Even when we did find them they could disappear as quickly as they appeared.

I was in country two or three weeks before I saw my first Marine get shot and die. You realize quickly that the stakes are high. The first booby trap we encountered was called a "Bouncing Betty." A Marine in the front of the patrol trips a wire by accident. The Bouncing Betty flies up in the air about six feet or so and then in a couple seconds it explodes and hits one of the Marines behind the one who tripped the wire. The Marine it hit was severely wounded. By the time we got to him he was already covered with blood, it was everywhere but not just on him. The explosion had blown his backside off and he was hurt bad. He was originally from Texas and as he lay there he started to sing "The Yellow Rose of Texas." He died in the helicopter on his way back to base camp.

We were all stunned. This was his second tour of duty in Vietnam and we all looked up to him. The Marine who tripped the wire felt horrible. At that moment I became convinced of three things: first, no matter how much you've been in combat, when its your turn to go, it's your turn to go; second, I had this moment of understanding at a deep level, someone was trying to kill me; and, third, I resolved right there and then that those bastards weren't going to get me.

Throughout our time in Vietnam there were constant reminders about booby traps. The VC had mastered the art of booby traps and you had to watch for them constantly. If you were walking down a path that the villagers used regularly you felt a little safer. They seemed to know what paths to avoid. Often times we'd avoid the paths altogether because booby traps were everywhere. In my first month the booby traps killed more Marines than firefights.

Hotel Company stayed on that bridge for about three or four weeks. It was a pretty boring assignment. The sun was scorching and the busses kicked up clouds of red dust that made us feel like we were eating the dust all day. If we weren't on patrol, all we did was check the ID's of people crossing the bridge. At night things were more tense. We stayed in our foxholes expecting to get mortared but never did. What sounded like thunder was the 105 mm cannons hitting the mountains and flairs lit the sky throughout the night.

You saw all kinds of people crossing the bridge. Prominent were the old ladies carrying baskets on both sides that hung from a long pole across their shoulders. The baskets would contain rice, straw, wood, and sometimes mud and clay. These women looked to be sixty or seventy years old but could carry more than we could. One hot,

sultry day an old Vietnamese woman was crossing the bridge and one of the Marines decided to help her. He motioned to her to put the baskets down and he would help her carry them. There were some other women with her who spoke to her in Vietnamese and she complied. The Marine then tried to pick the baskets up but couldn't! The other Marines on the bridge began to laugh. The old woman said something in Vietnamese, laughed, and then picked the baskets up and went on her way. The Marine was humiliated. We teased him all day and told him he was a weakling. We got a big laugh about the whole thing.

Seeing my first Marines get killed had a big effect on me. Every time I went on patrol I kept a round in the chamber and the safety off. My finger was always on the trigger guard of my rifle ready to slip it off at any moment and with sweaty hands that was easy to do. This was probably a bad idea but I didn't care, I was scared and wanted to be ready for whatever was coming.

We were on patrol one day when we spotted a couple VC. We were told not to chase them into the jungle but two Marines decided to pursue them. We tried to get them to stop but they must have thought they could get them. As they chased after them they ran right into a booby trap and were killed. I think they were actually the first ones I saw die.

April 1966  
Vietnam

Dear Mom,

Sorry I haven't been writing but the only thing I can say is that I've been busy, or we were making our landing in Vietnam. Right now I'm in An Tan, Chu Lai. We are guarding a bridge that the VC tries to take away. I've been going on ambushes every night.

I haven't got my school paper yet. Glad you sent the pictures of Tom, Glen and Sis. They look fine. We are leaving tomorrow for the

mountains where the VC are. I'll be having it rough for a while.

I'm fine and gaining a lot of weight. Say hello to everyone for me. The only thing I have to gripe about is that I'm tired.

P.S. I'll try to write soon.

Love,  
John

As we got further and further from the bridge we would encounter more VC. Intense fighting broke out on every patrol. Firefights would last anywhere from ten minutes to an hour or more depending on what you ran into. Sometimes you'd engage one or two VC and other times twenty or thirty. In the firefight is when you can hear your heart pounding. You think you're in a dream and want to wake up but you can't. A bullet would whiz by you and you'd realize they're really shooting at you. So you shoot back and look for cover.

These firefights were not like the intense battles we'd fight soon. Often you'd spot a VC at a distance and open fire or they would spot you and fire. The gun battle could go on for quite a while but most of the shooting was at a distance. For a month each day we went on "search and destroy" missions. To be honest, we really hoped we wouldn't find any VC, we weren't anxious to engage the enemy. One of the things we were looking for were VC bunkers stocked with rice, weapons and medical supplies.

One day we were on patrol walking through thick elephant grass that was five or six feet high. The edges of it were sharp and could cut you. On patrol we'd be spaced about 15 to 20 feet apart as we silently went through an area. All of a sudden the Marine on point walked into a high elephant grass area where a squad of VC were sleeping. As he tried to get our attention one of the VC jumped and shouted, "Ambush!" At first I

thought it was one of the Marines yelling, but it wasn't. We started firing and killed a couple of them but most of them darted off into the elephant grass and got away.

On these patrols all my training would kick in. The squad leader would give orders like, "Take two guys and flank them on your right," or "Move up the M60 to this position and concentrate your fire where the VC are." We would also have to call for medovac if there were any wounded, clear an area for the chopper to land, and put yellow smoke out to show the wind direction. When we found a bunker we would blow it up. Sometimes if there was a village close by where the VC hid and they didn't tell us, we'd burn it down. The poor villagers were caught in the middle.

One of the first things our commander told us was that VC is afraid of the letter "H." He said it was some kind of superstition they had and that they thought the letter "H" gave people some kind of special power. Since we were "Hotel" Company the commander said we would be especially feared by the VC. Later on we became suspicious that they told every company this to try and make them feel invincible and braver.



Full combat gear. Ready to go on Patrol.

But we didn't feel brave, most of the time on patrol we felt lonely. We were so anxious that we thought they were VC behind every rock and bush (and sometimes there were!). On our way back to the bridge we would walk through the villages and rice paddies. It was always eerie because the people wouldn't give us a second glance. We knew we weren't the first Marines they had seen but they went about their rice planting as if we didn't exist. We were always looking back over our shoulder thinking the NVA (North Vietnamese Army) would pop out at us at any moment.

This may sound silly because with nine or ten Marines on patrol we could put out some awesome firepower. Nonetheless you still felt scared. It wasn't a cowardly scared but a scared that you just hoped nothing would happen. One person described the trauma that a war like this one created as the constant threat of attack. Every patrol you went on, each day, you felt you'd be fired on. Each day you thought to yourself, "Am I the one who is going to get shot or step on a booby trap," because each day someone did. When

we would finally make it back to the bridge, to the big bunkers we had built there, we felt secure. At each end of the bridge we had a 60-caliber machine gun. There was a big bunker in the middle of the bridge set up like a tower so we could see beyond the bridge to the edge of the rice paddies.

23 September 1966  
Chu Lai, Vietnam  
An Tan Bridge

Dear Mother,

Well, our time is about up down here on the bridge. We go back to Hill 69 on Sunday. I sure hate that place, because all the sergeants get on your rear end. Plus we have to go out on ambushes and day patrols. Also we have to stand bunker watch around the hill. One good thing about being a radio man is that you don't have to stand lines.

Right now I'm listening on the radio to all the songs that I used to hear back home. I'll tell you it brings back good memories. It makes me think of all the crazy things I used to do around you. Also about when I use to go with Mary Ellen, that most of all.

It sure is getting windy and dusty around here and it looks like rain. It hasn't rained in about a week. So when it rains I guess its going to pour for a long time because of the monsoon season.

Right now my platoon commander, platoon sergeant, and right guide and myself are sitting around drinking pop, yes I said pop. We are just talking about war stories and just talking about things in general. Mostly about Vietnam.

That brings up something sad that happened to a buddy of mine. The 26<sup>th</sup> Marines landed eleven miles from the DMZ in Vietnam. I guess you know I'm in the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division. Well it's moving up to the DMZ. Right now its just talk but it's a good chance that we will go. It will take about three months to move. No sweat because I'll be coming home in about four months after that I think, if I don't extend for 6 months.

So this is the little old beer drinker saying so long for now. Don't forget the Year book and football pictures and that picture of me and that Okinawan girl sitting in that bar.

John

Orders came down to get all the companies together and report to Hill 69. Hill 69 was located between Chu Lai and Da Nang. It was located just off of Highway One that

ran from North Vietnam through South Vietnam. It was about ten miles from the bridge we were guarding. We packed our things and were trying to get ready for a long hard march. To our surprise (and delight!) they brought trucks in to haul us to Hill 69.

Hill 69 was a big place to us, almost like a little city. It had concertina wire about eight feet high surrounding the hill. There were 105mm and 155mm canons, 40mm and 81mm mortars, and tanks all stationed there. Our squad was assigned a tent that was just big enough for 10-12 Marines. There always seemed to be a hot breeze blowing on the hill. Sometimes we'd sit outside the tent and would get our faces covered with dust and dirt from the breeze. Inside the tents they had cots set up for us. They were folding cots with wooden legs then we'd put "rubber ladies" (an inflatable rubber mattress) on them for sleeping. It was a lot better than sleeping in a foxhole.

Sitting outside the tent you'd often see other Marines coming back from patrols. They had blank looks on their faces and bloodstains from firefights on their flack jackets and jungle uniforms. This parade of returning Marines was a sobering sight. These three and four day patrols took their toll. Their helmets would be pushed back on their heads and some of them would have a towel draped down the back of their necks to catch the sweat. We knew exactly what the blank stares meant. It was the look we all came back with after we had been in life and death firefights.

After returning from a patrol you'd try to relax and clean your weapon. You still had to man the foxholes for perimeter watch. In addition you still had to take care of the listening post (LP) that was about a hundred yards away from the base. Your job was to listen for the enemy and let the base know when they were coming. You were on your own a hundred yards from help.

The heat was unbearable. The only way I can describe it is to make a comparison with a kitchen. If you ever opened an oven door while it was on and felt the blast of heat hit you, that was the constant feeling in Vietnam. It was still worse when you had all your gear on for a patrol. Sickbay always had lots of Marines suffering from heat stroke. Normally the corpsman would give you a day of rest and lots of water then you'd be off to the jungle again. The heat would be as high as 110 in the sun and 90 in the shade.

The heat never bothered me to the point of making me pass out but I came close at times. As far as I know I never had heat stroke. As a matter of fact, I was lucky and never got sick at all. We would carry two canteens of water at all times. From time to time we'd run out and then we'd try to find water wherever we could. Doc (the corpsman) gave us iodine pills to put in the water so we wouldn't get sick. It tasted awful but we drank it anyway. I put iodine pills in everything I drank. Some of the other guys didn't and got really sick. They just hated the way the pills made the water taste. We were always looking for villages that had a deep well where the water was cold. I was so hot at times I would've given a month's pay for a cold glass of water.

The biggest difference when we got to Hill 69 was that there more Marines getting killed and wounded. The directive that constantly came down from high command was to "make contact." We did. We made contact. We were getting good at killing them. Unfortunately, they were getting good at killing us as well. That was the bad part. Death was all around us, we never knew when it was going to be our turn to get shot or blown up.



Rice paddies we had to cross on patrol.

## Chapter 4: Battling the Memories

Sitting outside our tent or in a foxhole some of us didn't talk much about home. Some guys didn't want to think about it (it was bad luck) and others just didn't want to remember. For me I couldn't remember anything good about growing up. I'm sure I had good times but I couldn't remember them. Ironically, childhood was so difficult that it had hardened me. In most instances that would be a weakness but in war it's strength. It prepared me at least emotionally as much as you can be prepared.

My mother had divorced my father when I was really young. I was born in Hawaii and my father was in the Navy. When I was five and my brother Bill was almost seven my mother was remarried to a guy in the Army. At five years old you don't really know much about what is going on. I don't remember any father figure in my life early on. About the only thing I remember is that we were Catholic and would attend a Catholic church where one day my brother and I found an unexploded Japanese bomb out back and other random things like that.

I don't know how long my mother went with my step father before marrying him. I sometimes think she married the first guy that came along to help take care of Bill and me. It was hard for my mother being single and trying to take care of two small kids. But her second marriage changed our lives forever, and not for the better.

Our stepfather's name was Ray. He was short and stocky and seemed to be fun at times around my mother. Somehow we knew he wasn't our father when we were growing up. One day my mother sat us down and told us he wasn't our real father. It

was no big surprise but we were so young it really confused us. She made the point that our last name was Barber, the name of our biological father. In fact, my real father's name was John Barber, the same as mine. She never mentioned him again after that day and Bill and I never asked about him. I hated my biological father as I grew up because I thought he did nothing to help us, and worse still, had forgotten us. I wouldn't find out until later that he would write us letters that Ray would tear up. The whole thing confused me some but I was always glad that Ray never adopted us. Once I got to school we were registered by my step father's last name. The teacher would call my name and I wouldn't realize she was talking to me. How can a little kid figure these things out?

Things were OK at first until Ray and my mother had children of their own. At that point it was as if Ray disowned Bill and me. Worse than that, he also began to abuse us. Bill was about eleven at the time, I was nine. He would always pit us against each other. Sometimes he'd make us fight each other just for his amusement. His practice was to treat one of us like his buddy one day while he'd beat the shit out of the other one. The next day it would be reversed. The day he was your buddy would be a good day. But the next was terrible. My mother always thought we had done something to provoke him but that was hardly ever the case. He was just a sick bastard.

In the early 1950's Ray received orders to report to Fort Lee, Virginia which was an Army post just outside of Petersburg. He was a supply sergeant. So the whole family packed up and moved. It was a particularly hard move for my mother because all her friends were in Hawaii and she didn't know anyone in Petersburg. In addition, my stepfather wouldn't let her work outside the home and was always extremely jealous. Petersburg was a predominantly African-American city at that point and most people

worked in the tobacco plant that was about three blocks from the apartment complex where we lived. It was at a time when in the south blacks and whites didn't mix. I remember going to the Catholic Church in Petersburg where African-Americans could only enter through a side door (these were the Eisenhower Years).

The apartment complex had a lot of unusual features. You could always smell smoke from the factory. It was so strong it was as if you could taste it. We lived in the back of the complex and there was an older lady who lived in the front. Upstairs from us was a German lady. She always seemed to be playing German music and would frequently be in her underwear. I would make a little money by taking her garbage out for her and once when I was in her apartment I noticed a picture of a strange dark-haired man with a black mustache prominently displayed and later learned it was Adolf Hitler.



This is me (middle) and Bill (right) with our friend Shorty in Petersburg, VA.

By the age of seven I was used to Ray having his Army buddies at our house. (When my brother and I look back on it we realized there was something strange about his always being with guys. Over the years we wondered if he was actually bi-sexual.) I was just sitting in my room one day when one of them grabbed me and dragged me into the other room. Ray and his buddy had decided it would be funny to give me a haircut. It wasn't an attempt to save money, they treated it like a big joke. They chopped my hair off in a haphazard fashion all the while laughing. It looked awful and for a kid of seven it was humiliating. I got up the next morning to go to school and pulled on a tossel cap to keep my head warm (it was winter). I was so mortified that I refused to take my hat off when I got to school. Finally the teacher insisted I take it off and when I did the whole class laughed. It was a day I would never forget.

Ray made a paddle just for Bill and me. I dreaded my birthday because on our birthday he would wake us up and paddle us until we cried. Others would look forward to their birthday with anticipation but I would just lie there waiting to be paddled and cursing his mocking laughter. My mother should've put a stop to things like this but she seemed helpless. Ray was an intimidating person and my mother had very few choices being so far away from home and not having a job.

When I was nine or ten my mother sent me to the store to buy a couple of cans of tuna fish. By mistake I bought two cans of sardines. When I realized what I had done I knew Ray would be pissed. I sat at the end of the dining room table while he paced back and forth. I couldn't figure out why he couldn't just let it go. It was just a mistake any kid could make. He was so mad he opened the cans and made me eat both of them. I choked down the first couple but the more I ate the more I began to gag. My mother kept

saying to me, “Com’ on, you can eat them, it’s not that bad.” Even after I threw up some of the sardines he made me finish both cans. I learned that day that even though my mother was a good person, she was weak and afraid of Ray.

Another sick thing Ray would do was to lock us outside for hours on end even when it was cold weather. For some reason at that time I had a lot of trouble with constipation. So when I had to go I really had to go. I knocked on the door and asked him if I could come in to go to the bathroom. He opened the door but suspected that I was just using it as an excuse to get warm. So he went into the bathroom and watched me as I tried to go. With the pressure of him standing there watching I just couldn’t go. So he got the paddle and whacked me a few times and told me to get my ass back outside.

Ray had a motorcycle that he kept in a garage way behind the apartment. The garage was right next to fence where kids from the neighborhood would play. Some times the kids would climb over the fence and on one occasion they broke into the garage. While they were in the garage they broke the motorcycle. Ray accused Bill and me of breaking the bike and beat the shit out of us. We tried to convince him that we didn’t do it. We knew it was the black kids from the neighborhood and even though he hated black kids he didn’t care. He just loved hitting us and used any excuse for it. After all, in his eyes we weren’t really his kids and he didn’t think we deserved anything from him. We were bastards to him.

At the time we didn’t understand what was going on. Sometimes he would be nice to us and take us to the Dairy Queen for an ice cream cone. It was just enough kindness for young kids like us to figure that getting hit each day was normal. As a matter of fact, if we went through a day and didn’t get hit it made us nervous like

something was wrong. When we were older we looked back on this time and thought that he honestly was crazy.



Me (left) and Bill in  
Petersburgh, VA mid  
1950s

Bill and I were so sick of being abused by Ray that we ran away from home. I don't remember much about it and I don't think we got very far. I just remember one afternoon we tired of being treated that way and just left, we wanted out. I don't remember if we took anything or not. I don't know how long we were gone or how far we walked but finally the police picked us up and took us home and as you might assume, we got our ass kicked.

In the summers we would always take a trip to Pennsylvania where Ray's brother owned a farm. I hated those trips and I hated his brother. I would get a sick feeling in anticipation of the trip. We would usually go twice a year. Ray's family viewed him as a fine father who had taken in this woman and her two children. I never talked to my

brother about it specifically but I think he hated it as much as me. When we got there we were put to work on the farm especially helping with hay baling. Bill and I were also expected to play with his brother's two sons. They would always take us down to a swimming hole where we would all swim naked (not unusual for young boys). The youngest son, Larry, seemed too interested in the whole affair but we never thought much about it. There was something about his suggestion and the way his eyes lingered that seemed off at the time. We just swam and had fun even though it was a little strange (we would later learn of some real distortion in his life).

After four years in Virginia Ray was transferred back to Hawaii. My mother was really happy to be going back home and especially to be close to family. When we first arrived there was no housing available on the base so we had to live off of the base for a while. The only place they could afford was a small two bedroom house in a small village of mostly Hawaiian and Japanese folks. The house was infested with roaches. When I went to bed I would pull the sheet up over my head and tuck it in around my legs because they fall on me as I slept. As I would lay there I could hear them fall on the sheet. I was just a young kid, it terrified me.

One day Ray thought it would be amusing to take all my clothes off of me and throw me outside. I fought as hard as I could to keep him from doing it but he overpowered me. I know my brother would've helped me but he was outside somewhere. My mother looked on and tried to stop him by telling he should leave me alone but he stripped me laughing the whole time. He then pushed me outside and locked the door behind me. It was the middle of the afternoon and there were all kinds of people around. I didn't know what to do, I was just standing there naked. There was a big

mango tree next to the house so I climbed up it hoping no one would see but they did. I was hiding in the tree crying and just wanting some clothes. A few minutes later (though it seemed like hours) my brother brought me a pair of pants. I remember my mother muttering, "Ray, you shouldn't have done that." She didn't witness a lot of our abuse but she knew it was happening.

There was a golf course right across the road. Two Hawaiians named Virgil and Biggie taught us how to jump the fence and get some work caddying. We loved it because we could make a little money and it was like getting out of hell for a few hours. Bill was about twelve and a half and I was eleven at the time.

Ray worked part-time as a cook at a "beer garden" on the base where they sold beer and made hamburgers. When he would go to work, we'd have to go with him and sit in the car and sometimes he'd bring us out a few burgers. My mom, Bill, and my other two brothers from Ray, and our new baby sister would just have to sit there for hours until he got off work. My new half sister was still in diapers and we'd have to have a diaper pail in the car and it smelled awful. It was crazy and I hated it more than I can say.

We finally moved on to the base and got a pretty nice house. The abuse continued. As my brother and I grew up the abuse became more mental than physical but it continued. He would do little things that made things hard to live with him. We had to buy milk at school for 25 cents a day. He'd give us five quarters at the beginning of the week. If we lost one, then we'd go one day without milk. It wasn't that he couldn't afford another quarter or that he was trying to teach us responsibility, he just liked to treat us poorly.

As you can tell, Ray's abuse took a lot of different forms. Sometimes it was pretty violent. One night Bill and I were doing the dishes and Ray decided to come in and inspect them. We had plastic plates and sometimes it was hard to get the plates completely clean. He decided they weren't clean enough and commenced to break each of the plates on our heads. In a tantrum he then pulled all the dishes out of the cupboards dumping them in the sink and told us to clean everything up. Things like this went on in our home for years. It was so much a part of my growing up I thought it was normal family life. I didn't realize how different a family could be.

One more incident might give you an idea of how the abuse continued but changed as we got older. Bill and I started to caddie at the golf course that had been across the street from our former house. It was 20-30 miles from our house on the base. We took a bus and then transferred to a second one to get to the course. Carrying bags at the golf course got us away from the hell at home. Ray was glad to have us work but would only give us enough money to get there. At that time our pay was three dollars a bag for eighteen holes. When we got home we would have to give all the money to Ray.

Some days we didn't make any money and had no way to get home. In a lot of ways we didn't even want to go home but we were only kids, where else could we go? Sometimes we would stand at the bus stop and beg people for money for our bus fare home. Other times the golf pro at the course would give us the money for the bus. He knew us pretty well and knew that eleven and thirteen year old boys need support. One day we hit the jackpot. We both made fifteen dollars and decided we would keep five dollars each. When we got home we each gave Ray ten dollars. He said he wanted the rest of the money but we told him that was all of it. I think I was more scared of him than

Bill was and I was the first to crack. I must have started to shake so he knew I was lying. We finally gave him the rest of the money and he beat us for lying.

I could go on and on with these kinds of stories. There were years and years of these sorts of things and they happened almost every day. People who live with abusers know what it's like and they probably suspect (rightly so) that they are worse things I could tell if I chose to. But I leave the account as is and I think you get a picture of what my growing up was like. There are two things that were obvious. First, Ray was a sick person and really distorted my growing up. At one point he even made my mother stop going to church. She told the priest she couldn't be a Catholic anymore not because it wasn't important to her but because Ray made her. And, second, as I would sit and think between patrols and watch all the killing, I had already had to learn how to harden myself to the dark side of life. I don't mean I didn't care when my buddies got wounded or killed but I had to learn how to function in a hostile world from the time I was young.

## Chapter 5: The Ground Pounders on Hill 69

The life of a 0311 ground pounder, grunts as we are called, revolved around patrols. The scary part of patrols is that you never know what to expect. We would stay off the trails as much as possible to avoid the booby traps. The result of not walking the trail was that we had to walk through thick, heavy brush and the tall elephant grass trying not to make any noise. As much as we hoped we wouldn't engage the enemy, but it seemed we had shots fired at us on every patrol. We constantly called in mortar fire or blew up VC bunkers. And there were constant casualties: VC rifle fire, booby traps or a grenade cut down Marines.

We relied on maps to show us where villages, rivers and streams were but they weren't always correct.

The worst part of patrols was walking across rice paddies, right out in the open. Sometimes we had no choice and had to cross them. We'd space ourselves about twenty yards apart so we weren't an easy target. It made you feel alone being that far apart but we just couldn't bunch up. Sometimes the Viet Cong would wait until we were in the open like that and then fire on us. There was no place to go for cover except the muddy water of the rice paddies full of buffalo dung. We would have to maneuver through that mess to the other side of the paddy trying all the while not to get shot.

The rice paddies were several hundred yards wide and long and when you were stuck in the middle under constant gunfire it was murderous. If your buddy got hit and was yelling for help you had to run to him under fire. This was our Marine code. This is what we did for each other over and over again. Marine after Marine would do this.

Even though many were only seventeen or eighteen years old, they became men as they risked their lives to save a wounded Marine. These guys would have been too young to buy a beer back home but were risking their lives day after day for thirteen months. There were a lot of Marines who gave their lives this way. It was for their country but it was more for their fellow Marine who was yelling for help.

The Vietnamese would mound up dirt on the edges of the rice paddies. They were sort of like dikes three to four feet wide and two to three feet deep. We walked on them when we crossed the paddies until we were fired on. As we walked on one of the rice paddy dikes the VC opened fire on us. We were on patrol not far from Hill 69. One of our Marines who had a funny build (he had the biggest ass I had ever seen), a black guy, carried the M-60 machine gun in our squad. As he tried to crawl over a dike to get more ammunition for the machine gun, he took a 50-caliber round right in his ass. It was no laughing matter, he was seriously wounded. These kinds of bullets were three or four inches long and would explode when it hit its target.

When we got to him he was lying face down in the rice paddy. His cheeks had been blown off but when we rolled him over he was still breathing. We were stunned. The round had just blown his ass off. We were able to get him on a chopper still alive but we never heard if he lived or not.

Day patrols were hard but patrols at night were even worse. They would put so many flares up to light the night sky it seemed like the Fourth of July. The flares made it so light out that it was possible to find the enemy. You could actually see the VC running toward you. Unfortunately, the flares also put us more in harms way because they could more easily spot us as well. If a flare went off while you were out in the open

we were trained to just stand still and hope that you looked like a tree or a bush to the enemy. But knowing the VC or NVA were out watching for us as we crossed the rice paddy, there was no way we were going to just stand still. If a flare went off while we were out in the open we would dive for cover and hope we weren't spotted. Our weapons fired tracers almost every third shell. Our tracers would make a red streak and pinpoint where we thought the enemy was. Their tracers were green. During a firefight in the dark all you could see were red and green streaks going back and forth. At night the enemy would be out looking for us and we'd be out looking for them. When we'd run into each other the shit would really hit the fan. I don't know if it was worse fighting at night but those battles seemed really intense.

June 18, 1966

Hello Mom.

Well the fun is over and I'm back on Hill 69 again. I'm back to the same routine of going on patrols and ambushes. I guess I better tell you the truth. We are going to make one of the biggest operations ever pulled off in Vietnam. We are not fighting the farmers anymore. We're fighting a trained Viet Cong Army. We are fighting a war where we meet them face to face and hand to hand.

On the day of the operation we sent out 18 recon people to scout the area for us, sorry to say 16 got killed and only two made it back. Hotel Co. was first to go, but we found out they had us outnumbered 3 to 1 and they had an ambush set up for us. So we called the operation off for a couple of days to figure out what we were going to do.

Right now I'm in a bunker on Hill 69 keeping watch. Well I have to go now. Will write soon. Only 7 or 8 months left.

Your son,  
John

P.S. Here are some of the men in my squad.  
Sgt Magana-----Squad Leader  
C/P Austain-----Fire Team Leader  
L/C Plyer-----Rifle Grenade  
Pfc. J. Barber-----Automatic Rifleman  
Pfc. Hurd-----Rifleman

Pfc. Hurd was killed the other day on patrol around Hill 69.

We had been on Hill 69 for about two or three weeks at that point doing “search and destroy” missions with other units in the area. Overall I had been in country for about three months and by this time I had lost a lot of friends and fellow Marines. These were guys I had talked to about what it was like back home and what things were like where they were from. Many were dead. It was hard to see them die but there wasn’t much I could do about it. It was strange but I had what you might call a sixth sense. Something inside me told me where the VC was. It didn’t work all the time but it worked enough that I’m sure it saved my life and the lives of others a number of times. It sounds hard to say it but you got used to seeing dead Marines. And, if you were honest, you couldn’t help but think, “I’m glad it was them and not me.” That’s just the way war is. Most of us developed a sort of combat fatalism, when it’s your time to go there’s nothing you can do to stop it. I don’t know why I made it back to the real world without getting shot or losing a body part. Sometimes I feel guilty having made it home in one piece.

In Marine training we were taught that our duty was to follow orders to the best of our ability. In Vietnam, things were a little different. When I first arrived in Vietnam I was gung ho and could not wait to kill some “gooks” (this would obviously be a derogatory term to a Vietnamese person but it was just how we talked about the enemy. When you’re at war you don’t worry about being politically correct.) It didn’t take long for me to realize I was in life and death situations and could be killed. So I got to the point where I stopped taking unnecessary chances and thought things out before I acted in certain situations. I think this helped save my life. The sixth sense I mentioned gave me an idea of where I should go and even what trail to take, most of the time it worked out.

Having this “sixth sense” was really critical when I’d be walking point. It was common practice for the VC and us to let the point man walk through the ambush before they would open fire on the rest. Walking point meant that you were responsible for all the Marines behind you. There would be about 15 to 20 yards between each guy in the squad depending on the terrain. Walking point you would look for booby traps or punji traps and you learned quickly how to stay alive.

In a day to day squad patrol through the jungles of your sector of operation you never know where the enemy is. You may think you know where he is, but when you get there he’s gone. Then again when you think he is nowhere to be found you get caught in an ambush, or you get VC shooting at you about a hundred yrs. away from your position. There were so many spider holes throughout the area that we didn’t know until it was too late. One of their favorite booby traps was putting an explosive device underneath a punji trap. So when you step down onto the punji trap, which are sharp bamboo sticks that go right through your boots, your first reaction is to pull your foot up right away. Then, as you pull your foot out of the punji trap you trigger the explosive and your foot blows off or you get seriously wounded. Make no mistake about it they could make a booby trap out of anything to kill you or seriously wound you.

Even though I was a “ground pounder,” a 0311, (my mos) I was good at what I did. I could smell Viet Cong if they were close by. Typically they would rotate different squad members to walk point because it was so dangerous. They put me on point a lot, however, because I could anticipate danger. Trying to walk through the jungle without making any noise was almost impossible. Even though there were supposed to be 14 men in a squad we never had more than 11 or 12 men that meant we had to carry all kinds

of extra equipment. There always seemed to be one or two guys who made way too much noise. Even in the heavy bush we did the best we could to be quiet.

Because we were always “short” men in our squad we had to double up. That is, we’d have to carry extra rounds for the machine gun or extra rockets for the rocket launcher. It seemed you always had more than you were supposed to carry. When guys got wounded or killed we would get replacements. We called the replacement “two year wonders” because they had enlisted under special circumstances that meant they only had to serve for two years instead of four like the rest of us. (There was such a need for men in the field that they were offering reduced time to get more enlistments.) It seemed to us that they were less prepared and very under-trained. We heard they had been rushed through training to get them out here quicker. Their lack of training got a lot more of them wounded and killed. When replacements joined us I didn’t even try to learn their names because I thought they’d be gone soon.

Every so often we would just stop the patrol to get our bearings with our map and compass. We would also use the pause to listen for any unusual noises. Typically we would be on our way to an objective such as a village, a riverbed, or an identified NVA stronghold. You knew you could encounter the enemy any moment so you always had your finger on the trigger. On these patrols we would sweat our ass off. It was 100 degrees and we were carrying full packs. But we were ready if we had to go into action.

The first three men in the line were most important. The point man was leading the way based on his reading of the map watching and listening for the enemy. The second man watched from side to side looking especially for the punji traps. The radioman was third in line and was in constant communication with other units. When

needed he would call in mortar fire and could even request fighter jet support if there were any in the area. We used air support a lot.

June 28, 1966

Dear Mom,

Well I received your box you sent me the same day I got your letter. I sure enjoyed the cookies and books and newspapers. We're in the mountains again for a week or so, doing sweeps and ambushes. Then we go to Hill 76 to rest for a couple of days and do it all over again. We are going where no one has gone before maybe we will see some action.

A couple of days ago I led my platoon through a mine field and no one got hurt. I felt pretty proud of myself. I haven't had a good night sleep in a long time. It's about 105 degrees right now and getting hotter.

I still think of Mary Ellen a lot. If she knows it or not it really keeps me going. Well getting ready to go on patrol now. Will write soon again.

Your son,

John

[We were on patrol in the middle of the afternoon when we realized we had wandered into a minefield. We noticed the tiny prongs that formed an "x" (the top of a mine) sticking out of the ground and trip wires. Both were indicators that we were in trouble. After we realized our predicament we actually noticed a tiny sign in Vietnamese warning the locals of the mines. I proceeded every so slowly, it was really intense. The lieutenant said to the squad, "Wherever Barber puts his foot you put yours." Fortunately I could see all the mines that were in our way and we made it through.]

It was about 9 or 10 am when my squad leader gave me and two other Marines an assignment to protect some guys hanging telephone lines on poles along the outer perimeter of Hill 69. The area was really sandy almost like the beach. As we walked along the road protecting the linemen a sniper opened fire on us. The three of us all moved toward the sniper trying to get in position to return fire. We were lying in the sand about five feet apart.

For some reason the Marine on my right jumped up and started running at the bunker where the sniper was. The sniper shot him two or three times and he started

screaming in pain. The sniper also had me and the other Marine pinned down and we couldn't get to the wounded Marine right away. The snipers rounds was hitting all around us so I tried to dig a hole in the sand so I could take cover but I couldn't dig fast enough. The sniper's bullets got closer and closer, they were exploding right in front of me. I remember thinking to myself, "if you get hit don't yell or scream, just take the pain and hope it's not too bad."

All of a sudden mortar shells started landing all around the sniper's bunker until one made a direct hit. The shells were coming from Hill 69. Someone had realized what was going on and called in the mortar fire for us. The other Marine and I checked the bunker where the sniper had been but we didn't find a body. There was a tunnel in the bunker so we assumed he got away. We threw a couple grenades in the tunnel and left. We attended to our wounded buddy and got him on a chopper back to base camp. After we got him on the chopper we took a deep breath and went back to guarding the linemen for a few more hours.

This was the rhythm of life on Hill 69. There were jobs to do and patrols to go on. When your squad was assigned a mission, you went and did it. It was hard to explain why some Marines reacted as they did under fire. We didn't know why the guy protecting the linemen got up and ran right at the sniper. Sometimes it seemed like they just reacted without thinking.

One of our first patrols from Hill 69 was in the middle of the afternoon. We spotted two VC who were off in the brush and who stood up and ran. One of the young Marines in our squad started running after them. We shouted at him to stop and come back but it was too late. The VC had lured him right into a booby trap that exploded and

killed him. In our training we were told never to chase VC into the brush for this very reason. Where was this kid's head at? But that was the problem. Sometimes a Marine would just react and not think. This was a big VC tactic. They lured you into their booby traps. It was this constant presence of death as much as anything that scared the hell out of me every time I went on a patrol.

I've thought a lot about how scared I was. I think all the Marines were scared but we made sure never to let anyone else know. I know I wasn't a coward, it wasn't that kind of scared. This kind of scared made all your senses more alert. It made you conscious of every little thing going on around you. I constantly took in everything I heard, smelled and saw. I processed it all and made decisions. I had this deep sense that something was going to happen to me.

Sometimes I'd be walking down a trail in the jungle and could feel the enemy's gun sites focused on my neck. It's like the feeling you have when you think someone is staring at you and you turn around and, sure enough, someone is looking right at you. I lived with this feeling the whole time I was in Vietnam. It was that constant reality that made you anxious to go on patrols, we hated them. We didn't like to go ambushes in the middle of the night or be on guard duty all night. But we did it because we were Marines. We did it to save each other's lives and our own. Maybe we did it because we were scared shitless or because we were trained to, I don't know, we just did it.

There were thing happening in the war at this point that were getting more news coverage than our daily search and destroy missions. Earlier in the spring Buddhist demonstrations against the Saigon (South Vietnamese) regime had started in the northern cities of Da Nang and Hue' (the ancient capital of Vietnam). These were the kinds of

things that attracted the media. By June the South Vietnamese government had sent troops to end the demonstrations and take more control of those two cities. Also in June the US targeted and began to bomb oil depots in the North Vietnam. These weren't dramatic events but were incidents in the continuing escalation of the war. For us they had little effect. We just got up did our patrols and did what we had to do.

We dragged in from one patrol tired and caked with the red Vietnamese mud all over us. We were returning to our base at Hill 69 from a four day search and destroy mission. We were exhausted. Suddenly we heard clapping and cheering and wondered what was going on. As we got closer to the camp we could see a makeshift stage with a hundred Marines standing around it. Then we heard the music and could see there were women on the stage performing. Finally when we were close enough we realized that it was Diana Ross and the Supremes, on Hill 69! We only got to watch them perform a couple songs but for those few moments, in our minds, we were back in the states. It was great! I wish I could remember what the songs were but it didn't matter. When the songs were over reality hit us like a ton of bricks and brought our morale to a new low. They got in a chopper and were off to their next show somewhere in Vietnam.

We had a couple days of rest to clean our weapons and get some hot chow before we had to do it all over again. In the hot and humid weather you could run your finger down you neck or arm and the dirt would just roll off. We still were responsible for manning the perimeter around the hill but not patrols. For a day or two we didn't have to worry about booby traps and being shot at, we could relax.

During the four days in the field we'd get sick of eating c-rations. Some of them weren't too bad. The best c-rations were the wieners and beans. There were also lima

beans, ham and eggs, and cans of bread we could heat up with our blue heat tabs or a small amount of C-4 (plastic explosives). The C-4 worked really well as long as we kept the blasting cap away from it. C-4 could heat up a can of coffee in five seconds. I used to mix coffee and hot chocolate together to drink. Today Starbucks charges three bucks for a cup of that, I could have been rich if I had thought to market it!! We also had peanut butter and crackers in our c-rations that worked pretty well to cure diarrhea.



Storage depot for sea rations, beer, and soda.

We actually had a pretty big chow hall on Hill 69. We always knew when we were going on a big mission because the cooks would make us steak and eggs for breakfast. The reality was that a lot of Marines probably wouldn't make it back that day and they wanted us to have a good breakfast. No steak and eggs – they didn't expect a dangerous mission and we'd probably make it back alive. (Even today if I'm with someone who orders steak and eggs for breakfast it reminds me of Hill 69.)

Water was really important while we were on Hill 69 but was never a problem. The choppers would fly in big containers of water called “water buffaloes.” They placed them at various spots on the hill so we always had plenty of water. We had to have water because the heat was unbearable. When we couldn’t find water while on patrols, we would have to drink the water from the rice paddies after we added iodine pills. I know it’s disgusting but one time I was filling up a bunch of canteens for the squad in a rice paddy. I looked up and about twenty feet away there was some kind of large animal taking a piss in the paddy. It was 105 degrees and we were thirsty. I had to fill the canteens. It didn’t taste so bad but I would’ve given a month’s pay for an ice-cold glass of water.

One night I was on perimeter watch with my buddy and it was my turn to stand guard. The Marine I was with decided to sleep for a while outside the foxhole. He was so tired that when he laid down he put his head right on an ant hill without knowing it. He was in such a deep sleep that he didn’t even feel the ants biting him. When I woke him up in two or three hours I didn’t even recognize him, his head seemed like it was twice its normal size. He had nothing to put on the bites and was too tired to go look for any. The next thing I did was to call in a chopper for him to be flown to Da Nang where he could be treated. People back in the states weren’t aware of the trouble we had with bugs and snakes especially while we slept.

September 26, 1966

Dear Mom,

I’m still on Hill 69 doing patrols and ambushes. I sure don’t like it up here at all. It seems like every time we come up here we have an operation or something important to do. They have me on a fifteen minute stand-by which my buddy

and I change every day. This means I can be called out anywhere if something bad happens and our Marines need help right away.

You might think this is stupid but I wrote Mary Ellen a letter a couple days ago. I told her I didn't expect a letter back, but I hope I do. It sure will build up my morale here.

What do you think of me extending my tour over here? I don't suppose you would like that but I'm thinking of doing it. I don't want to leave my Marine buddies. Well I've got to go now. Its starting to rain pretty hard. Will try to write soon.

Your son,  
John

I was assigned to a listening post with three other Marines on the top of Hill 69 one night. Things were very tense because intelligence had told us we might get hit tonight. From our view we could see the whole compound. We were a couple hundred yards away with a big bunker right beside us. It was a cool night about eight five degrees with a cool breeze blowing. We all had a sense of what was about to happen. We were all spread out and looking into the night hoping not to see anything. As our eyes scanned the compound we could see the 105s, cannons and mortars all surrounded by concertina wire. The wire was meant to keep the enemy out as much as possible. On a normal night we would have been talking with our buddy about the day we'd had or the letter we got from home, but not tonight, we were ready to engage the enemy.

It was one or two in the morning when the compound was shelled by mortars. All hell broke loose. We saw Viet Cong coming across the concertina wire. They were trying to blow up the wire so they could get to the cannons and mortars. We kept expecting to get fired on in our foxhole but the attack never got to us. Some of the VC made it through the outer perimeter but never made it to the cannons or mortars. A lot of them were killed. Someone had called for "Puff the Magic Dragon (a DC 3 plane with two big machine guns mounted on each side)." Command thought there was a lot more

VC than there were. The firefight was over before the DC 3 even arrived. We came down from our listening post and started to clean up the mess. While a few Marines were killed that night, we didn't have as many killed and wounded as we had in firefights before this.

The first time I saw the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), I thought they were boy scouts. They were tiny and skinny and couldn't have weighed more than seventy pounds each. They spoke in broken English and giggled like school girls. We would see them walking down the road holding hands or with their arms around each other. I didn't know if this was just a custom or true affection. I found it hard to believe that these guys would be fighting along side us. I knew I didn't want to be in a battle and have to depend on them. But South Vietnam was their country so sometimes they would join us to fight the NVA.



South Vietnamese soldiers getting ready to go on a patrol.

I found it hard to trust ARVN soldiers. I was suspicious that they were ARVN by day and Viet Cong by night. When ever we did a patrol with them I always thought that they knew were the VC were. There must have been good ARVN soldiers somewhere in

Vietnam but I never saw them. It was their country but they didn't seem to care. We would make them walk the point so if there were any booby traps they'd get hit and not us. We sort of knew where the VC were as well and we would tell the ARVN point man to go down the trail to where we thought they were but he would refuse. I thought it was because he didn't want to encounter his buddies who were fighting with the VC. So we'd threaten to shoot them if he didn't go. They didn't like that but we didn't care.



A South Vietnamese soldier reads a letter from home.

At times I saw ARVN soldiers walking down trails without their weapons. I asked one, "Where is your weapon?" Laughing and in bad English he replied, "If I carry a rifle, the VC will shoot me." I just shook my head in disbelief. This was how they were going to save their country? They acted like going on an ambush was like going on a picnic. They took hammocks, food and transistor radios. It all seemed like a joke.

The command had set up a movie for all those who weren't on duty to watch. I still remember the film, "Alfie." (The movie may not have been as famous as it's theme song, "What's It All About Alfie.") I was sitting next to the first sergeant's tent when the call came in. All I heard was the first sergeant say, "We can be ready in eight hours." The First Battalion 7<sup>th</sup> Marines had been almost wiped out by the division of NVA and

we were going to replace them. They were operating north of Con Tien which was much farther north very close to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). We had been doing routine patrols around Hill 69 but at Con Tien we'd be in "the big ball game." We would be facing off with the North Vietnamese Army there.

We were told to pack our sea bags with the things we couldn't take with us. So we started putting things in our sea bags to be shipped home if anything happened to us. We knew why we were packing things in the bags but we didn't want to think about it. I put a lot of junk in my bag and hoped I'd see it again. This was the precaution they took with our things in case we got wounded or killed but we all knew in our minds we were coming back. We had to think that way or you'd go nuts focusing on dying. (By the way, I never did get my stuff back and I had a camera and some good pictures from Hill 69.)

While we were getting ready we were told that the second squad needed a radio man. I thought that if I volunteered I could get out of walking point and maybe stay alive a little longer. So I volunteered for the job and got it. As the radioman I had to remember all kinds of frequencies to call. At first I had to write them all down on paper to remember them but I would have to get rid of the paper. If I got shot or captured I couldn't let those frequencies fall into enemy hands. I finally just memorized all the call signs. I thought I'd never be able to do it but I did.

The next morning we were loaded onto choppers. It was a cool, crisp morning but the sun would be up soon and it would be another hot, sticky day. As the choppers landed they kicked up clouds of dust and dirt. Each squad ran to their assigned chopper and boarded. As the choppers rose the cool air dried us off. From our vantage point in

the chopper we could see we were going deeper and deeper into the jungle. We saw fewer and fewer rice paddies.

We flew for about forty minutes and finally landed in a jungle area. All of our companies got in a line after we got off the choppers and went to the area where the 7<sup>th</sup> Marines had lost 80 percent of their unit. We were the lead company on the march. As radioman I walked with the platoon commander at all times. The platoon commander knew all the call signs well so I wasn't as worried or nervous about it. As we marched I had a lot to carry. I had my backpack with things I needed like extra ammunition, dry socks, c-rations, cigarettes, an extra battery for the radio and I was carrying the radio. I had about fifty pounds on my back all the time. That wouldn't have been so bad because I did get off of walking point. However, I was completely unaware of the fact that the average life expectancy of a radioman in Vietnam was seventeen minutes. That's right – seventeen minutes! The Viet Cong tried to hit the radioman first to knock out the squad's communications. I wish I had known that before I volunteered for the job.

We walked along a trail for hours with two fighter jets flying as an escort. Occasionally we would see villagers working in the fields but very few. The NVA was in the area and a firefight could break out at any time.

We were still walking in the middle of the afternoon when we came upon a pile of sticks in the middle of the trail. We immediately noticed there were no villagers in the field so we passed word down the line to watch out for an ambush. (I was almost convinced that our two South Vietnamese interpreters were Viet Cong.) There was a strange arrangement of bushes here. First there would be an open area and then a row of bushes then another open area followed by another row of bushes. We were puzzled by

the sticks in the trail. The interpreters told us they didn't know why they were there. Later we found out that it was a signal to the villagers to stay out of the area.

We decided to continue down the trail and were immediately caught in an ambush. We had months and months of training about how not to get caught in an ambush and there we were, right in one of the open areas with the NVA firing on us. We dropped down on the hard dusty ground and started firing back at them. There were so many muzzle flashes from the enemy we couldn't count them all (muzzle flashes is one of the immediate ways you assess the number of enemy.) We knew there were at least 10-12 NVA firing on us. I shot all forty rounds from my M-14, reloaded with another magazine and fired again. When the enemy quit firing for a few seconds we assumed they were reloading and we ran for cover. We got behind some rocks and the bushes and I tried to call the first squad on the radio but no answer.

Just to the right of me was the M-60 machine gun. They were blasting away at the enemy when the Marine firing the gun was hit. Another Marine jumped over and started firing the machine gun and he got shot as well. I called in air support to give us a hand. We threw red smoke bombs in the area of the enemy so the jets could use it as a target. The jets came in so low we could almost touch them. They were so close that the shell casings from their machine guns fell on us. Once the jets got there with their massive fire power the firefight was over in a matter of minutes.

During the battle my lieutenant was shot through the side of his stomach. The bullet went right through him. A machine gunner to my left had been firing away when his gun jammed. He had gotten on his knees to reload the gun when he got hit in the stomach too. He looked over at me and said something I've never forgotten, "I've got

jelly in the belly.” Then watching him fall over was like watching a movie in slow motion. I thought, “My God is this really happening to me?” I tried not to lose focus on what was happening around me. For a few seconds it was like there was no sound, I couldn’t hear a thing. Then I heard like it was far in the distance, “Barber, Barber,” until finally I popped back to reality and heard my lieutenant yelling, “Barber, the radio, the radio!”

After the firefight was over we went through the grizzly routine of gathering up our dead and wounded and putting them on the choppers. The reason I couldn’t raise the first squad on the radio when we got ambushed was because most of them had been ambushed and killed as well, including their radioman. I had gotten to know their radioman who was a small black guy and a good Marine. Before we had left for the mission he and I had been talking about home and how we only had eight or nine months to do. People had heard us and when they heard he was killed no one ever talked about going home again. It was bad luck. We lost so many Marines in that firefight that we no longer were the lead company. We were sent to the back to bring up the rear.

Finally we arrived at our outpost. The site was a small hill with jungle all around us. There were five 105 mm cannons and tanks on the hill with us. Each tank took a strategic position on the hill incase the enemy tried to hit us. We had no idea how long we were going to be there but as soon as we arrived we dug foxholes in case the enemy lobbed mortar shells on us. It was about eight at night when we were digging our foxholes and we couldn’t see a thing. But the longer we dug the more our eyes got used to the dark and eventually we could see what we needed to. Each company was assigned a portion of the hill to protect.

(No date)

Dear Mom,

I'm sorry I haven't written in a while but I've been busy. I guess you know where I am by now. If you don't I'm at the DMZ. Any further north we'd be in trouble. I got your letter about Bill calling home. I'm glad he did and I bet you're happy. We are going to be here for a while all depending on how long we last up here. It sure is Hell up here. We get mortared every once in a while. I've lost a lot of buddies, but not this kid. I'll make it back OK. I won't be writing for a while, so don't worry. I've never been so tired and worn out in my life. Don't worry Mom.

Your son,  
John

This area was called Con Thien. It was just south of the Demilitarized Zone. It was a bad place to be, the NVA were everywhere. My foxhole was right next to one of the tanks so I felt a little more protected. On a clear night we could get a radio station from Da Nang and listen to music. We went on search and destroy missions every day while we were in Con Thien. Everyday we had someone shot or blown up by a booby trap.

11 Oct. 1966  
Vietnam

Dear Mom,

I'm sorry I wrote such a sloppy letter last time. I didn't have much time to do anything. I still can't believe I'm in the DMZ. We are getting a lot of men hurt and killed. We are right in Ho Chi Min's back yard. We are fighting men who will fight back. Its like the second World War.

I'm fine and in good health. I seen John Speigal the other day. He is fine and we can't wait to get home. We plan on buying a bar when we get out. He'll go half and I'll go half. When I get out of here we are going to Da Nang as our permanent home until I get ready to go state side.

I got the football clippings you sent me. I'll try to get them back to you. Don't worry about me because I'll be alright. Bill made it back so will I.

See you soon,  
John

One night we heard several choppers flying in and out of our area. The choppers hardly ever flew at night. It was so dark you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. All we were able to see were the red-hot engines of the choppers landing and taking off again. You couldn't help but wonder what was going on.

The choppers had brought more ammunition for us and shells for the 105s. We were told there was a division of hard-core NVA coming toward us. We pointed our weapons straight ahead into the dark. Our 105s were pointed straight up so the rounds would fall just outside our lines.

We waited all night for them to come, hour after hour. We had decided that we would kill as many of them as we could before they got to us. Each foxhole was fully supplied with ammunition and grenades. We were scared but ready. I wrote a letter to my brother telling him he could have all my clothes and my golf clubs. He was my beneficiary if I didn't make it. (I still think he has the letter to this day.) The last time I remembered being that scared was when my stepfather was beating me on my birthday. I think I was eight and he was using a 2 x 2 piece of wood.

No one slept that night even though we had a lot of firepower at our disposal. We thought we would hear something from the listening post but all was quiet. We heard nothing. Finally at about 2 am we heard explosions far off in the distance. 500 pound bombs were being dropped on the NVA. In addition to the bombs in the distance, we heard something we had never heard before. There was a screeching sound going over our heads time and time again. We asked the lieutenant, "What the hell was that?" He

said, "Those are sixteen inch shells from a battleship off the coast." Those bombs and shells took care of the enemy that night and boy were we glad. It was good that we didn't have to face the enemy that night not because we were scared but just so we could live to fight another day.

I think one of the things that kept me alive was that I had a pretty good lieutenant. He didn't make a lot of mistakes and tried not to put the men in harm's way unnecessarily. One day he told our squad to go out and make contact with the enemy and try to bring back a prisoner. He told the nine or ten of us that if we got in trouble there were no other men he could send to help. He told us we could have mortar support but that was all. So we did as we were ordered. We went out into the jungle, found some NVA, overpowered them and got a prisoner. We had two Marines pretty badly wounded but were able to bring the prisoner back for questioning.

The lieutenant was really pleased with our patrol and announced that he wanted us to do the same thing tomorrow. He told us we had done an outstanding job. He got a map out and showed us where he wanted us to go. We told him, "Yes, Sir," but we were upset. It was like we could just stroll out and find a prisoner and bring him back. It frustrated us because we had two Marines wounded and it didn't seem like there was a great need for another prisoner. So the next day we went back out to the jungle but this time we found a nice place to lay down and relax for four or five hours. We were careful not to put anyone in harms way and we let the listening post know what we were up to. This might not have been right, but at that time we had to look out for our own ass or no one else would. Our lieutenant didn't send us out very often when he didn't need to but

we thought this time he did. You learn quickly how to stay alive and how to make decisions to keep yourself and you buddies alive.

It was when I got to Con Thien that I killed the first Viet Cong I'm sure of. I had been in a lot of firefights and may well have killed other VC or NVA but none that I saw a bullet of mine actually hit. We never knew if we hit any of the enemy because once the firing began you would just be shooting in their direction. As a matter of fact there were only five or six that I actually know my bullet actually killed.

I saw an NVA soldier leaning on a tree and aiming at someone. I aimed my M-14 at him and fired. He immediately disappeared but I thought I had hit him. I crawled about thirty feet toward him. When I got to him there was a saw a small hole in his forehead. I rolled him over and half of the back of his head was gone.

I didn't know how I would react to killing someone. When I got to him he was lifeless, there was no movement. He was dead. It wasn't until later in the day when everything had quieted down that I was able to think about what I had done. I started to quiver and shake, it was uncontrollable for a few minutes but then it subsided. It made me wonder how Marines reacted that had killed a lot more VC than I had. No one ever talked about it as far as I can remember. We just talked about how to stay alive.

The NVA soldier I killed had a knapsack with him. I went through it and found a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes, American made toothpaste and a bar of American soap. I'm sure he got all this stuff from a dead Marine. There was also a North Vietnamese flag in the pack that I took.

## Chapter 6:

When we would sit around and talk about home I never knew quite what to say. I could tell stories about growing up like the other Marines but I never remember feeling good about my life at home. Things changed as Bill and I got older. The abuse was still there but it changed forms.

In 1960 Ray (my stepfather) got orders to go back to the states. We moved to a town called Washington in southwestern Pennsylvania (not D.C.). We had a big house in a section of the town called East Washington. Ray was still in the army but he took a job in a nearby gas station working at night to make some extra money. He eventually bought the gas station once he got out of the Army.

I was now in the eighth grade and my brother was in high school at the East Washington High School. Bill and I had been in so many schools we lost count but it must have been eight or nine. There were only about 125 students in the school so everyone knew everyone else's business. Yet somehow we were able to conceal what was happening at our home. The abuse continued. Sometimes it was more intense than others. I remember wanting to ask some of my friends what their families were like but I could never get up the courage.

Ray would make us wear the same clothes to school for at least three days in a row. The others at school would look at us and say, "Are those the only clothes you have?" It was embarrassing. Once in a while we'd sneak out of the house with other

clothes and then change into them at school. Because of Ray, we never had friends over to our house. I don't remember anyone coming over the whole time I was growing up.

People have their own images of what abuse is like. Two of the hardest parts for me was that it was constant, one thing after another. And, second, it was always different, things you couldn't anticipate. It wasn't always a physical or horrible thing, but it was always wrong. For instance, Ray would get mad at me and make me go down in the cellar and eat dinner with the dog. He would do this from time to time when he was mad. (The funny thing was that for me it was better to eat with the dog than with him.) Sometimes he would eat in his underwear and pass gas while everyone else was eating. He thought it was funny but it made me sick. When his own son wouldn't finish his meal he would put the food on my plate and make me finish it.

We didn't have a shower in our house, just a bathtub. Even by the time I was fourteen or fifteen, I was only allowed to have about an inch of water in the tub to take a bath. While I would be taking a bath he would walk in to the bathroom (that had no lock on the door), sit on the toilet, smoke a cigarette, and do his business even though I was taking a bath. The toilet was right next to the tub and it was embarrassing.

One night my brother and I went to a party at a friend's house. We were told to be home by eleven. We were having fun and lost track of the time and didn't get home until after 11:30. Ray had the doors and windows locked. It was the middle of the winter and we were really cold. That night we had no choice but to sleep in the garage and we just froze all night. The next morning Ray asked us if we had learned our lesson and in the future we should come home when we were told to.

My brother couldn't take the abuse any longer so, after his junior year of high school, he quit school and joined the Marines. Bill had to do this to get away, but Ray was delighted to have him leave. In fact he paid someone to drive my brother to Pittsburgh so he could enlist. I was really upset that Bill was leaving me but I understood why he did and I didn't blame him. I remember one time Ray told him that he would be a bum the rest of his life. It seemed that Ray was glad to get rid of Bill so his abuse could be concentrated on me. He knew I was afraid of him and that he could have his way with me.



Bill (left), Glenn (middle), and me (right) in  
Washington, PA 1963 or 1964

I don't know what the psychology of abuse is. I don't know all the consequences that come along with it. But for me it had two immediate results. First, I really resented that my mother didn't do anything at all. I knew she was bullied herself by Ray and was afraid of him, but she should have done something. Second, when I hear news reports of children turning violent because of their abuse, I understand it completely. Even in the most extreme cases where abused children kill a parent or parents I find myself thinking, "I know exactly why they did it." I know I hated Ray enough to do violence to him if I would have had the chance. I don't remember much about my step siblings except they never had to go through the abuse Bill and I did. However, later on I discovered that he had been mean to them as well.

In the summer, when I was seventeen, Ray's brother, his wife, and two sons came to visit us. These were the same relatives we would drive to Pennsylvania to visit when we lived in Virginia. The one son, Larry, brought his fiancée with him. (Larry was the one I always felt uncomfortable around.) My bedroom was up in the attic and I was on my bed doing my homework. I was surprised when Larry came up to see me and soon found out why I felt so uncomfortable around him. After a while he came over and grabbed me between my legs and started feeling me in a way I certainly didn't want. I ran downstairs and out the door, over to the gas station. I didn't know what to do or who to talk to. I tried to forget about it and act like it never happened. These are the kind of things that should not happen to a boy and I've never been able to talk about until now.

Here's another example of the crazy things Ray would do, things that made no sense. During my senior year in high school he would sometimes come and take me out of school early. As a teenager I thought it was great to leave school early. I'm not sure

my mom knew about this but she never said anything if she did. Ray had another part-time job in addition to the gas station. He worked at a local college in the ROTC building. Even though I was glad to get out of school it turned out to be really weird because he would make me sit in the car the whole time he worked. My grades were really bad and there I sat in the car and no one cared. The other students and teachers thought I was stupid. I really struggled in school but they had no idea about what was going on in my home. When I would get a chance to hang out at my friend's house I was always amazed at what a normal family was like. I really wished I could have a family like that.

Not only did Ray abuse us but he disrespected my mother by having a girlfriend on the side. This happened while he was working at the gas station. He knew my mother didn't know anything about it and was pretty bold about the whole thing. He would either meet her at a bar in town or in a car down the street from the gas station. This went on for a few months until my mother finally found out about it. She was really mad but just didn't have the courage to leave him. Ray didn't allow my mother to go to town or the store by herself. He always had to go along. She had grown to hate her life but just couldn't do anything about it. She wanted to leave Ray but had no money, her family was far away in Hawaii, and she couldn't leave her children. But I had to get out. I told my mother that as soon as I graduated I was joining the Marines just like Bill.

During my senior year in high school I worked at the gas station that Ray now owned. He paid me a dollar a day. I had so little respect for him that I would steal money from the station to buy cigarettes and to go drinking with my friends. In school I got really bad grades but I didn't care anymore. I got the message that no one else cared

about my grades and how I was doing so I stopped caring myself. I kept drinking and smoking and going to parties but everyone just seemed to ignore that stupid kid, me. I do understand this part of the psychology of being a child: that when people tell you over and over again that you're stupid you begin to believe it. And in those days, the schools would just push you along until you graduated regardless of whether you were learning anything or not.



Me (right) and my friend at Ray's gas station.

While I was working at the gas station I used to see this girl walk past on her way to a friend's house. This, of course, was Mary Ellen and I knew I wanted to meet her. Her two brothers used to hang out some at the gas station. One day I asked if they minded if I gave their sister a call. Her brother Jim said, "Sure, give her a call." So I summoned my courage, called her and she agreed to go out on a date. She had been out of high school for a year and was working for the telephone company.

We dated at that point for a little over a year. Like most people who dated then, we would talk on the phone and I would go over to her house. Her parents were very nice and liked me a lot. I guess we were kind of in love but after my family situation I didn't really know what love was or even how it was supposed to feel. We used to talk about getting married and having lots of kids but it was really just talk. Even though we were young and I didn't know what it meant to be in love or have a good family there was something about Mary Ellen that made me want to be with her forever.



Mary Ellen Enloth - 1964

Then something happened at home and it just made me feel like I needed to let her have some room. I told her we should go our own way for a while and see what happens. I guess this was kind of stupid because I knew what a special person she was but I knew I was going to the Marines after I graduated and I didn't think it was fair to her to be tied down. On top of that I figured I'd be going to Vietnam after boot camp and

it wouldn't be fair to her to try and continue a relationship. (It would be six years before I would talk to her again except for the ill-fated phone call from boot camp.)

So I got my diploma and kept my word. I got the hell out of my crazy life and joined the Marines. Now I was in Con Thien in another crazy world, the killing fields of Vietnam. So I would sit in my foxhole and think of all the mess around me wondering how I could stay alive. Then I would think back on my life growing up and wonder how I made it that far and not gone crazy. But things would get worse.

## Chapter 7: Operation Prairie

In the middle of August in 1966 we began an action that was called “Operation Prairie.” The operation lasted over three months and was focused in the Quang Tri Province up near the DMZ and not far from the jungles and hills surrounding Khe Sanh. We met the enemy with full force. It was as if we were in their backyard. They knew every inch of the province and it was our intention to kick them out. There was more intense fighting than we had ever seen before.

Operation Prairie was planned to cut the NVA infiltration through the DMZ into the South. The Air Force had begun bombing oil depots in the North at the end of June. This was the heaviest ground action of the war to date and at it’s height it involved seven Marine infantry battalions supported by air and artillery units, ARVN forces, and Navy gun ships at sea. Of course, grunts never knew the full extent of what we were engaged in, we just followed orders day in and day out. The battles were in the rivers and jungles of this northern region against a well-trained and fully equipped regular army.

This operation featured the kind of warfare Vietnam became famous for. As we would struggle over really difficult mountainous terrain and dense jungle growth, often we would have to rely on bombs and napalm to clear the way. The enemy was deeply

dug in. They had tunnels and “spider holes” everywhere. There were intense attacks and counter attacks. We would battle fiercely to take a hill that was deemed to be of strategic importance. These battles would be costly with many casualties. Then after such intense fighting we’d be told to abandon the hill we had fought so hard to take and move on to the next target. We were supposed to be a part of a bigger “sweeping” movement that was intended to drive the NVA toward other units of ours so they could be destroyed.

The NVA and Viet Cong were everywhere but were also really hard to find. One of the reasons they were so hard to find was because of the way they dug in. On one search and destroy mission we saw a number of NVA running out of an area we were patrolling. As we continued on we discovered a huge bunker built underground. A couple of Marines were sent into it to see what was there. They found a field hospital with operating tables, lights, new bandages, used bandages and bloody rags. They had also left some weapons. We must have surprised them and frustrated them having to leave such a massive installation. We took the things we thought we could use and then blew the bunker up with C-4 (plastic explosives).



I found this picture in a book called ‘Vietnam’, by Larry Burrows – 2002. This is me (second in from right) and my squad saying a prayer before we go out on Operation Prairie.

It seemed like we were fighting all the time in the tall elephant grass (here it was about eight feet tall). It was so hard to fight in that stuff. It was hard to see the enemy and it was also hard to distinguish them from your own men. We were under fire more and more each day and lost lots of Marines. We continued to lose Marines to the booby traps that were everywhere and we were also aware of the fact that we were mostly facing the NVA not just the Viet Cong.

We were engaged with the enemy in the elephant grass one day and bullets were whizzing by all around me. A young Marine, only eighteen years old crawled up next to me and asked me for a cigarette. I gave him the cigarette and he kept moving to another spot. Not five minutes later, still with the battle going on, a couple Marines came past carrying his dead body. He still had my cigarette in his mouth. Stuff like that really got

to me because he had told me he just got married before he left the States. To this day I wish I had learned his name.

Part of our routine at this point was to spend the night in an ambush. I must have been on 20 or 30 of them but it's easy to lose count. There were only four or five times that we engaged the enemy on an ambush. The VC ruled the night. They were really good in the dark. Sometimes it also made them overconfident.

Waiting hour after hour for something to happen on an ambush was both frustrating and boring. It was especially bad if it was raining or if the Marine close to you fell asleep and started to snore. Snoring on an ambush could get you killed. If the Marine next to you started to snore you'd hit him while still trying to be quiet. The next day we'd confront him, "What the fuck were you trying to do, get us killed?" Then he'd be assigned shit detail or walking point. This was the unwritten rule. If someone was caught snoring on an ambush they would either be put in the most dangerous position the next day (like walking the point or the flank) or given the worst job (like cleaning the shit hole). A Marine that snored had to know he was putting everyone else at risk. There were several ambushes that I was on that were pretty typical of what Marines in combat experienced.

One night, it must have been one or two in the morning, five or six of us were sitting in ambush just off of a trail we thought the VC used at night. Sure enough, six of them came walking down the trail right into our killing zone. They were talking as if they just came from a party. As soon as they were close enough we opened fire. It seemed that in ten seconds it was over. We searched their bodies for maps and papers and then shoved their bodies off of the trail. The ambush was over and we went back to

our base camp. During this time we went from a base camp on one hill to set up on another hill and to be honest it is hard to remember one hill from the other and which things happened at base camp and others on other hills. You could be at base camp one day, on another hill for two or three days and back to base camp or still another hill.

It was critical to know protocol when returning to base. When you were about 50 yards from the perimeter you'd radio in and tell them you were coming. Then you'd set off a green flare. If you weren't identified you'd be shot. You would also know the password for the day that was normally something like "Ivory Soap" or "Sugar Bear." They would challenge you with "ivory" and you would respond with "soap" or whatever the password was.

There were crazy things that happened on ambushes also. One cool and damp night at about 2 am we decided to pack it in for the night because it just seemed nothing was happening. All of a sudden the Marine next to me whispered that he heard something coming down the trail. We saw four VC walking toward us with their rifles on their shoulder like they were taking a stroll in the park. When they got into our kill zone the Marine next to me jumped out and grabbed the last one in the line. As the rest of us opened fire, he took a grenade and stuffed it in the VC's mouth and pulled the pin. He pushed him out of the way before it went off. We waited about ten minutes after we killed them and then checked their bodies looking for papers or anything that could give us information about what they were up to. When we were finished I asked the Marine, "Why the fuck did you put that grenade in his mouth?" He nonchalantly replied, "I just wanted to see if it would fit." I left it at that and walked away shaking my head. People do weird things in battles and on ambushes. I heard of Marines taking fingers or ears and

wearing them around their neck or on their utility belt but I never saw any of that. People back in the states accused us of all kinds of atrocities that I never saw.

There was a routine we went through on ambushes that was standard. They typically would send six or seven of us out for an ambush. We would sit about ten feet off the trail and about three or four feet apart. Then you wait. It was both nerve-racking and boring. You couldn't help but wonder how many of them there would be or if you'd encounter two or three ahead of a much bigger group. Most of the time nothing happened before 2 or 3 am. The Viet Cong didn't think Marines could stay awake that long. Sometimes a combination of the heat and the anticipation of the ambush would make me sweat profusely. It was even worse during the monsoon season. We would sit soaking wet in the rain with mosquitoes as big as your thumb buzzing all around you and other bugs eating us alive. We had great insect repellent but the smell was so strong that the VC could smell you when you had it on. Because of that a lot of guys didn't wear it.

We tried to be quiet and listen as intently as we could but it was almost impossible to hear anything with the rain beating down so loudly. If we were lucky nothing would happen and we would pull out of the ambush and return to the base camp. Once we were back we'd get a cup of coffee, get some sleep and then get ready for the next mission.

Since one of the hardest parts of being on an ambush was staying awake when you were dead tired and just had to sit there, we would devise ways to keep ourselves awake. Some would put their K-Bar (knife) under their chin so if they nodded the point of the knife would wake them up. Other times we'd pull the pin out of a grenade, hold it

until our hand was tired, and then put the pin back in. Still other times we'd tie a rope around everyone's hand. The squad leader would give a tug on the rope and we'd tug back to let him know we were awake.

During daylight patrols we'd look for good ambush sites for that night. We would either mark it on a map or leave something on the ground so we could find it when we returned. Occasionally we would choose two ambush sites. This was for what was called a "roving ambush." You would sit at the first ambush site and if nothing happened you would move to the second. That was a little scary. I really hated these because it could be so dark on some of those early mornings that I literally couldn't see the man in front of me as we moved from one site to the other. In addition, we'd be moving at the same time the VC would be moving and, of course, they knew the terrain better than us. Sometimes we'd run into each other and a firefight would break out.

Between ambushes and patrols we'd usually try to find high ground for our base camp. We'd usually stay there about a month or so. The whole platoon would dig in making foxholes with sandbags around the top. I would dig my foxhole about three feet deep with about three or four sandbags around the top of it. The sun would be beating down on you as you dug and filled sand bags. But as hot as it was in the sun, we knew the more sand bags you had the better. We would also take our ponchos and drape them over the top of the foxhole to keep some of the rain off of us and at times the sun also. When it was monsoon season though, nothing kept you dry. In the monsoon season we slept in the rain, ate in the rain and fought in the rain. There was no hot chow, no baths or showers and only c-rations. Boy did we stink but at least we all smelled the same.

When it was raining like that we would keep our wallets in some kind of plastic cover or everything in them would get ruined. Our wallets were important to us because they had pictures of our girlfriends, pictures of our families, money and our Geneva Convention card. We were all issued these cards that said if we were captured we were to be treated humanely. We viewed that as a joke. It may have worked in WW II but in Vietnam the enemy paid no attention to it. One thing that did work was the bug juice (insect repellent). We usually kept it tucked into our helmet or in our pocket. It smelled bad but it was the best insect repellent I ever used.

Daytime patrols were full of action at this point as well. We were sent out most days looking to engage the enemy. One hot, rainy day we were walking up a dry river bed on the side of a mountain. We knew there was VC in the area and as we moved along we spotted a couple. The two of them were sitting in front of a tree and it looked like they were eating something. We saw they were armed with AK-47s and we moved low and quietly. Using hand signals we motioned for our rocket team to come up to the front of the squad to get in position to fire. They shot a 3.5mm rocket right in between them. When we got there to check them out all that was left were body parts and their black pajamas. This was usually how we distinguished VC from NVA. The VC typically had the black pajamas on and the NVA had regular uniforms.

One of the booby traps that were most sinister were the punji traps. Extremely sharp bamboo sticks would be hidden on trails and if you didn't see them they could go right through your boot if you stepped on one. They would place them two or three feet off the trail so that when you'd jump to the side to take cover you'd step on them. We were told the VC would piss on them so you would get infected if you weren't hurt more

seriously. In return I pissed on my K-Bar so if I used it on the enemy I could return the favor. The worst punji traps also had explosives. As you recoiled from the pain of stepping on one, an explosive device that was attached to it would explode as you pulled away. The explosion could either blow your foot off or kill you.

We were on patrol one sunny afternoon not far from our base camp. We started to receive fire from a sniper in a small grass hooch (hut). Since we were close to the base camp we decided to call in mortars to hit the hooch. We radioed to have them send a white phosphorus shell so we could get the range we needed. The round landed about 50 feet too long. I was told to radio, "Down fifty and fire for effect." Before we knew what happened there was another mortar round that hit and killed two of our Marines who had been about twenty yards in front of us to spot the first shell. We thought the VC was mortaring us in return. We all spread out and took cover expecting the VC to start attacking us. One of the Marines realized that the shell had not come from the VC but from our camp. Someone started yelling at the radioman (me), "Cease fire! Cease Fire!" This was one of the worst things that happened, Marines killed by our own fire. It was called a short round. There was not enough powder in the shell to go the entire distance. Was that ever reported back home? Or would they just say they were killed in combat. The Marines were killed by "friendly fire" as they called it. This wasn't the first time it happened nor would it be the last. It made me wonder what the military told their families. Would they tell them the truth or imply they had been killed by the enemy? It was very unfortunate but it happened.

It's hard to describe how difficult it was to try and conduct a war during the monsoon season. It usually lasted 3-4 months starting sometime around the end of

October and running through the end of January. During the monsoon season it would rain all day every day. It might stop for an hour or two but it would immediately begin again. We were wet all the time day and night. We did what we could to stay dry but it was a losing battle. Our feet were soaked, water-logged all the time. During the monsoon I remember taking my sock off at one point and having the skin come right with it. This happened to a lot of Marines. When it did they would have to go back to base camp and be treated by the corpsman. When it happened to me I was put on radio watch while the patrols went out until I could walk again in a couple days.

During the monsoon the rivers and streams would be unusually high and hard to cross. But we would jump in and cross them anyway because we had to. Of course we'd look for a way to cross the river without jumping in but sometimes it wasn't possible especially when we were trying to out-flank the enemy. The worst part of the rivers was that once we crossed we had to check each other for leeches. These leeches were long and black and sucked your blood out. To get them off of us we'd either burn them with cigarettes or take our K-Bar and cut them out. Once we were rid of the leeches we'd continue the patrol. Even the simplest thing like taking a shit was a problem when you were on patrol. We'd stop right where we were and then go off the trail two or three feet. We'd always have another Marine close by to watch our back. We would also bury it to make sure the enemy didn't know we had come this way.

If the purpose of Operation Prairie was to keep the NVA from infiltrating to the South we weren't very successful. But we did them a lot of damage and not a lot made it through where we were stationed. Obviously they had found many other ways to get troops to the South. Even though they didn't get much past us they found other ways. It

was hard from my perspective to follow the larger strategies of the war. We were in the thick of the fighting, day to day warfare. We were trying to survive and make it home while at the same time carry out our assignments. I had become a weary, battle-tested, combat Marine. My buddies could count on me and I was focused on what I needed to do to survive.

## Chapter 8:

About every six months we got to go on “rest and relaxation” or what was called R & R. We were allowed to leave Vietnam and go different cities or countries in different parts of the world for five days. We were able to get away from the fighting for a little while and begin to feel like a real person again and the best part was that Uncle Sam paid for the entire trip. I went to the island of Formosa (Taiwan) just off the coast of China. I was there for five wonderful days.

I was now a man of the world and I knew all about women because of all the hookers in Okinawa! I had four hundred dollars with me because Uncle Sam would get

you there but you had to pay for things once you arrived. They would give us a list of hotels we should stay in and also a list of bars to avoid. (Those were the bars I went to!) Most guys would have saved enough cash by the time they were ready to go but if not they would borrow it from their buddies. I simply sold my camera for three hundred dollars and off I went.

The first thing I did when I got to the hotel was take a long hot shower. I think I was in there for an hour. I would try to hang out with other Marines so I wouldn't be taken advantage of by the locals. There were a lot of service men in the area I was in. They were all over the place in the bars, restaurants, and cabs. There were women all over the place as well. They knew what you wanted and were eager to give it to you for a price.

All I did on my trip was booze it up, eat good food, and have my way with the local women. Some Marines had sex with women in Vietnam. Many of those women were very beautiful, half French and half Vietnamese. But those women were notorious for having VD or worse so I had decided I would wait until I was on R & R unlike a lot of other Marines.

I had been drinking all night at one of the bars that I had been told not to go to. It was dark. I was drunk and couldn't see very well. I started to talk to this woman and took her back to my hotel. We were together all night. The next morning I woke up and turned over. She was the ugliest girl I had ever seen in my life! I gave her some money and kicked her out. This may not sound like the nicest thing, but I was alive after coming out of Hell and I felt I could do anything I wanted. After what I had seen and been through, no one was going to tell me what I could do.

I went to another place called the New York Bar. I walked in and there was a girl (a hooker) sitting on a bar stool at the end of the bar. We had a few drinks and I arranged to be with her for the rest of my time there. To try and put my mind at ease she showed me a card from a doctor that said she was checked every month for VD and was clean. I had no way of knowing if the card was real or a fraud but I didn't care. The women actually "belonged" to the bar and they claimed the card was evidence that they had a doctor come and check them. I had to sign a contract to take her from the bar. She not only belonged to that bar but was paid by the bar. I gave her some additional money as well. This was the way they worked it and I would have signed whatever they wanted to take her with me. As we talked over the next few days she told me she was trying to save enough money to get to the States to live. The five days went by so fast I could hardly believe it and before I knew it I was on a plane back to hell.

[Six months later I had another R & R and decided to return to Formosa. I walked into the same bar and there she was the same girl sitting on the same stool at the end of the bar. She remembered my name and even the unit I was in. This time we spent the time at her place instead of a hotel. She gave me a picture of herself and I still have it. I kept it to remember the crazy things I did on R&R.]

If you had been with a particular lady for the week she would often ride back to the airport with you. Sometimes they would even cry knowing there was a real chance that you were going to be killed. Most guys would go to the corpsman as soon as they got back and got a shot of penicillin just to be on the safe side, I did as well.

Going back to the airport when your time was up was hard but you did it. There were a lot of service men who could not go back and went AWOL (absent without leave)

instead. They would end up in the military jail. They had decided they would rather go to jail than go back to Vietnam. I never gave it a second thought to be honest. I knew my platoon needed me and it was almost like you would feel guilty if you didn't go back. I just figured I needed to go back.

After five days of R & R I found myself back in country and back on patrol again as if I had never left. I tried to stay clean as long as I could but it was impossible. Soon I had mud and bugs all over me. The only time you could relax was if you were in a "secure" area. There were some areas that actually were pretty secure. After you returned from a patrol you could rest in this area without worrying about snipers or getting mortared.

We were in one of these areas after returning from a patrol on a sunny afternoon cleaning our weapons. We were relaxing when we heard a loud explosion. We thought the VC were attacking us so we grabbed our rifles and went to our tents to get our gear. As I was getting to the tent something came flying by me. I took a closer look and realized that it was part of an arm. But as we took cover we realized we weren't under attack. About fifty yards away there were two small tanks that each had three 106 recoilless cannons on each side. By accident a round went off on the one tank and hit the one in front of it. The Marine who accidentally fired the round while cleaning the barrel was blown back against a tree and killed. Four or five Marines were killed in the tank in front by someone's stupid mistake. More Marines killed by friendly fire. That was the worst part of the war. As for me, I had a little more than six months left in Vietnam and not a scratch on me. It made me wonder why?



Marine tank with 6-106 recoilless cannons.

When I was on patrol I always had a round in the chamber of my rifle and the safety off. We were supposed to have the safety on but I didn't want to take any chances. It really only took a split second to take the safety off but I felt that in a split second I could be dead. One day I was cleaning my rifle in a secure area and had taken the magazine that contained twenty rounds out of my rifle. However, I forgot I still had that one round in the chamber. When you would clean your weapon you would take the trigger guard out first. You would also oil and clean the spring in the magazine. As I did that it put pressure on the trigger and fired the weapon. The round was shot from the rifle and almost hit another Marine. Thank God it missed him but boy was he pissed at me. My lieutenant then took over and chewed my ass out for about twenty minutes. I was due for a promotion at that point but things like this were taken so seriously that I had to wait six months because of the incident.

So many Marines died around me. Sometimes I would get what we called an FNG (fuck'en' new guy) assigned to my foxhole with me. I would tell him to stay awake when it was his watch and do his job well. I didn't want to know his name or get to know him very well because he might be dead the next day. Sure enough, they often were. Sometimes I'd ask them where they were from. Marines died all around me. Guys in my foxhole got killed or wounded and it was just too hard to be friends and then have them killed. So we just did what we had to do with each other. Maybe that's one of the reasons I took over the radio.

With all the death around me I don't know how or why I stayed alive. The radio had been shot to bits while it was on my back, enemy rounds hit my rifle stock, and, I barely missed being napalmed by a fighter jet. After a while you begin to think the VC or the NVA can't kill you. That was a really bad way to think because you start to take chances that put you and your fellow Marines in harm's way unnecessarily. I knew if I thought that I was invincible there would be a bullet with my name on it. I guess as I look back on it years later God had plans for me to marry the woman I loved, raise a family and have a beautiful grandson. It's the only sense I can make of it.

We were on a day patrol in an area where there was a lot of VC. As we went through the jungle we came to a fork in the trail. One way led around the hill and the other went up the hill. Our lieutenant had only been in country for a few weeks and wanted to go around the hill. Our regular lieutenant was on R&R and this was a replacement. I'm sure he had good reasons but we convinced him that it made more sense to go up the hill so we could see the area better. Going up the hill would be hard because we'd have to go through a lot of heavy undergrowth. He agreed and we went to

the top of the hill. We went as quietly as we could but I think we were “about as quiet as an elephant in a jungle.” But no one heard us.

When we got to the top of the hill we could look down the side and see the trail that went around the hill. We could also see about 10 VC waiting in an ambush for us. They were about three feet off the trail in the heavy brush. If we had gone around the hill I probably would have been killed. We opened fire on them and killed about four or five. The others got away.

We called for an “Amtrak” to come and pick up two of the dead bodies and take them back near the base camp. (An Amtrak was like a big tank that could also hold ten to twelve Marines inside. Its front came down like a ramp so you could run in or out. It was normally so hot that most Marines rode on top of it. It was also equipped with a 50 caliber machine gun.) We hoped that the VC would come back and try to pick up the dead bodies and then we could take care of the rest of them. This was probably a mistake because they never came to get the bodies. After laying in the hot sun for two days the bodies swelled up like big balloons and had maggots and worms all over them. The bodies were only thirty or forty yards away from our camp and nothing smells worse than rotting flesh on a hot day. It was rancid so we sent a couple guys down to dig a big hole and bury the bodies.

While we were on patrol close to the DMZ we came upon an old wooden hut with foxholes already dug. We figured it to be a place where the French had been years before. Some of the Marines were really tired and some were lazy and decided not to dig new foxholes. Instead we decided to use the ones that were already there and then spent the night. The foxholes were really small so only one Marine could fit into it with his

gear. Since there weren't enough foxholes for everyone we'd take turns through the night, switching back and forth every two hours.

At about one AM that night we heard one of those noises that every Marine recognizes, the sound of enemy mortar rounds leaving their tubes. The VC had the area zeroed in with their mortars and we didn't realize it. Suddenly mortar shells were hitting all around us and we all went for cover. When the shelling stopped I realized that there were two other Marines in my foxhole that was only big enough for one! We looked at each other and started to laugh. It may sound morbid to laugh but in it's own weird way I guess we thought it was funny. It was a tight fit but we made it work. Two Marines were wounded in the attack and our first sergeant was killed.

Not every day was blood and guts. Once in a while we would get some down time. It was important during down time to clean you weapon. I cleaned my rifle every day because it was so damp and humid you had to make sure your M-14 was well oiled or it would rust. I would take each round out of the magazine and oil the spring as well. The bottom of the M-14 was called a butt plate. The butt plate opened and inside was cleaning supplies such as a ramming rod and a small container of oil. If we ran out of oil we would go to the mortar or 105mm canon crew to get some. A lot of Marines didn't clean their weapons as often as they needed to. The problem was that rifles that hadn't been properly cared for could jam and a jammed rifle often got a Marine killed.

We did more than clean our rifles during down time. We played cards, wrote letters home and ate hot chow that the choppers would fly in if we were lucky. I'm not sure how hot food was allocated but every once in a while it would be flown in. Since Mary Ellen and I had broken up before I went to the Marines, the only letters I wrote

were to my mother. But that didn't keep me from thinking about Mary Ellen, as a matter of fact; she was often the only thing I thought about. I didn't know if she was alive or dead but I would fantasize about marrying her, having kids and living the good life. Even though she might not have even known I was alive she kept me going. It was the hope of being with her that kept me alive during the worst times. I tried not to think that there may be other guys kissing her and holding her. I just had this deep feeling that I was going to make it back and she would be my partner for life. This might seem crazy since we had no contact at all but she kept me alive.

I had a picture from one of these down times of me and three other Marines playing cards. I'm not sure why I hung on to this picture but I did. As I said before, we never knew much about each other and didn't want to know. But I discovered that one of the Marines in the picture was Martin Alsopp, who lives only about thirty miles away from me. I got to meet him not long ago and we talked for hours about what we remembered about the war. It had been over forty years since I had seen him. A little while after that I got an email from a Marine named Paul Kellum from Dublin, Ohio. He said we had been in the same outfit but I couldn't remember him. I really connected with him when we spoke on the phone but I still couldn't place him. I sent him some things that had the picture of us playing cards. He got back to me and said, "Hey, I'm one of the guys in that picture playing cards with you!" I couldn't believe it. It made me tear up. Forty years later and I found two of the four of us that were playing cards in a random picture. I was also able to tell Paul that pictures of us were included in a famous book of photographer Larry Burrow's work on Vietnam. He and his wife were both really surprised.



Some down time between patrols. (Me front left)

Days in the field often felt so lonesome. You went on patrols or you had down time. You never knew what was coming next. You just took each day as it came. One day I was feeling kind of lonely and I thought it would cheer me up some to see my high school yearbook. I wrote my mother and asked her to send it. It came about two weeks later and it was fun to see some of my old classmates even though I never really got along with most of them. I think if my classmates had known what I had gone through at home they would have understood me better. At that moment high school seemed like it had been a hundred years ago. I just needed something else to think about at that time.

A few days later we took some incoming mortar fire. My bunker was blown up and so was my yearbook, and with the rain all my supplies, c-rations, everything was gone, but I really was sorry about my yearbook. I looked all through the rubble to see if I could find it but I never did.

I had about five or six months left to serve in that stinking place but I never talked about it. It was bad luck to talk about going home, good food, or any other beautiful thing. It seemed as soon as someone started talking about those things he stepped on a mine or gets shot by a sniper. So we did our time and kept all our thoughts of home to ourselves.

The ARVN forces (South Vietnamese Army) were also involved in some of our operations. We were camped with them on a hill and my lieutenant was walking with their commander seeing their positions. I was walking with them because I was the radio man. They were trying to figure out where both groups were so they could coordinate their plans. We walked up to a foxhole where there were two ARVN soldiers fast asleep. (When you were out in the intense sun it was easy to fall asleep.) The ARVN commander was from Hanoi and hated the North Vietnamese. He was furious and took out his penis and pissed all over the sleeping soldiers. He went nuts and said that if we hadn't been there he would have shot them both.

Late in 1966

Dear Mom,

I've got a wild story to tell you. We were sent out on an ambush a couple of nights ago about a thousand meters outside our perimeter, which was quite unusual. So we started off and I was elected point man because I knew the terrain and the area in which we were going. We had to cross a lot of rice paddies. We got caught by our own illumination which lighted up the area and had us pinned down off and on for about an hour. Boy was I scared and in a cold sweat. I was thinking that at any moment they would open up on us. We finally made it to the other side of the rice paddies. Something didn't seem right. There were two Viet Cong waiting for us to cross one more rice paddy. We saw the two VC Running and we shot at them and missed. We got a little closer to them And grabbed one of them. He had a long spear waiting to jab me in the stomach. If I would have walked down the rice paddy a little more he would have got me, but it wasn't my time to go yet. I have the picture of the spear the VC was going to get me with. Well that's all for now.

Write soon.

Your son,  
John

[This was not the kind of letter I should have written home to my mother. I don't know what I was thinking. There a lot of things I shouldn't have written home, it must have scared my mother to death.]

We were paid in Vietnamese money and I swear it looked like monopoly money. The pay officer would come to where we were to make sure we got paid. I would only take thirty to fifty dollars a month. That was all I needed to get by until the next payday. We didn't need much money while we were in Vietnam. Beer was cheap and cigarettes were two dollars a carton. We could only buy two cartons of cigarettes a month. You needed a ration card to get your cartons of cigarettes. There were some guys who didn't smoke so we took their cards so we could buy more. I had a Zippo lighter for my smokes. Written on the back of it was, "I know I'm going to Heaven because I've already been to Hell." (I lost my lighter on my way back to Vietnam for my second tour.) Uncle Sam would send the rest of my pay home. We could get our haircut and our ears cleaned by the local Vietnamese barber and later we found out that he was a Viet Cong.

We would spend about three months out in the jungle doing patrols and ambushes. We would eat nothing but c-rations and drink water. Every once in a while one of the guys would get a package of Kool-Aid from back home and mix it with water. A simple thing like that tasted really good. The choppers would sometimes bring goodies from the Red Cross. They would bring candy, cigarettes, writing material, and chewing tobacco. I remember talking to the pilot of a spotter plane. I think it was on the day we celebrated the Marine Corps Birthday. He said he was going to drop a package from his plane. The package was a case of beer! The beer wasn't cold but we didn't care.

You hear things when you're standing guard (50% watch) in your foxhole. You didn't know if what you heard was human, animal or just rain hitting the plants in the jungle. After you've been watching things in the black of night it seems like things begin to move. But since you weren't sure you wouldn't wake your partner in case it was something stupid. So instead we would keep our finger on the trigger and just keep watching and hoping that it was the rain or an animal. You had to be careful though because the VC liked to chase monkeys or water buffalo into our positions and hope we would start shooting so they could identify where our automatic weapons were. Those nights were so long and nerve-wracking that if you asked me what my greatest wish was on one of those nights it wouldn't have been a cold glass of water or even a beautiful naked woman in my foxhole. My greatest hope was to see the sun rise the next day.

One of the responsibilities all Marines had to face at one time or another was "shit detail." Needless to say, we all hated it. Normally in a secure area you have an outhouse set up where the Marines could go to the bathroom in private without anyone watching you. Holes would be dug, sometimes two or three of them, about three or four feet deep. Next, you put the bottom half of fifty-five gallon drum in each hole. You would also put holes in the sides of the drums so you could pull them up to be dumped. Finally, they would build a small shack with flaps in the back to pull the drum or drums out to be dumped. There was a round wooden seat to sit on while you were doing your business. Somehow one of the guys always seemed to be able to find a toilet seat somewhere like you were used to back in the States. That was appreciated!

I'm not sure anyone could imagine the aroma but it was awful. The temperature was around 100 degrees and there were swarms of flies around the shitholes. And when

the drums were full, someone had to empty them. Usually Marines who hadn't cleaned their rifles, had been snoring on an ambush, or were a private or PFC, or were new and just in country had to do the dumping. After they got the drums out of the shitholes they poured kerosene into the drums and set fire to the shit until it was all burned. You had to stir it around to make sure it all burned. The smell was indescribable. As you can imagine, I'm able to describe this vividly because I had to burn some shitters myself. It wasn't because I had screwed up but just because it needed to be done.

We had extended patrols, search and destroy missions, that could last three weeks. In November of 1966 we had been out for three weeks and were on our way back to base camp. It was monsoon season and we were tired and wet from the constant rain. It was hard to keep our feet dry and it messed up some of the guys' feet. They had to be carried out to a clearing so a chopper could pick them up. As we got close to the camp we could smell something really good. We had been eating c-rations for the last three weeks and didn't realize that it was Thanksgiving Day. As we got to the base camp we saw they had everything set up for us. It wasn't just hot food, it was Thanksgiving dinner! There wasn't any mess gear for us to use but that didn't bother us. We simply used our canteen cup and filled it with hot food. We had turkey, mashed potatoes, peas, corn, gravy and apple pie. I put almost all of the stuff in my cup at once including a piece of bread. It was great. I put the apple pie in there too. Not every outfit got hot food that day, I guess we were lucky.

We had been out in the jungle chasing "Charlie" for three weeks so it seemed like we deserved it. I found out later that our Company Commander had made some calls and got the food sent for us. Not only did we have good food but someone had a radio and

we listened to the music as well. They also filled a barrel with water and set it up so we could take a shower under it. That was one of the best days I can remember in Vietnam.

But even after such a good day the reality was that it was still the monsoon season. It rained off and on (mostly on) every day. It rained while we were eating, sleeping and fighting. It would get as hot as 105 degrees in the day and be as cool as 60 degrees at night. Sixty degrees in the rain was cold enough that we would shiver in our foxholes at night. Some guys could sleep anywhere and in any kind of conditions. But not me, I was too wet and cold to sleep. Even though we were so cold we would shiver and shake, it was kind of good because it kept us awake during the night while we were on watch.

Christmas was coming and everyone was depressed. Guys were getting letters from home and wishing they could be with their families. Some guys really took it hard. I didn't get it. Leaving home was the best thing I ever did. I couldn't understand their homesickness (although I do understand it now). I didn't have a family that loved me and wanted me to do well and amount to something the way many of the other Marines did.

As if we weren't miserable enough, the enemy would drop leaflets on the ground telling us to leave Vietnam and go home to our families that we missed so much. They said it was not our war. But I felt I had a job to do and couldn't leave even if I wanted to, and I didn't want to. (I wish I would have kept some of those leaflets.)

In January and February of 1967 things continued on the same way with more men being killed most every day while we were on patrols. A good day at that point was to only have a few men in our squad get wounded. Like always, most of the wounds

came from booby traps. Once in a while we would get a break and have two or three days off to rest and clean our weapons. But getting a break from patrols meant that we had to man our own foxholes and cover for the Marines that were out on patrol. We also still had to man the listening posts.

It was a hot, stinking, muggy morning and it wasn't our turn to be out on patrol. A call came in for us to go help some tanks that had gotten bogged down in the monsoon rains. There was always to be a squad in reserve in case someone got into trouble. They would take one Marine out of each foxhole and make a small squad with them and send them out to help. We had been resting when the dreaded call came for help. The tanks that were bogged down in the mud had been pursued by the NVA. When we got there we engaged the NVA and the battle lasted about an hour. I called in air support from a Phantom jet that was in the area. It dropped napalm around our position and on the NVA and the battle ended. Once the tanks got out of the mud we had them follow us back to our hill in Con Thien. We felt a lot better having tanks with us and the guys in the tanks were grateful that we had gotten them out of a jam.



(My squad going to the tanks in trouble.  
This picture was autographed by Carlos Hathcock. He was a marine sniper who  
had the most kills in combat. He is now deceased)

This battle was actually photographed by a man named Larry Burrows who sent  
the pictures to Life Magazine. This wasn't all that unusual because CBS and Newsweek

Magazine also went out on patrols with us. They were there in the firefight talking with us and taking pictures. Marines would also take pictures some times. I had a camera but was too busy trying to stay alive to take pictures while someone was shooting at me. We actually had a Marine who mounted a camera on his M-14 rifle and took pictures while we were on patrols and in firefights. I think it was an 8mm camera and I was amazed that he could think about something like that when the rest of us were just trying to stay alive. I guess it was a good idea if you could do both. They must have been really good pictures because he sold them to one of the big magazines for ten thousand dollars.

The area around our hill in Con Thien was full of Viet Cong and hard core NVA. Every night we set up claymores (mines), hand grenades, and flares about fifteen to twenty yards in front of our foxholes. When we went out to set these things we were supposed to tell the guys in the foxholes on either side of us what we were doing so they wouldn't shoot at us. We had to make sure the claymores (which exploded in the direction they were aimed) were turned the right way once we set them up. The Viet Cong liked to sneak up on our positions and turn the claymores toward us. We ran wire from the claymores to our foxholes. If we thought we heard or saw something we'd pull the string on the flare and the whole area would light up and we could see anyone who was out there. All the Marines were on edge. You knew they were out there but you didn't know when they would attack. That's why after a while it seemed like you saw things move or heard sounds you thought were VC.

One night two Marines were putting their booby traps in front of their foxhole. Their foxhole was across the hill from my position and next to the tank. The Marines setting the booby traps failed to tell the men in the tank what they were doing. The men

in the tank saw movement and thought it was two VC and shot off a round. The shell killed both of the Marines. The guys in the tank were on edge like the rest of us and felt horrible about what happened but what were they to do? The Marines that were killed had been in country for a couple months and should have known better. The FNGs (fuckin' new guys) never told the Marines in the tank what they were doing.

On another night we were being attacked by mortars and rockets. We could also see muzzle flashes of NVAs as they fired. I jumped into a foxhole next to a tank to get a better shot at them. We could see the flash of one muzzle repeatedly so one of the guys in the tank fired a round at the muzzle flash. It seemed like a direct hit and the muzzle flash stopped but only for a few seconds. It began again from the same position so the tank fired again. Again it stopped but resumed again after a few seconds. We couldn't believe that he could still be firing after what seemed to be two direct hits. The tank fired again and then there were no more muzzle flashes. We were sure he was dead now. It was almost like we had our own little war going on trying to take that guy out at the same time explosions were going off all around us. The next day one of the guys in the tank and I walked down to where we had seen the muzzle flashes. The mystery was solved. We found a "spider hole" about eight feet deep. He would shoot at us and go down into his hole when we returned fire. We saw a little blood but found no body.

We were set up on a hill with our tanks about a mile away from base camp. After we were there for a while, my squad was chosen to be a listening post (LP) about four or five hundred yards away. We set up the LP on a small hill covered with red dirt (maybe it was clay). The dirt on top was soft but only for about two inches. Underneath it was hard clay. It was nearly impossible to dig foxholes so we had some sandbags delivered

so we could set them up around our foxholes. We called the place “Red Hill.” We dug in that first night the best we could. Even though the ground was really hard we eventually got foxholes dug that were about four feet deep or waist high. We would put the sand bags two or three feet high around the foxhole. They were big enough for two Marines, well three if you include God. God was in every foxhole, well God and your mother. When they were in real distress guys would ask for their mothers or for God to help them. He would be the first person you would call if you thought you were going to die. I guess I talked to God several times. Most guys would be in shock and not say anything during a battle. We had 10-12 men in our squad that night as we dug in. We were supposed to have 14 but we were always short because we constantly had Marines getting killed or wounded. Like always, we filled sand bags with the dirt we dug and put them around our foxholes to secure them.



(Fellow marine in his foxhole on Red Hill)

The first two days nothing happened. The nights were cool and damp and the days were as hot as Hell and believe me this was Hell. As I said before, it is really hard to stay awake on night watch when nothing is happening. We were on fifty percent watch every night. We reported back to base camp that everything was OK. On the third night two Marines were covered in their ponchos and both fell asleep in their foxhole. Two Viet Cong got into their foxhole and cut their throats killing both of them. My foxhole was only twenty to twenty five yards away from them. It was raining so hard that night and was so dark I never heard or saw a thing.

The next morning we called in a chopper to fly the bodies out and told base camp to be on alert because the VC was in the area and they were. The next night they came back to Red Hill. The night before they had determined how many of us there were and planned their attack. They loved to attack us when it's raining. At about one or two in the morning they hit us with full force. About twenty or thirty of them came running up our hill yelling and shooting at our positions. We yelled right back and I emptied my magazine of bullets and tossed grenades at them. Some guys in the squad fought them hand to hand hitting them with their shovels (entrenching tools that you dug foxholes with) and rifle butts.

An enemy grenade was tossed into my foxhole. I yelled but couldn't react, I was frozen. There were explosions going off all over the hill and someone yelled, "Barber's hit, Barber's hit!" But I was lucky that night. The grenade never went off. It turned out to be a dud. Sometimes enemy grenades would get wet and the fuses wouldn't work. It scared the shit out of me. That was one of the times I talked to God. The attack only

lasted five or ten minutes but time slows to a crawl in battles like that and seemed a lot longer.

We had three or four Marines wounded that night but no one killed. The enemy just ran up the hill shooting and ran down the other side and kept going. We killed about eight or nine of them maybe more. We asked base camp to throw in some mortar rounds around our position to keep the enemy in check but they said no. About every half hour we would throw a grenade down the hill just in case there were any VC there. The next day we packed up our gear and joined the rest of our company. We were really glad to be back and the platoon commander gave us the rest of the day off. (We still had perimeter watch but we didn't have to go on any patrols.)

One of the nicest guys in my squad was a guy named George Townsend. He carried the M-79 (grenade launcher and we called him "Sugar Bear." I think he got that nickname because he was a big black guy and everyone liked him. We even used his nickname as our password to get back into our lines after we had been on night patrols. George was walking point on a patrol and I was right behind him with the radio. We were the lead squad, and there were three squads altogether. As we walked down the trail we came to a barbed wire fence. "Sugar Bear" stopped at the fence to see what was going on. A sniper opened fire on us and a round came right over our heads. We looked at each other and at the same time said, "Oh shit!" and knelt by the fence. Two more rounds came whizzing by and we hit the deck. I realized he was shooting at me because I had the radio. We looked through the fence to try and find the sniper but couldn't see him. There was a photographer with us from CBS or NBC who took a picture of George looking through the fence that was published back in the States.



We didn't see any movement as we looked through the fence so we all got back into line and continued moving down the trail. But we had been shot at and were really pumped up and ready for a fight. All three squads had gone down the trail about fifty yards when all of a sudden we all turned around and ran back to the barbed wire fence and tore it down. We were so pumped up we didn't even check to see if it was booby trapped. All three squads started walking again to where the shots had come from. All at once the Viet Cong started firing at us and a big firefight broke out that lasted about an hour. We lost five or six Marines that day. There was also a famous photo taken from that firefight that appeared in Life Magazine. The picture showed four Marines carrying a dead Marine back to the chopper ("leave no one behind" wasn't just a saying). One of

the four Marines was Sergeant Hoolie and he and the others were carrying the body of Leland Hammond.



(Sgt. Hoolie and fellow Marines carrying the body of Leland Hammond)

After the fighting was over and the area was secured I reloaded my weapon. As I did I saw that part of my rifle stock was missing. I'm not sure whether an enemy round or shrapnel hit it. That's awful damn close to getting shot! I tried to save the rifle stock to bring home with me but I couldn't find it after it was stored at base camp. After this firefight, there seemed to be a change in some of the guys' attitudes. They were tired of being shot at and watching their buddies die. Some of them actually wounded themselves. One Marine said he was cleaning his 45 caliber pistol when it went off and accidentally shot his foot. We all kind of knew what happened. People react to war in lots of different ways. Although I sort of understood why they did it I thought of them as cowards.

There were times when we knew a guy just wasn't feeling well and we would sometimes leave him back at base camp. The Marine who stayed behind would find a big pot and put all kind of c-rations together and make us something to eat when we got back. He'd have to get the pot from a village or from ARVNs who were there and always seemed to be cooking something. Sometimes it actually tasted pretty good especially if the food was hot on a cold, wet day. And, someone always seemed to have some hot sauce from home that we could add to it to give the food a different taste.

If we were going to be at a permanent (long term) position on a hill for at least three months we would build bunkers that at least five or six of us could fit in. We would also put all our gear in the bunker as well. We stored our c-rations in the bunker as well to keep them out of the elements. We always slept with one eye and one ear open at all times, at least I did. Some nights we'd hear someone going through the food. We'd turn a flash light on to see who it was and find out it was a big rat. Some of the rats were as

big as a full grown cat in the U.S. Sometimes as you slept the rats would fall on you as they tried to maneuver through the bunker to get to the food. There weren't many dogs in Vietnam because the Vietnamese eat dog. I tried it one time and I mixed it with my c-rations and it tasted pretty good.

During a break from one of our patrols we walked into a village where we would always fill our canteens. The village had a deep well with nice cool water. The people in the village seemed pretty friendly and we felt OK about getting our water there. I guess that caused us to let our guard down a little. After filling our canteens one day we headed back and shots were fired at us. We turned around and went back to the village. We demanded to know where the Viet Cong were. The chief of the village in a panic said, "No VC, No VC!" So figuring who ever shot at us was long gone, so we left.

As we got to the outskirts of the village more shots were fired and one of our Marines was killed. The shots had clearly come from the village. This time we turned around and went back to find them. One of the Marines saw two VC running away from the village with AK-47s. A small firefought broke out in the village and just outside it. We were so pissed off that one of our guys had been shot and killed and that they lied to us about the VC that we shot all of their animals, burned all the rice we could find, and then burned down the village. (There was no protocol for a situation like this. It just seemed to us that if they were aiding the enemy in a time of war we had to do what was needed to protect U.S. troops.) Old women and children were crying but I tried to not let it get to me. The villagers were caught in the middle like usual but I had a job to do right or wrong. Some of the villagers were killed in the firefought. I felt really bad and like a lot of Marines and Soldiers for some reason I wrote a poem to try and express the way I felt.

A burst of fire and that was all,  
The body laying dead was small.  
It was the body of a girl of ten,  
Her life so short now at an end.  
A marine raised up her lifeless head,  
The ground around her was stained red.  
It all started on a sunny day,  
And it was in the month of May.  
The sun shone bright and hearts were light.  
The patrol was soon far out of sight.  
The marines knew they'd be back soon,  
No one foresaw the child's doom.

They heard some shots not far away,  
As they marched along that day.  
There the enemy was seen,  
By the men all dressed in green.  
They chased him to a nearby vill,  
There they made their first kill.

They ran the enemy from the village small,  
They had seen a body fall.  
They approached to where it lay,  
Then they heard a marine say,  
"My God, it's a girl."  
There he touched the blood-stained curls,  
Oh my God, how did we ever kill this little girl?

No one knows who killed that little girl, the Viet Cong or us. My eyes were full of tears, but I fought not to let it bother me. The fighting went on. Once in a while I still think of that little girl when I see a small Vietnamese or Chinese girl. After more than forty years, I still can't forget her. But I don't think I really want to.

We were once again back on the choppers doing another operation of seeking out the Viet Cong. We landed in a valley with mountains all around us. We were going to land and walk back to the base camp looking for the Viet Cong. No big deal just another mission under our belt, the same routine. Even in wartime the sight from the air was

beautiful. The valley was so green and the rice paddies were like pieces of a puzzle that had been put together.

There were five or six choppers trying to land. After the second chopper landed, the Viet Cong opened fire on us. The other choppers couldn't land because of all the rounds and mortar shells coming from the enemy. They flew off and landed about a half mile away. We had about two squads with us on the ground. We were pinned down and couldn't move. The other Marines who had been dropped off about a half mile away tried to get to us but couldn't. They were busy fighting their own battle with the Viet Cong. For about an hour we were under brutal fire that the VC were raining down on us from their positions on the side of the mountain. Finally we called in an air strike from two Phantom jets. They flew in so close to the mountains I think the pilots could count the fingers on the Viet Cong's hands. Within fifteen minutes it was all over. We reunited with the other squads that were dropped off a half a mile away. We got the wounded out and continued with the search and destroy mission.

I can't count how many helicopters I was on in Vietnam but it was a lot. Choppers almost became a symbol for the Vietnam War. They had become a central means of transport especially for getting in and out of the jungle. They could get you in and out of situations like in no other war up until that point.

My first combat ride in a chopper was overwhelming. The helicopter we used for most combat assaults was the H-34. There was room in it for about five or six Marines with all their gear including the door gunner who had a mounted M 60-caliber machine gun. Once we were all in the pilot said, "OK," and the door gunner replied, "All set," and we were off into the clouds with the wind blowing through the chopper. I was lucky.

I got to sit by the door with my legs hanging out. What a feeling! We were thousands of feet in the air. It was so exhilarating that for moment I forgot myself and felt like I was flying! I looked down and the countryside looked so peaceful (even though I knew it wasn't). There were hundreds of craters on the ground made by bombs and mortars.

All of a sudden we started to descend. I took the safety off my weapon and got ready to meet the enemy. That was an incredible ride! The anticipation of the Landing Zone (LZ) could be unbearable. You never knew whether or not it would be a hot LZ but most of the time it wasn't. Typically there would be a few snipers around trying to take down the chopper or some of the Marines who were on it. It was just enough to piss us off.

If the LZ was hot we'd see red and yellow tracers going everywhere. We knew we were landing right in the middle of it. We'd say a quick prayer, "Dear God, get us through this day." The gunner on the chopper would be blasting away at the ground with the M 60 and that would get your blood boiling and you'd be ready to get hit. You had your flack jacket on thinking it would stop a bullet if you were hit (but it didn't). God knows we didn't want to jump out of that chopper but we did.

Glancing at the other Marines on the chopper I could see some of them were ready to throw-up just before we hit the ground and I found that unsettling. I wondered if the other guys were looking at me and thinking the same thing. After all the training we'd been through, when the time comes, something pushes you out of that chopper onto the ground. Maybe it's your DI from boot camp pushing you out. You also realize that you're really not safe in the chopper either because rounds are coming in there as well. Some guys made it, some didn't.

Ninety percent of the time pilots would land just about anywhere we told them to even if it was a hot LZ. If the pilot couldn't land the first time he would go around and try again. There some instances where the helicopters couldn't land on the ground because of booby traps or elephant grass. When that happened, the pilot would hover about two or three feet off the ground and we'd have to jump. With full combat gear, it's amazing more Marines weren't hurt during such a jump.

It took a special kind of person to be a chopper pilot. They took risks every time they were in the air. They would go places you didn't think they could and land in impossible places. They would balance one wheel on the edge of a mountain, while getting shot at by the enemy, to get close enough to pick up dead and wounded Marines. Pilots often were wounded themselves as they flew in and out with the wounded. H-34 choppers were your lifeline to and from your mission. They were regularly the difference between life and death because without them there would have been no way to get wounded Marines to the aid stations to be treated by doctors.

Typically after a firefight with the NVA we would have lots of casualties. We'd call for a med-a-vac to get the dead and wounded out. With the heavy fire coming from the enemy the choppers wouldn't stay on the ground very long so we had to get the wounded in fast. The dead and wounded were taken out first and then we'd have to wait for the chopper to come back for us. Being in the last group of six or seven you couldn't help but wonder if they would come back for you. The best sound in the world was hearing the "Womp, womp, womp," of the chopper coming back to get you. We would have given the pilots our first-born because we were so happy to get picked up.

A lot of helicopter pilots died risking their lives to land and pick up wounded and dead marines. I wish I could shake hands with every one of those pilots who picked me up and took me to a safe place. God bless them.



(My squad on patrol near DMZ)

The patrols and firefights went on with a somber regularity. One particular patrol took us to an area called “the rock pile” near the DMZ. It was the middle of the afternoon and hot as Hell. As we trudged along the NVA hit us with a terrible force. In the initial assault a Marine who was carrying a 3.5 rocket launcher (something like a bazooka) got hit pretty bad. He was a tall black guy about 6’6” and had been shot in the chest and arm. He was bleeding badly. I got to him first and was trying to keep his insides from coming out until the medic could get there. It was amazing, as he lay there

he seemed to be calm and not in shock at all. To be honest, I was more in shock trying to hold his stomach and insides in place than he seemed to be. He had a weird smile on his face as he laid there waiting for the corpsman. He got there before long and started working on him.

Another Marine was shot in the leg and was screaming, yelling, and rolling all over the ground even though the bullet had gone right through the leg. It was hard to control him. It took two Marines to hold him down while they waited for the corpsman. Just like the helicopter pilots, the corpsmen had an unbelievable job to do and were heroes like the pilots. They rushed to people while under fire to try and save their lives. There should be a whole book written just about what they had to do in combat and the pressure they were under.

The lieutenant told me to get on the radio and call the other squad to come and assist us. So I called the other squad leader and told him we needed help badly. But when I talked to him even over the radio I could tell he was scared. We continued to be under fire but he and his squad never showed up. Two or three additional Marines were killed under the murderous fire while we waited. Whether it was right or not, I blamed that squad leader for those Marines getting killed.

After a long delay he finally arrived. My lieutenant asked him what happened. He claimed he was pinned down and couldn't get to us in time. There were a lot Viet Cong and NVA in the area but I know he could've made it sooner. To this day I don't believe his story. The squad leader was the same Marine I mentioned back when we were on the bridge in Chu Lai (when we first arrived in country). Even then we knew he was scared and we were so bored one night we played a prank on him. We opened fire

shooting the ground on both sides of the bridge. Of course there was nothing going on but he never came out of his bunker the whole time, but we knew he was scared. Maybe I had that in the back of my mind.

I could tell the lieutenant was really pissed, but there was nothing he could do. But it was wrong what happened. I don't know what came over me but I turned around and hit the squad leader square in the face and knocked him to the ground. I guess the intensity of everything that had just happen and my suspicion that they could have made it and saved some lives was just too much. No one said a word to me not even the squad leader. I thought for sure I was going to be in big trouble but nothing was ever done about it.

[About a year and a half later I saw the same Marine (squad leader) in a bar on a base in Arlington, Virginia where I was stationed. It was my twenty-first birthday and I was drinking pretty heavily. I went over to him and asked him about that day in Vietnam. He said I was drunk and didn't know what the hell I was talking about. I started to tear up a little, yes, a Marine crying. Maybe it was the booze, but I just thought of those Marines who died that day. I don't know what ever happened to him after that. I hope he reads this some day and feels the shame for letting other Marines down.]

For a month after that firefight it seemed like the same routine of patrols and ambushes. More Marines were being killed and wounded. I kept asking myself, "Will this ever end?" I just kept counting the days until my tour of duty was complete. It was another hot muggy day and a couple Marines and I were watching 105 canons shooting their rounds into an area where the NVA were. We would watch the shells leave the tubes of the canons and explode in the mountains about two miles away. We

nonchalantly watched for a half an hour not realizing that we were headed for the area they were shelling. But we were OK with it because after an area was pounded like that with the 105s we thought nothing could survive.

We were loaded onto Chinook helicopters that could hold more Marines than the H-34s (the ones that had a ramp that was lowered down from the rear). It took us about twenty minutes to get to the target area. We were supposed to land and then sweep back looking for bunkers and bodies.

Someone fucked up. I don't know how they did it but they landed us in the wrong LZ. There were six choppers landing when all Hell broke out. As we were landing we could hear rounds zipping by us and hitting the choppers. The machine gunners on the choppers were firing as fast as they could while the pilots tried to get us as close to the ground as possible. They got to about three feet above the ground and the door came down. The gunner told us to jump out before we all got shot. All I could see were yellow tracer rounds from the enemy all around me.

They had landed us on a company of hard core NVA. It was total confusion for a while. We jumped out and tried to get organized with the other Marines on the ground. We just kept firing in the direction of the enemy. I went through several magazines of ammunition not knowing if I hit anything nor did I care. I just kept shooting. The NVA were everywhere. Finally we fought our way out of the area taking a lot of wounded Marines with us. We lost so many guys that we couldn't do that sweep we supposed to do. This was a battle we lost to the enemy. We licked our wounds and got the hell out of that area. We were so shot up we had to call the choppers to come back and get us out.

Not long after we were coming back from what was called Operation Mississippi. We were tired, dirty and hungry. My back was killing me from having carried the radio and my backpack. The straps from the radio and the ones from the backpack had dug into my skin between my neck and shoulder blades. Our company walked into a big field to rest. There were a lot of local Vietnamese people in the area so we thought it was OK to be there.

That night my squad was assigned perimeter watch. Boy, were we pissed. We dug foxholes around the rest of the company and began our watch. That night it started to rain really hard. There was an 'L' shaped fence inside our protective area. The rest of the Marines used the fence to drape their ponchos so they could sleep under them and stay dry. About an hour later we were startled by the sound of incoming mortar rounds. The enemy had used the fence to gauge their distance for the mortars. When the shells hit they killed almost everyone there. There was also a horrible electric storm and lightening that killed two other Marines in their foxholes that night. Standing watch that night probably saved my life.

Paul Kellum was one of the Marines who got wounded that night. He cradled the head of one of his buddies in his lap who was also wounded but died as he held him. I would meet Paul again forty two years later to talk about what happened that night in Vietnam. The tears flowed as we talked about it. But we had to talk about it and get it out in the open.

It was gruesome. After the smoke cleared and we got our dead and wounded together, there were only about ten of us left out of the whole company. I was in shock to say the least. Our company was so devastated that the command didn't know what to do

with us so they put us on a truck and took us to a battalion in the rear. I think that's when I was assigned to the Third Battalion Ninth Marines. For a while we were put in H&S Company handing out supplies to other Marines. As other misplaced Marines came into battalion they formed us into a unit. Once the squad was formed, I had an automatic rifle not a radio.

Handing supplies out just didn't do it for me so, once again, I was walking point for the squad looking for the enemy. I guess I just felt more at home being in a squad going on patrols. It was hard at first because I had to put my trust (really my life) in Marines I didn't know, but they had to do the same with me. The other Marines didn't know if I was a shit bird or if I knew what I was doing. Before long they realized I knew what I was doing and the trust followed. I told the guys what had happened to my old outfit and they told me I should be happy to be alive. I said, "Believe me, I am." I don't know why they didn't assign me to Gulf Company or Fox Company. Later I found out that 2/5 went to Hue to fight in what became known as the Tet Offensive.

My new squad was coming off two or three days of a search and destroy patrol when we heard shouting, whistling and clapping. (I can't remember which base camp we were at.) As we approached base camp we could see a lot of Marines crowded together looking at a stage. Bob Hope and the USO Show, complete with beautiful women, were performing. The girls sure looked good! I was glad to watch the show for a while but I was way back in the crowd and couldn't see much and was so tired I went to my bunker and got some much needed sleep.

Some of the men of Mike Company 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 9<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment put their heads together and wrote a poem that a lot of us felt described some of how we felt.

There were a number of Marines who wrote it but I think everyone could put something  
in if they wanted:

You sit at home and watch TV  
And sip a cold refreshing ice tea  
The news comes on and then you hear  
The All Star game is drawing near  
Then you see a far off land  
Where men are dying in the sand

A frown appears across your face  
You're tired of hearing about this place  
Who cares about Vietnam across the sea?  
It's far away and doesn't concern me

You would rather hear the Beatles play  
Than learn about the world today  
But stop and think a moment or two and  
Ask yourself, does this concern me?  
It's great to be alive and free  
But what about the guy across the sea?  
He's giving up his life for you  
So you can live in liberty.

He's far away and fighting a war  
Instead of fighting at your front door  
This man who lives in filth and slime  
How can he do this all the time?

He's about your age, so why should you care  
About the war someone else should share  
You call him wild names and make fun of him  
Yet he is always first to win your wars.

You lucky guys, you laugh and sneer  
Because you really know no fear  
But this young man faces death each day  
But he's always got something funny to say  
No mail today, oh what a sorrow  
What the hell there's always tomorrow.

The moral is low, the tension is high  
Some men even break down and cry  
He wants to go home and see his loved ones.  
He fights all day and watches all night  
He's tired and sick but always ready to fight  
The college crowd thinks he's a fool  
But that is what makes him cruel.

You don't appreciate what he'll do  
Like give his life for you.  
He sacrifices much but asks little in return  
Just so you can stay free.

He believes in freedom and the American way  
No parties and fun for the young man  
Until he comes home again someday.

The days are hot and so are the nights  
Oh what wonders a cold can of beer can do  
He dreams of cold beer and a nice thick steak  
The someone shouts, we got a village to take.  
Some will be heroes because they are brave  
Others will die and face a wreath on their grave.

You'll recognize him as he walks by  
The saddened look in his eye.  
He walks so proud yet looks so mean  
He's called the world's best fighting machine.  
"He's a United States Marine."

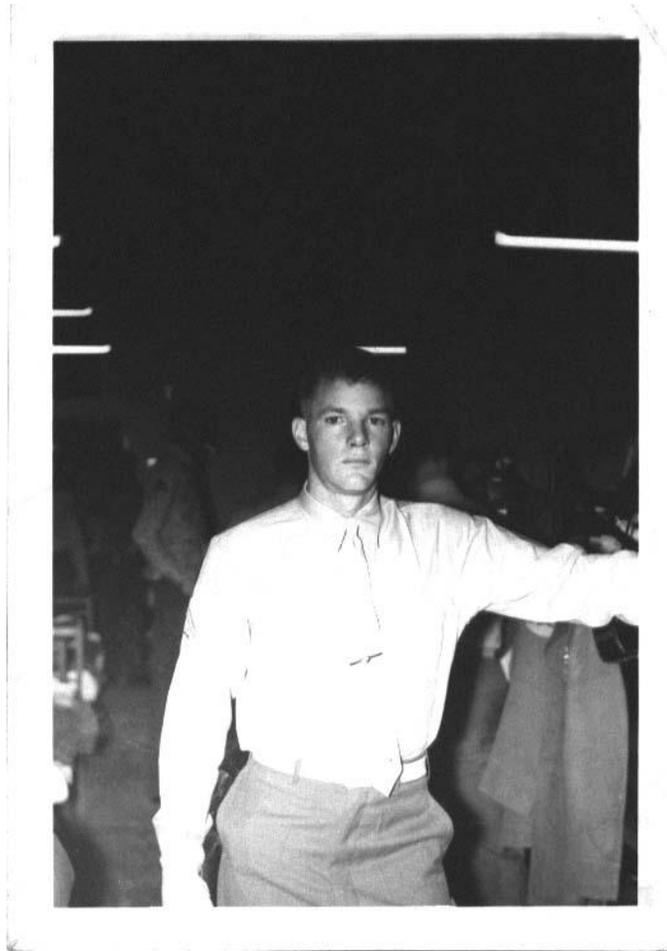
## Chapter 9: Vietnam Rewind: Second Tour

My tour of duty was coming to an end, and remarkably, I still had all my body parts. I was convinced I would never see this place again and would leave as soon as possible, but I guess I was wrong. There were some Marines who had done thirteen months of duty in Vietnam and were coming back for another thirteen. I thought they were crazy to come back so soon. They were 0311 riflemen just like me. They told us that we were losing so many Marines in our battles with the VC that we didn't have enough Marines. Regardless of where they had been reassigned they were being brought back to Vietnam.

I just couldn't bring myself to return for another thirteen months but seeing what these other Marines were doing really affected me, so I did the unthinkable. I extended my tour for another six months. The deal was that if I extended for six months I could have thirty days leave almost anywhere in the world. So I did it. Actually I had told them I would extend for six more months if I could get Military Police (MP) duty. When I signed my name on that dotted line my heart sank to my toes. "What did I just do?" I asked myself.

As crazy as it may seem I really believe it was the best thing for me to do at the time. I remember being on a hill somewhere in a tent with a lieutenant signing the papers to extend my tour of duty. There were a lot of other Marines doing the same thing. I think they were doing it because they were going to get the thirty days leave in a different country.

I didn't care where they sent me in Vietnam as long as I could get off the front lines. They gave me the MP duty I requested but sent me about as far North in the country as possible. They assigned me to a place called Phu Bi, and gave me my thirty days leave. There were a lot of places I could've gone but like a good Marine I went home.



On my way home from Okinawa after first tour was completed.

I left Vietnam in April of 1967 and flew to Okinawa for three days of down time. They sent you there first to let you get your head straight and begin to forget about the jungles of Vietnam but you don't. Just outside the main gate was a town called Kin

Village and I did some drinking and messing around with the local women but wasn't there long. In addition, it was a time for you to get the papers you needed and the uniforms to wear stateside or "across the pond" as they said. After the stop in Okinawa I went to California and then on to Pennsylvania.

I was home at last! I didn't tell anyone I was going back to Vietnam but somehow my mother knew when she saw me. "You're going back to Vietnam, aren't you?" she asked. I said yes, and then I explained that I had to go back. I told her I would cut my time of dying in half. [What a thing to tell your mother, that you were going to cut your dying time in half!] I don't think she understood what I meant but I had just returned from Vietnam and I guess I didn't know how to talk in a civil way. Then I tried to explain that I would be going back as an MP and that I'd be fine and out of danger. [At last I thought I was going to be out of danger. Little did I know that one of the most intense battles of the war for Hue City would be going on while I was in the area at Phu Bi.]

While I was at home I looked up some of my old friends. I went to some parties but something didn't seem right. My mind kept going back to the place I had just left and all the killing and especially my fellow Marines, my friends, dying. Some people may have been able to put themselves into such a situation and pick up as if they had never left, but I couldn't. I couldn't get those images out of my mind and was really conscious of the fact that I'd be back there in thirty days.

I wanted to see Mary Ellen, but I didn't. I guess I didn't want to tell her I had decided to go back to Vietnam. Sometimes I would stand across the street from the church she attended and watch her walk and talking to other folks. I didn't think she

liked me anymore. I saw Mary Ellen at a local watering hole sitting with her friends. We made eye contact but her eyes said nothing to me. Her dad was at the bar and I bought him a drink or he bought me one, I can't remember. I told him I was headed back to Vietnam and he told me to be careful.

I had gone to her house when she wasn't there to visit her mother who I liked a lot. I think I was in love with Mary Ellen but didn't know how to tell her. There I was a big tough Marine, having been through the unimaginable in Vietnam, and scared to tell my ex-girlfriend how I felt about her. I wanted to hold her and tell her I thought about her all the time. I needed someone to hold me and tell me to be careful as I went back to Vietnam but it didn't happen. I tried to enjoy myself while I was at home but my friends just seemed really immature and silly. The time at home went by so fast. My thirty days were up and it was time to report to San Bernardino, California.

I got back to San Bernardino a few days early to do some last minute drinking and partying. It was about a hundred degrees there and the town looked empty. I walked into a bar wearing my sweat-soaked Marine uniform and asked the bartender where all the action was. He replied, "Come back tonight. This place will be jumpin'." Later I met another Marine in town and told him we should go back to the bar I was at earlier because it was going to be "jumping". Sure enough when we got back there the place was jumping like the bartender said it would and it was packed with women. We sat down, both of us in uniform, and ordered a couple drinks. Some guy came over and said to us, "Are you sure you two Marines want to be here?" We said, "Sure, look at all the women here!" He laughed and said, "All the "women" on the dance floor are actually

men. This is a gay bar.” We took a sip of beer and then ran out of there as fast as we could.

We went to another bar and had a few more drinks. We laughed all night about what had happened. I guess in some ways I was trying to forget about Mary Ellen but that was hard to do. We met a guy in the bar who had a son who was a Marine and was in Vietnam. He told us we were welcome to spend the night at his place and so we did. I slept with one eye open all night but it was OK. The next morning he was kind enough to drive us to the airport to catch our flight back to Okinawa.

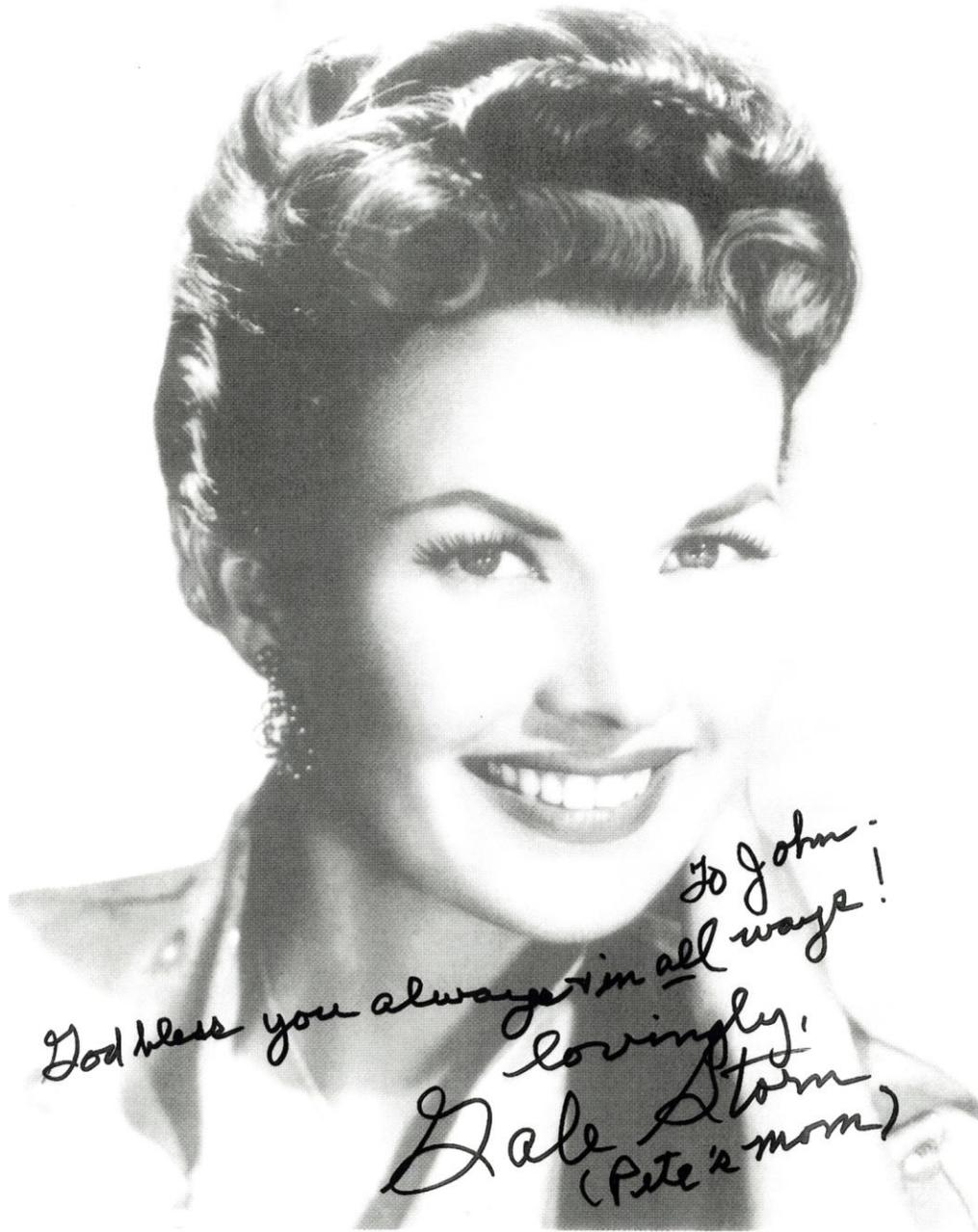
At the airport we went to a hanger to board our plane. There were a lot of parents there to see their sons off. For most of them it was their first tour of duty. I struck up a conversation with one Marine named Pete. He said, “Let me introduce you to my mother.” When his mother turned around it was Gale Storm a famous TV actress from the fifties and sixties. I was stunned and told her that I used to watch her all the time on TV. Pete told her I was going back to Vietnam for a second time. She told me to please take care of her son and watch out for him. But I told her that he was a Marine and could take care of himself and didn’t need me. I tried to reassure her that he would be fine.

Boy, I sure didn’t want to get on that plane, but I knew I was doing the right thing. There were some other vets going back for their second tour like me and Pete and I hit it off and flew to Okinawa together. I told him as much as could about Vietnam and how to stay alive. I don’t think he was headed to the front lines like a 0311 (a grunt) but anywhere in Vietnam was dangerous. When we arrived in Vietnam he went to his unit and I caught a C-130 back to the killing fields.

[As I was writing this story I wondered whatever happened to Pete. I wondered if he had made it back from Vietnam. So I decided to do a little investigation. I looked up Gale Storm on the Internet and found her email address. I sent her an email describing who I was and how I had met her and her son that day in San Bernardino in 1967. I asked her about Pete and if he had made it back. I didn't really expect to get a reply but to my surprise in two or three days I did. She said she remembered that day and asking me to take care of her son. That was 1967 and she still remembered! She said Pete did make it back and was living in Montana. She gave me his address and I wrote him. Unlike his mother, he had no remembrance of the meeting or the flight. I guess I remembered because his mother was such a famous person. Gale Storm is in her mid-eighties and still lives in California. She also sent me an autographed picture of herself with some kind words on it. She was a very gracious woman and it amazed me that she remembered after all those years. I thought it would be appropriate to call her and thank her for such a kind gesture. We had a wonderful conversation and she invited me and my wife to visit her the next time we were in California. She even was willing to read an early draft of this manuscript. After she finished it she called and asked why I hadn't included her picture. I said I'd be delighted to if I had her permission which she granted. I got a good laugh about her caring enough about the story to want to include her picture. I really appreciated the exchanges we had.]

It was a long trip from Okinawa to Vietnam. As I sat on the plane I couldn't help but ask myself a series of questions, "What the hell am I doing?" "What did I get myself into?" "I am going back to Vietnam again?" I could remember when I couldn't wait to leave this damn place. I couldn't help but wonder, "Will my life end here in this

hellhole?" And of course I also thought, "Why didn't I tell Mary Ellen I loved her?" I really wanted to hold her one last time.



There were a lot of Marines on the plane with me and most of them were their first time in Vietnam. I tried to look like nothing bothered me but my stomach was doing flips like a stunt plane doing loops in the air. As soon as I saw the coast of Vietnam I wanted to throw up. Once we landed and my feet hit the ground and the heat hit my face I went right back into a defensive mode. It was as if I had never left.

The plane landed in Da Nang where there were a few hundred soldiers and Marines going to their respective operations. Their uniforms were shiny and new but in a few months they would be sweat-stained, blood stained, and torn up. Most of them looked like they just got out of high school, which they probably did. They were all ready to kick “Charley’s” ass. I caught another C-130 flight to Phu Bi my new duty station in Vietnam. I was to be there for six months and I had already begun to count the days until I’d go home.

My duty station was a big landing strip for C-130s (a large cargo plane) and a fuel depot. It was just South of the DMZ and surrounded by the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army. The airfield was in a valley surrounded by mountains. The VC were out there but so were our patrols. It was a place where the choppers would bring dead Marines in body bags and then ship them to Da Nang on a C-130.

The regime at Phu Bi was much different than I had been used to. We had to make sure our gear was squared away and that our boots were shined all the time. With so much dust and dirt I couldn’t understand why. The only explanation for it was that our

CO was always dressed as sharp as a tack so he expected everyone else should be as well. We had to stand for inspection every day before we went on duty and he would ask us our general orders just like in boot camp. I hated that. I don't think he had much combat experience and after being in the field for a year this all seemed stupid.



MP Headquarters in Phu Bi.

I drove a jeep around the area with another MP making sure everything was OK. We had a lot of Vietnamese civilians working for us so we had to check and make sure they had the right papers on them. They worked in the local PX, the fuel depot, and the hanger at the airstrip. I had it pretty nice for a while until I was put on a truck manning a fifty-caliber machine gun. Our job was to take supplies up North to Marines in the jungles. That was not what I thought I'd be doing as an MP. They assigned me to the truck because I was a 0311 rifleman and had experience in jungles and on the front lines. There was nothing I could do about it.



Me (driver's seat) during my MP duty in Phu Bi.

I was getting shot at again and I didn't like it. I had come so close so many times that I thought my time was up for sure. The truck I was on got hit a mine and I was blown off of it. I said, "Oh shit, here we go again!" I was stunned but OK. There were two other Marines with me in the back of the truck and they weren't seriously hurt either. Luckily we had sandbags on the bed of the truck and they absorbed the blast. The driver had some metal in his legs from the truck and had to be flown out by chopper. We pushed the truck to the side of the road and then loaded all the supplies and c-rations onto another truck. After that episode, I made about five or six more trips running supplies to my fellow Marines without any incidents. I guess I didn't really mind because when they saw us coming with water, food and ammo they were glad. I knew what it was like to be in their shoes so I made the deliveries without complaining.

On the MP base I slept on a cot in a big tent that you could roll the sides up to let air in. There were about ten other MPs in the tent with me. Sleeping on a cot was hard but it was a lot better than sleeping in a foxhole filled with mud. We had a bunker right outside our tent in case we were mortared which did happen from time to time.

One night mortars hit our headquarters and we ran for the bunker. Even though there was only room for six or seven in the bunker, this night we squeezed ten in. With all of us packed in there the bunker was hit by a mortar shell and collapsed on us. One of the Marine MP was killed and the rest of us couldn't move because of all the sandbags and wood that was on top of us. I was gasping for air and thought couldn't breathe. In the panic of the moment I couldn't help but think, "What the hell am I doing here?" I couldn't move until help came to pull us out. (To this day I have dreams that I'm back in that bunker buried in the sand and wood. I break out in a cold sweat and have trouble breathing. I have to keep telling myself that it's only a dream and that I'll be OK.)



Me in front of the bunker that was hit by the mortars.

There was a hospital next to the airstrip at Phu Bi. This hospital took care of badly wounded Marines and wounded enemy soldiers. Once in a while I was assigned to guard the NVA prisoners that were shot up or in intensive care. One day I saw two Navy men, I think they were hospital aids, throwing food at the prisoners who were tied down and also hitting them with bedpans and rubber hoses. When I saw them I was really pissed off. Fellow Marines and I had risked our lives capturing prisoners like these so they could be questioned. Prisoners like these could have information that could save American lives but these Navy aids didn't understand that. I took out my 45 pistol and told the two aids they were both under arrest. I took them to the MP headquarters and explained what I had witnessed. They both were busted down one rank. I tried to make them understand that there could have been Marines who died trying to capture those prisoners.

I had once again accumulated enough time in country to go on R&R. I decided to go to Malaysia with two other Marines. It's hard to describe our view of R&R except to say that you could only understand our perspective if you knew how constantly we lived with death. R&R was the unreal interlude where you could be a teenage guy and do all the things you dreamed about without getting in trouble. We never knew if this would be our last chance to live a little so we decided not to miss the opportunity.



Me with the snakes in Malaysia.

I had bought a camera several months earlier for about three hundred dollars and I decided to finance my trip by selling it. The three hundred dollars I got for the camera was equivalent to about nine hundred dollars in Malaysia so I had enough to do what ever I wanted. One of the other Marines spoke the language so he was a perfect guy to have along. Like on my other R&R trips we enjoyed lots of food, women and booze. One of the rickshaw drivers found us three women for the entire time we were there. The rickshaw drivers would be at our hotel every morning and take us wherever we wanted to go.

One afternoon, after we had been drinking pretty heavily, we told the driver to take us to a famous temple we had heard about. When we entered the temple we saw there were snakes all over the place. We were told they were Pit Vipers, one of the deadliest snakes in the world. The snakes were sort of hanging in the bushes and the people were burning a kind of incense that was believed to make the snakes drowsy.

Well the three of us (who had already had too much to drink) thought we were so brave that we decided to pick up the snakes. We held them in our hands and put them on our heads. Boy, were we stupid! One bite from one of those snakes and we wouldn't have had to worry about going back to Vietnam to die.

It's hard to describe the mindset you get into but we decided we would do whatever we wanted and have as much fun as we could arrange. Every night when I came back to my hotel there would be a bottle of booze waiting for me in my room. One of the other Marines who I was with was in the next room. One night we just decided to switch girls, so we did. It didn't seem to be a big deal to the girls since their intention was to make us happy and get our money. On another night we had two girls in the room at once. What an experience, having two girls at once. I was all of nineteen or twenty and thought I knew it all, but of course, I didn't. We were all drinking so much that I really don't remember much of what went on. But I'm sure you can use your imagination.

We found out that one of the rickshaw drivers had a car, an old Buick 58 or 60 model. One day we talked him into driving us around in it. We had a blast in that car. I don't think he knew how to drive very well so we took over driving (and we took over the drinking too). We even went swimming in the South China Sea. After five days of living it up I came back to Vietnam with thirty five cents in my pocket. At that point I only had a few more months in that stinking hole of a place until I could get back to the good old USA.

An order came down from High Command that anyone with a 0311 status and more than three months to serve in country had to go back to a line outfit. That meant

back to the jungles, going on patrols and ambushes, getting shot at, and walking into booby traps. My heart started pounding at just the thought of going back into combat. But I lucked out. Even though I was a 0311, I only had two months and three weeks left. I didn't have to go back. As a result of that order a lot of Marines had to return to combat and never came home. To this day I don't know if I would have gone back to the line outfit or not. I don't think I was a coward but I really wondered how much close fighting I could take. I knew if I went back into combat that my number would be up.

This is a really intense feeling you get when you've been in so much close combat. As an MP one of my jobs was to guard a Marine prisoner. I'm not sure what he did but I think he had tried to return to the US without orders, that is he was AWOL (absent without leave). I wondered if this could've been me if I had been sent back to a line outfit. I'm glad it's something I'll never know.

Another task I was given while I was in Phu Bi was that I had to take a North Vietnamese Colonel to the hospital south of Da Nang. His fingers had been blown off by a grenade. We got on a C-130 that was full of supplies for an hour long flight to Quin Nhun. The Colonel was a very important person to intelligence. He had a lot of information that was vital to us so we were taking care of his wounds. I sat across from him on the plane watching him the whole way. His hand was bandaged and he was handcuffed. He looked as if he was very tired and glad he was done fighting. He slept the entire time on the plane.

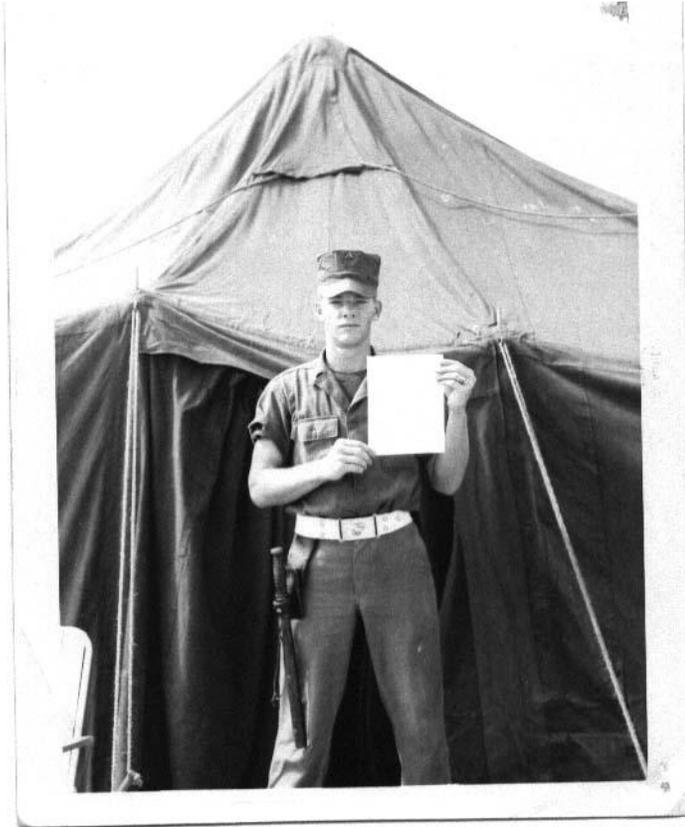
When we landed I handed him over to another MP who was kind of rough with him. He grabbed him by the collar and said something in Vietnamese and shoved in the jeep that was waiting for us. We both escorted him to the hospital and then I officially

handed him over to the other MP. As I was leaving the hospital I heard the Vietnamese Colonel begin to scream. I ran back to see what had happened and saw the doctor pouring some kind of solution over what was left of his fingers. The doctor and the MP stood there and laughed at him. I felt sorry for the Colonel but there was nothing I could do.

I didn't understand why I felt sorry for this enemy Colonel. Maybe it was because we were both human beings and the war was now over for him. I might have even felt some empathy for him. I returned to the airfield, hopped back on the C-130 and headed to Phu Bi. My job there was finished.

I was again counting down the days until I'd leave this smelly armpit of a place. It was frustrating because we didn't seem to be making the progress we're supposed to in getting control of the country. I remember at one point throwing my rifle down in disgust and saying, "Why are we here?"

Finally the day came when I got my orders to leave for the states. I had less than a week to do in Vietnam. MP Headquarters was kind enough to let stay in the building handing out IDs to Vietnamese civilians that worked in the area for us. I tried to stay in the building as much as possible. Once in a while I drove someone to the air strip to catch a C-130 transport plane to Da Nang or somewhere else and then I'd head right back to headquarters. I felt I just couldn't take the chance of getting shot by a sniper's bullet or running over a mine with the jeep. I stayed inside and did a lot of paper work.



My orders to go home.

Then the day came, my time was finally up and I was ready to leave. I couldn't move fast enough to get ready to leave. My sea bag was packed full of my cloths and three pairs of jungle boots. I said my good-byes and hitched a ride to the airstrip. I got on the C-130 headed to Da Nang and had no weapon for the first time in six months. That was a feeling that was both weird and scary. There were two other Marines on the plane who were also headed home. They had just gotten out of the jungle from a combat unit. They had finished their first tour of duty and were headed home. They had been awarded Purple Hearts but not for serious injuries. They had taken shrapnel in the arms and legs from booby traps.

There was a third guy on the plane but he didn't sit close to us. He was in the Navy and worked in the hospital in Phu Bi. We tried to talk to him but he didn't say much. He seemed to be in a world of his own. I thought he may have been overcome by knowing he was going home or maybe he had been a corpsman in combat at some point and was thinking of the men he was leaving and carnage he had seen.

The three of us, however, had grins from ear to ear. We spent the night in Da Nang getting our paper work OK-ed for the trip to Okinawa and our next duty station. I flew to Okinawa on a Pan Am jet with about a hundred other military personnel for three days of rest. We could see the coast of Vietnam getting farther and farther away. Finally the captain got on the loudspeaker and said we were out of hostile territory and everyone began to clap. It was time to get adjusted of being out of the jungles. I was issued new military clothes for the fall, winter and summer months. I still couldn't believe I was going back to the states all in one piece.

A lot of the Marines went to town to get drunk and get laid, but I slept for two days. I also got plenty of good chow at the mess hall. Yes, I said the mess hall! Typically the food isn't the greatest at the mess hall but when you haven't had real cooked food in quite a while anything tasted good. (I can't remember if I went to town to visit the young ladies, but I probably went with some of the other Marines, I just can't remember.)

Then it was time to pack up one last time. We boarded a Pan Am flight for a military base in Southern California. I kept worrying that that the plane wasn't going to take off or that you would hear your name called, "Cpl Barber, you're not supposed to leave until next week." But it didn't happen. We looked out the window of the plane

feeling like we were leaving for another mission but when we saw the flight attendants we knew we were going home.

Most of the guys were so exhausted that they slept most of the way. Others were so excited that they couldn't sleep and talked to the attendants as much as they could. When we finally spotted the coast of California and you could hear a pin drop. No one said a word. A lot of them cried. We were all thinking of all the Marines and buddies that were left behind. I know I had a tear in my eye too. We hoped they would make it out of Vietnam when their time came to leave. But no more going back for me, I was committed to never seeing Vietnam again or so I thought. (For years I've seen Vietnam in my haunting dreams. The dreams are often so real that I actually think that I'm there again.)

## Chapter 10: Duty in the States

There are no words to describe the change from being in combat and a war zone to being back in the society that you're used to. For me it's taken decades to be able to describe what the Vietnam War was like. But when you first get back you're so glad you're not getting shot at and relieved that you made out alive and that all your energy goes into making the transition back to regular life.

I was headed to my new duty station in Arlington, Virginia. I was assigned to Henderson Hall. It wasn't a very big place and contained a lot of barracks, a mess hall, and an NCO bar and grill. Across from Henderson Hall was Headquarters Marine Corps, or the Annex Building as it was sometimes called. That building was large and there were a lot of Marines and civilians who worked there. Half the building was Navy and the other half was Marines. At this point I had about eleven months left to serve in the Corps.

My assignment was in an office where I was to take pictures of officers so they could get an ID to get in the Pentagon. I did this for about three hours a day and the rest of my day was split between working at the information counter in my dress blues and working in a room destroying top secret papers. I had to be given a top-secret clearance to do this. To be honest, the work in this office was as boring as hell. I asked my lieutenant if I could go back to Vietnam. He said, "Are you crazy? Give it some time and relax." I did what he said and actually started to enjoy it. It seemed that all I was doing was drinking, going to parties and meeting girls. I'm really glad he talked me out of going back to Vietnam.



Made sergeant at Headquarters Marine Corps.

One night another Marine and I came back to the base drunk. We climbed over the fence near our barracks so we could sneak back in without being noticed. The MPs caught us and took us to the Provo Marshall Office. This is the officer in charge of the MPs. It just so happened that the officer in charge had been my CO in Vietnam and he remembered me. He knew what I had been through in Vietnam and only gave us a slap on the wrist and said, "Next time use the front gate."

One day while I was working the information desk I had an incredible opportunity, I got to meet Lewis B. Puller, know as "Chesty" Puller. He walked in and waited for the elevator right next to my desk. He was in full uniform with medals displayed from his shoulders down to his waist. I saluted him and asked if I could shake his hand. He was one of the most highly decorated Marines in the history of the Marine Corps. He was the only Marine to win the Navy Cross (the highest honor the Navy can bestow) five times for heroism and gallantry in combat. Excluding medals from foreign

governments, he won a total of 14 personal decorations in combat, plus a long list of medals, unit citation ribbons, and other awards. In addition to the five Navy Crosses, he also holds the Army equivalent, the Distinguished Service Cross.

I shook his hand and told him it was a pleasure to meet him, but he said the pleasure was all his. I told him about my time in boot camp and that we had to say, "Good night Chesty Puller, wherever you are." He asked, "Are they still doing that?" I also told him I had read books about his fighting in Korea, his life in the Corps and how he became a hero to the Corps.

He said he was here to see the Commandant of the Marine Corps about his son who was wounded in Vietnam. He asked me which unit I was in, in Vietnam. I told him I was with the Second Battalion, Fifth Marines, First Division, Hotel Company. He said, "That was one of the best units fighting in Vietnam." My chest stuck out a little more and I stood a little taller after he said that. I had never been so proud to be a United States Marine than at that very moment.

Several months later I saw "Chesty" again. He was in civilian clothes. He was there to talk to the Commandant again but this time about his son's death. Little did I know while going through boot camp that I would get a chance to meet the man in person not once but twice. In 1966 General Puller had requested the chance to return to active duty to serve in Vietnam but was turned down because of his age. On Oct. 11, 1971, Chester Puller died in Hampton, VA, he was 73. I am so proud to have had a chance to meet General Puller and shake his hand. That is something I will never forget.

The entire time I was at Headquarters the subject of Vietnam never came up. No one ever asked me about it or how many VCs or NVAs I killed. I never said anything

about it either. I guess it was viewed as being part of a Marine's duty. You were to go where they sent you and do the very best you could do. I did my part and did it very well, I made it back alive.

For a while during my time at Henderson Hall I lived off base with two other Marines in a three bedroom apartment. Every once in a while I would go to the mess hall on base to have breakfast before going to work. As I walked in I noticed a Marine sitting there having a cup of coffee and a roll. He looked very familiar. After seeing him the fifth day in a row I felt like I had to ask him who he was and if I knew him. I walked up to him and asked, "Have I seen you before?" As I was asking him the question I realized he was my cousin Leonard who I had lived with in Hawaii. It had been so long since we had seen each other we just didn't recognize the other. We talked for about an hour and I told him about Vietnam. I think he was on his way to Vietnam but I can't remember. I do know that he made it back from Vietnam and is living in Hawaii where he is a fireman.

My apartment was about two miles from work. There was a bus that ran right in front of the Annex Building that made getting back and forth easy. You had to be an E-4 (Corporal) or an E-5 (Sergeant) to live off base and the government paid for some of it. One of my roommates, Dale, was from Oklahoma. He had been involved with rodeos his whole life. He would show me pictures of himself riding bulls, horses and lassoing steers. I was really impressed.

Dale said it was pretty rough; he had broken ribs, fingers and a collarbone. He was just a small guy but he was tough. One day Dale asked me if I'd be interested in going to a rodeo with him. I said, "Sure, I'd like to go." He also asked if I would like to

participate by riding a bull and a bucking horse. I had missed the rush of doing something dangerous so much that I said, “Yes, Yes, Yes!” It was an open competition which meant that anyone could enter.

I had only been back from Vietnam for a short time and I guess I still thought I was invincible. I must have missed getting shot at and walking through mine fields. This was my chance to get that feeling back again.

The day came when it was time to go with Dale to the rodeo. It was a two day event and the place was packed with people. Dale was all dressed in his cowboy gear....boots and a big cowboy hat. He even had his own rope that he used when he rode the bulls. I had on jeans and combat boots and I was ready for combat. When we got there I had to submit my name and what I was going to ride. I had to pick a number from a board. Some guys rode twice in one day and others rode one day and then the next. I don't know if it was my good fortune or not but I picked to ride both a Brahma Bull (the one with the big hump on its back) and a bucking horse in the same day. Dale picked numbers to ride one each day which wasn't as bad.

We went to the corral to see the bull I was going to ride. His name was Whirlwind. I looked at the bull and said, “Am I crazy or what?” I just couldn't resist the rush. The bull and I stared at each other. I said, “I can't wait to ride you,” and the bull looked like he was thinking, “I can't wait to throw you off!” The bull stood there with snot coming from his nose, scraping his foot on the ground and looking at me. I couldn't back down now. I was a Marine.

After meeting the bull Dale and I went back to the motel where we were staying and he showed me how to wrap the rope around my hand and the bull so I wouldn't fall

off. He told me, “You have to wrap it so tight that you can’t let go.” I thought, “Can’t let go?”

The first day of competition Dale got to ride his bull first. I got to watch a pro in action. I was in the gate area when he got on the bull. Dale was just a small guy with a lot of guts and the bull looked enormous when he got on. He wrapped his hand around the rope and around the bull so tight it seemed impossible he could let go. He gave me a wink and nodded at the guys to open the gate. Off he went out into the arena. The bull was jumping up and down, twisting and turning and finally the buzzer went off. Dale had stayed on for either eight or ten seconds (which was the maximum time). The people gave him a big round of applause. Dale felt pretty good about his ride.

When his ride was over I told myself I could do that. “There’s nothing to it. Just don’t fall off and you’ll be fine.” In about half an hour it was my turn to ride Whirlwind. I had a chance to watch another rider ride Whirlwind before me. I was able to watch how the bull moved with a rider on his back. Dale told me to watch every move the bull makes so I could adjust to it. He may as well have been speaking Japanese because I didn’t understand anything he was telling me. I know he meant well but I had never done this before. I decided I just wanted to get it over with.

The bull was in the chute waiting for me and I seen he had a smirk on his face. I climbed into the chute to get on the bull while Dale was giving me all kinds of encouragement. He said, “You can do this. There’s nothing to it.” I looked out at the crowd and there had to be at least four to five hundred people there. I got my legs around the bull and he was so big it was like sitting on top of a tank. Whirlwind began to move around a little because he knew something was going to happen. Dale started wrapping

the rope around my hand and the bull so tight I couldn't get my hand out. He said, "That's good." I looked at him and said, "Are you crazy?" He said, "No, that's good, you want a good tight fit."

Well it was time to open the gate. Dale gave me his cowboy hat seconds before the gate opened. He said, "Are you ready?" I said, "Let'er go!" The gate opened and Whirlwind shot out like the worst rollercoaster I'd ever been on. Round and round we went, his hump hitting me in the chest several times. It seemed like I was on him for several minutes but it was only about four seconds. I flew off into the air upside down and right on my butt. What a rush! But I was so happy to be off that crazy animal. I didn't realize it until after what a BIG ASS BULL I just rode. What an experience! It was something I hadn't felt since Vietnam. I wanted more of that same feeling. I guess I could've been hurt really bad but that thought never entered my mind. I couldn't wait to ride the bucking horse next. Dale thought for sure I wasn't going to do it but I proved him wrong. Or maybe I proved how stupid I was. I didn't want to give up.

Before I had to ride the bucking horse I had a chance to watch the other riders. The horses kicked a little more and a little higher than the bulls did. It looked to me like they were twenty feet off the ground. Soon it would be my turn. Dale and I climbed up on the chute. He gave me his spurs to put on the back of my boots. The horse was already kicking uncontrollably in the chute. I waited until he settled down before I got on him. All of a sudden he became very calm, almost gentle. Dale started wrapping the rope around the horse and my hand the same way we did with the bull. There was no saddle, this was bareback. Dale said, "When the gate opens dig your spurs into the side of the horse's neck for affect."

I nodded my head and the gate opened. The horse shot out of the gate like a cannon. He bounced me all over the place kicking high into the air. All of a sudden he took off for the other side of the arena. I just hung on for dear life. At one point I was looking right at his belly. I must have been hanging on with one hand and ready to fall off. Then he came to a screeching halt and I flew off and landed about six feet away. All this took place in a matter of five seconds which I thought was pretty good.

It didn't really matter how long I stayed on, to do it was an amazing experience and an incredible high. I will never forget it. The only regret I have is not having any pictures to show my family. I told my wife and daughters about my wild rides with those animals but I don't think they believed me. At that point in my life, I still missed the rush of living with the uncertainty that you could step on a mine or being shot at. (I don't have those feelings any more.....THANK GOD!)

I was so glad to be alive. While I was in Arlington I did a lot of drinking and partying. I went to Georgetown a lot which was just across the river from where I lived. Georgetown was a college town and full of bars and women. Some nights I would get back to the apartment at two or three o'clock in the morning and then would have to get up early for work. Sometimes I would show up for work late but my lieutenant never said anything to me. He knew I had just come back from Vietnam and gave me some slack.

I was having a good time but it felt to me like something was missing from my life. I sort of knew what it was and it was in Washington, PA. I didn't know what had happened to Mary Ellen, whether she had gotten married or not. I still thought about her every day. She was one of the people who kept me alive in Vietnam even though she

wouldn't have known it. Even though I didn't write her while I was there, the thought of her was one of the things that kept me going.

I realized that my four years in the Marine Corps was almost over and I had decided to re-enlist for another four years. I thought I would put in for embassy duty in Italy. The main reason I chose Italy was because of my biological father. I had looked up John W. Barber in the Navy directory. I thought if I went there I could be stationed with him since the directory said that's where he was.

So I got his information and decided to give him a call. After several rings a voice answered. I said, "May I speak with Master Chief Petty Officer Barber, please?" The woman put me on hold. As I was waiting I thought to myself, "What the hell am I going to say?" I got so nervous waiting that I just hung up the phone. I never called back. A friend of mine who worked in the office where they cut the orders told me that I could get the duty station in Italy. But the more I thought about it the more I realized with my status as a 0311 they would ship my ass right back to Vietnam. There was no way I was going back to Vietnam.

## Chapter 11: Out of the Corps

The day finally came for me to say goodbye to the Corps. I was getting out of the Marines. It was a happy and sad time all rolled into one. The day I was discharged the lieutenant asked me why I was getting out of the Corps. I told because if I didn't, they would ship my ass back to Vietnam for a third time. I wasn't going to go because I knew my luck had run out. Sitting behind the desk, only in the Corps for two years and with no combat action at all, this lieutenant said to me, "Well, we all can't be Marines." I wanted to jump over the desk and wring his little neck but I didn't. He had no idea what I went through in Vietnam and I knew if I would've stayed in the Corps, I would have been the best Marine the Corps would have had.

I just couldn't take the chance of going back to Vietnam. I just knew I wouldn't have come home alive the third time. There were a lot of Marines going back for a third tour and nothing happened to them. But there were a lot who died on their third tour. Did I really have a feeling about my luck running out or was I being scared or a coward? I think about this from time to time but I guess I'll never know.

The first thing I did was contact my brother Bill in California. He invited me to come and stay with him and his wife for a while until I found a place of my own. I gave Dale all my uniforms and military things packed in a sea bag and asked him to have them shipped to my brother's house. I never got them. Dale said he sent them but I guess they got lost. I just let it go at that.

I was out of the Corps and on my way to California. I couldn't wait to see my brother and swap stories of our time in Vietnam. He met me at the airport and off we

went to his place. My brother had only been married for short time before I got there. He married a beautiful young woman named Ellen. During the first few weeks we went out drinking a lot. We were really happy to be reunited again. We drank a lot in the apartment too. His apartment had a fireplace in it and some nights we would have a drink and say, "This is for (and name a buddy who had died in Vietnam)" and throw our glasses into the fireplace. We didn't do it very often but it made Bill's wife mad. After a while I think his wife got jealous of the time he was spending with me. I don't think she cared much for me back then but I didn't care at the time, I was with my brother.

I'm not sure Ellen could've understood what it meant for Bill and I to be together. We had endured a growing up dominated by the abuse of our stepfather. We had both joined the Marines to get out of our crazy, dysfunctional family. We had both been in the most intense action in Vietnam, and after that we were both still alive. It was a miracle that we could be together just seemed remarkable. This was the first time since our childhood that we had been close. We didn't talk much about Vietnam, however, because he went through some pretty rough things in Force Recon. Most of our time was spent talking about his business.

Bill was involved in a new business. He was cleaning boats at the marina and he wanted me to help. Bill had been trained as a Force Recon Marine. In his recon training he learned how to scuba dive. So he took this training from the Marines and put it to work in his business. At the time, there were five or six marinas in the area and over four thousand boats. Bill's work involved hull cleaning. That meant that he dove in the water and cleaned the bottoms of boats scraping off the barnacles so the boat would glide smoothly through the water and save fuel.

I told Bill that I didn't know how to use the air tanks to breathe under water but he said not to worry that he would teach me. He took me down to the marina with a pair of air tanks and he showed me how to put the mouthpiece in and breathe. I put the tank on my back to see how it would feel. The next thing I knew he pushed me in the water without any warning. I was flopping around not knowing what to do next. He yelled, "Breathe and relax you'll be fine." I did exactly what he said and he was right, I was fine. I guess I just panicked because I wasn't expecting to be pushed in. I quickly got the hang of it. It was pretty cool breathing under water and looking at all the fish.

We had a truck with a sign that read, "L.A. County Diving Service." On the weekends Bill and I would go down to the marina and ask the owners of the boats if they'd like to have their boats serviced every month. Our charge for cleaning was based on the size of the boat. It ranged from \$10.75 to \$21.75 a month. The more boats we cleaned, the more money we made. But the competition was intense because there were other boat cleaning services at the marina as well. We also made some money on the side by diving in the water and looking for things people had dropped overboard. The water was twelve to fifteen feet deep where the boats were docked. But because the bottom of the ocean was pitch black there, and we had to feel around to find things. We charged a flat fee for the dive and extra if we found the items.

My brother was a real go-getter. He knew what he wanted in life. He had good business sense and lots of ideas on how to make money. He was a certified diver and was able to teach others how to dive. So he decided to open his own diving school and teach people how to scuba dive. I was also certified so I helped him with the diving classes. He did all the teaching and I was just there to help however I could. The money

was rolling in and things were looking good. In addition, Bill decided to open a dive shop and sell diving equipment to go along with the classes. He said, "People are going to buy diving equipment, why not from us?"

Before long we had three things going: diving lessons; selling diving equipment at the dive shop; and, cleaning boats at the marina. Bill took care of things at the shop and it was now my responsibility to pick up customers for the cleaning business. At first I was kind of shy talking to people. But after a while I got used to it. I would be so proud of myself when I would come back to the shop and tell Bill that I had picked up two or three boats that day.

I met a lot of interesting people at the marina. At least fifty percent of the boats never left the docks. If they did it was only about four or five times a year. I think it was a status thing in L.A. to have a big boat. I met a lot of actors and stuntmen on their boats while I was trying to drum up business. I met Gene Rodenberry the producer of "Star Trek." At the time I didn't know who he was until I started watching the show. The name of his boat was, appropriately enough, "Star Trek." I also cleaned Rowna and Martin's boat a couple times. They were the producers and on-air personalities of the TV show "Laugh In." I can't remember if they were one of our accounts or not. The name of their boat was "PHUCK OFF." I thought that was clever.

We had thirty-five to forty boats on our hull cleaning account. Some racing boats we cleaned twice a month in the summer time because of algae build-up in the water. We also fixed bent props and shafts and installed depth gauges under water. I wanted to do a good job to prove to my brother (and maybe deep down inside to prove to my stepfather) that I wasn't stupid. I wanted to prove I could do something besides pumping gas my whole

life. [I think to this day I'm still trying to prove to people that I'm the best I can be. I feel this in lots of areas of my life. For example, when I play golf I'm always trying to be better than the guy I'm playing with. Or, I think, I should've been better with my kids while they were growing up or with my wife with things around the house. They tell me I'm a great dad and husband but I have self-doubt in those areas of my life. I guess it shows how deep those things in childhood are in our lives.]

Our cleaning business was so busy that we had to hire another guy to help me clean the boats. My brother knew this guy and he was already a certified diver, so we hired him. We cleaned about eight to ten boats a day depending on the size. We were in the water eight or nine hours a day rain or shine. We would put a diving flag on the boat so the owner or anyone walking near the boat would know that we were underneath cleaning it. If we didn't have tanks with us we would use a big air compressor that we plugged in beside the boat. It had a hundred foot air hose. I remember there was a diver from another business cleaning a boat and he forgot to put his diving flag out. Someone was walking by and saw him but thought he was a big fish. The person grabbed a fishing spear and threw it in the water hitting the diver in the leg. The poor diver could have been killed because he forgot to put his diving flag out.

We were so busy with the business that Bill and Ellen didn't get to spend a lot of time together. On the nights that they wanted to be alone I would go out by myself. One night I was at a crowded bar talking to this nice girl trying to pick her up. I needed another beer so I told her to save my seat. I said I was going to get a beer but would be right back. But the bar was crowded and I had to wait about five minutes to get the beer. When I got back to the table someone was sitting in my seat. I said to him, "Excuse me I

was sitting there. I just went to the bar to get a beer.” The guy told me to get lost and find another chair. I tried to be nice and asked him politely to get out of my chair. When he refused, I snapped. I hit him over the head with my beer. Immediately four guys grabbed me and threw me out of the bar. All I wanted was someone to talk to and maybe get a phone number. It may sound funny but I felt kind of good after that happened. I wondered again if it was the rush I missed? Was it old baggage from Vietnam inside of me? I don’t know. Maybe it was just a guy moving in on my catch of the night.

At that time in my life I had no goals. I just wanted to make money and spend it. Finally I moved out of my brother’s apartment and into a small efficiency apartment in Redondo Beach. I guess I was with my brother for about a year or so when I decided to go on my own and find a job somewhere else. I was tired of working for my brother and being in the water all the time. The business was his baby. I wanted something of my own.

As much as I wanted to be on my own, I was in no place in my life to be without the structure that living with my brother gave me. I don’t think anyone realized what being in such intense combat does to a person. I know I didn’t. I just didn’t care about anything in my life. I had moved into my own apartment and my brother helped me buy a used car but I had to make the monthly payments. I hadn’t been able to find a job and soon I missed some of the payments and my car was repossessed.

Even if it hadn’t been repossessed I probably would have lost in anyhow. I had accumulated a lot of speeding and parking tickets and I rarely paid them. I would get warrants for my arrest in the mail when I didn’t pay them because I ignored them. I

didn't care. I was out of control. I never said anything to my brother who was unaware that I had fines and warrants for my arrest.

One day I was driving and went through a yellow light. Immediately I heard a siren. I looked in the mirror and saw a police car with its lights on right behind me. I pulled off to the side of the road. The cop pulled in right behind me and told me to stay in my car. He walked up to my car and asked for my driver's license and insurance. Then he asked why I went through the red light. I was surprised and said, "Sir, I didn't go through a red light, I went through a yellow light." He told me I was wrong and that it had been red. That made me mad and I said a few choice words to him.

He walked back to his car and ran my license to see if there were any outstanding warrants. Jackpot!! He told me to drive my car behind him to the police station and not to try and drive off anywhere. When we got to the police station they impounded my car. They told me I had a rap sheet as long as my arm. The officer put handcuffs on me and took me to get my mug shot. When he took the handcuffs off he took my belt and shoe laces too. I guess that was normal protocol to make sure I didn't harm myself. He put me in a holding cell with three other guys. I thought I was going to the electric chair. I was offered my one phone call so I called my brother. He came down and bailed me out and was pretty upset with me. To get me out he had to pay over seven hundred dollars in past tickets. He told me to get my act together and not to ever let this happen again.

I was so completely without direction that I even considered going back into the Marine Corps. The thought of going back to Vietnam still scared the hell out of me but I also missed the rush of being in combat. I was so messed up that I used to wish that I could be put on a deserted island with all kinds of mines and traps. Then I would

imagine trying to make it from one side of the island to the other without getting hurt or blown up. Who thinks like that? But that's where I was in my life. I felt lost and even though my brother loved me, in his own way, I felt alone and unwanted. And I still thought about Mary Ellen, now more than ever. I wondered what she was doing with her life.

I just about hit bottom on Christmas Eve 1971. I was walking the streets just going from bar to bar. I felt unwanted and depressed. It was hard to imagine that a few years ago I had been in a day to day struggle to stay alive in the jungles of Vietnam just hoping to get home in one piece. And now that I was back I was wondering around on Christmas Eve feeling sorry for myself. This didn't seem like what I had imagined back in Vietnam.

Bill and Ellen had had their first child and they were spending the night as a family. I walked into a bar for another drink. Sitting at the bar was a woman who looked to be in her late thirties or early forties. She asked if she could buy me a drink. I sighed, "Sure," and we had a couple drinks together. I guess because my hair was cut pretty short, she asked if I was in the military. I said, "No, I've been out of the Marines for about two years now." All at once she started to cry and I asked her what was wrong. She told me that her son was a Marine and was in Vietnam and that she hadn't heard from him in quite a while. It was amazing to be on the other end of things and see someone worried about a Marine in Vietnam. I told her not to worry. I tried to assure her by saying, "Sometimes they can't write home because of a certain kind of operation they're on. I'm sure he'll write soon." I knew this could be true and I hoped for her sake

it was. We had one last drink for the boys “Marines” in Vietnam, and then I went back to my empty apartment missing Mary Ellen.

I found a job cutting carpet that would be installed in campers and RVs. A lot of the guys I worked with were Mexicans who smoked a lot of dope. That really wasn't me so I didn't stay there long, I quit. Next I found a job at a gas station working nights. That brought back a lot of really bad memories of my home life and working at Ray's gas station. So I didn't stay there for long either. Finally I got a job at a casino parking cars. It was close to where I lived. The pay wasn't bad and I made very good tips. Most days I would work until about five-thirty in the morning. I could pay for my apartment with the tips I was making and that allowed me to start to save some money. This also gave me a chance to play golf. Most days I would go to the golf course and play eighteen holes after work. My game really began to develop and I got good. I was getting so good that I entered golf tournaments and won a lot of them. I was finally good at something and I liked that feeling. I wasn't really making a lot of money but I was doing something I liked. After all, I was by myself and only had to look out for me.

The fact that I was finally feeling pretty good about myself didn't make me stop thinking about Mary Ellen. I still really missed her. I asked my brother if I should write her a letter or give her a call. He said if you missed her so much you should give her a call. Because I didn't know if she was seeing someone or if she even thought about me, I decided to write her. In the letter I told her how much I thought about her and missed her and wondered if she was involved with anyone. Then I sent it.

Several days later I got a letter back from her. She said that she had thought about me over the years too. She said she had kept in touch with my mother and would

occasionally ask about me. She also wrote that she wasn't involved with anyone. My heart jumped up and down. I called her immediately all the while trying to stay calm. I asked her if I could fly home and see her and she said, "Yes." I was thrilled.

I got some money together as soon as I could and flew back to see her. I stayed with my mother once I got back to town. My mother was happy to see me and I just tried to stay out of my stepfather's way. There were still a lot of bad feelings between us. I would have gladly taken a hammer to his head but that would have only landed me in jail. Even though I was excited about my future I found it hard to forget the past.

But the reason I had flown home was to spend time with Mary Ellen. I spent a lot of time with her and her parents. It couldn't have gone better. We connected instantly and then just talked for hours on end. So after several days of non-stop talking and reminiscing I knew there was only one more step to take. I felt the proper thing to do was to ask her father for his daughter's hand in marriage. When I went to talk to him I told him I loved his daughter very much. I told him I had loved her for a very long time even though we hadn't been together. He responded that he had always liked me and then wished us well and all happiness. He sure seemed to me to be a good man. He liked to drink a lot but he was a good man.

After getting her father's blessing the only thing left was to ask Mary Ellen. She said yes and I was happier than I could've ever imagined! It was like I found something that had been missing from my life. All the times I had thought about her and imagined this moment, and now it had finally come true. It felt like she was the one who could deal with that deep loneliness I had felt. I don't think I could've survived my life without her.

I didn't even have an engagement ring to give her, that's how stupid I was. I just knew this is what I had to do and I did it. Little did Mary Ellen know what she was getting into by marrying me. She knew about my childhood and the abuse but she didn't know the whole story until we got married.

I was really excited. There had been so many times in the quiet moments in Vietnam and afterwards that I imagined all this unfolding. Even when I had lost contact with her I still had this deep hope that somehow in the future something would happen and we could be together. As I flew back to California in mid January 1972, I realized it was going to be as I imagined. If it sounds amazing, no one was more amazed than me.

When I returned to California I started working for a bottling company in Carson, Ca. I loaded and unloaded bottles of water onto trucks for delivery. I had a partner and we would do about thirty trucks each night. If we could be done with the thirty trucks in six hours instead of eight, we were still paid for eight hours. The incentive of being finished more quickly and being able to relax some made us load and unload at a feverish pace. The bottles at that time were made out of glass. We broke a lot of bottles trying to be done in less than eight hours but no one ever said anything so that's how we did it.

The abuse of my childhood and the messages I got at home and in school made me think I wasn't good enough for a better job. I was an MP the last six months in Vietnam so I could have returned to the States and applied at a local police department, but I didn't. I just had no confidence in myself.

Mary Ellen flew out to California at the end of February. She stayed with me for a couple weeks while we made arrangements for the wedding. We had decided to get married in California. The date we chose was March 18, 1972. Mary Ellen was also able

to transfer her job with the phone company to California. That worked out well so she didn't have to look for a job.

With plans for the wedding complete, Mary Ellen went back to Washington to settle things before her big move. I think I wrote her a letter every day. I kept telling her how much I loved her and that I couldn't wait to see her again. Even though her parents didn't have a lot of money, they threw her a nice going away party. All her family and friends were there to wish her well and see her off. I wanted to be there so bad, but I think she understood why I wasn't.

Mary Ellen came from a loving and caring family. That would be so critical for us as our marriage developed. I always let her take the lead in family matters because I knew I had a deficit there. I had no knowledge of how a loving family was meant to work. But I knew I loved Mary Ellen with all my heart and that we could have a great family. Even though I didn't quite know how it worked I did know what to avoid.



Me and Mary Ellen on our wedding day - March 18, 1972

Finally the day came to say, “I do.” I was nervous but I knew this is what I wanted. I had my brother and his wife and two other friends with me for the ceremony. Mary Ellen’s brother Jim was able to be there and that was great because it gave her some real family support. I had bough a wedding ring for about a hundred dollars. It’s sort of stupid but I didn’t even get myself a ring. I didn’t have the money but could’ve borrowed from my brother, it just didn’t occur to me.

I wish I could turn back time and redo our wedding. I’m not sure how we would have managed things differently but I felt later like I had robbed Mary Ellen out of one of the most important days of her life. She missed out on walking down the aisle in the church she grew up in with her family and friends looking on. It made me feel selfish. People understand that growing up in an abusive family is really hard but they don’t always realize the enormity of what you lose. My brother got married the same way I did, with a few friends and family in a simple ceremony. We just didn’t stop to think what a great family celebration something like a marriage could be. Because our family was so messed up we couldn’t imagine wanting to have all our relatives gathered for such a significant moment. The last thing we wanted was to be with some of our relatives (especially Ray and his side of the family). So it didn’t even occur to me when I was planning our wedding to make it a big family affair. By this point Mary Ellen knew my family situation and chose to make the sacrifice for me. It was great of her but I still fell bad to this day about it.

## Chapter 12: Beating the Odds

If someone picked up this book and “turned to the last chapter to see how it ended” without reading the rest, they might be disappointed. In some ways this last chapter tells a story that many other working families in the US could tell. Life is hard, it has its ups and downs, but with love and hard work you can find a way to succeed. That’s my story as well. But if you have read the rest of the book you may want to celebrate this “normal” last chapter as I do. I never thought I could have a normal life after what I went through.

If you read much or have been educated you know that the deck was stacked against me in four ways. First, I was horribly abused by my step father. The vast majority of people who experience abuse repeat it but I didn’t. Second, I saw death and carnage on the killing fields of Vietnam that tore the life out of many of my fellow Marines and soldiers. It dealt me a hard blow as well but I made it back. Third, my life circumstance robbed me of a belief in myself that many use to climb the ladder of success. But, I recovered that over the course of the years. And, fourth, I had very little money and didn’t have a family that could bank-roll me into a successful career. And yet, I’ve managed to live a comfortable life and provide for my family.

I think it’s these things that make my story amazing. Statistically speaking, people who have one or two of these realities seldom reverse their influence and live a good life. I’m not a social scientist but I bet there are very, very few with all four of these descriptors who are able to overcome them. But I beat the odds. I’ve managed a good life and I’m grateful for it.

If you've been reading the book I think you know me well enough by now to know that I don't take any credit for this. I was lucky. Like so many of my fellow vets I'm haunted by the fact that I made it out, and alive, and can tell this story while they ended up with their name inscribed on The Wall with great honor. For me I thank God for Mary Ellen. Even when I was out of touch with her she kept me going. The hope that we could be together was the hope that helped me endure. Once we were reunited it was her love and support that became my stability. And, of course, we had lots of help from family and friends. I made it! Let me wrap up the story for you. It's an American story but not 'the' American story (there were just too many obstacles early on for it to be a fairy tale-like story).

After we were married, Mary Ellen and I moved out of my small apartment and got a two-bedroom apartment in Torrance. She worked in San Pedro about twelve or fifteen miles away from where we lived. It really took a lot of guts on her part to take up that life. She had friends from work and my brother and his family were in the area but she had moved thousands of miles from her family and friends, it wasn't easy.

After living in the apartment for a year Mary Ellen wanted a little bigger place and I didn't blame her. We looked in the paper and found a duplex for rent. We went to see it and it looked perfect so we took it. The couple who owned it was young like us. The husband was a golfer and pretty good at that. We hit it off right away and would golf together once a week.

His wife worked for Western Airlines at the Los Angeles airport. After we had lived there a few weeks she asked me if I'd be interested in working for Western Airlines. She told me that employees got to fly anywhere Western flew for free and got huge

discounts on tickets for other airlines as well. It was clear to me that it was a better job than working at the bottling company. I told her I was interested and within a week I was working for Western Airlines in the freight department. The only drawback was that I was working nights. Mary Ellen didn't like that very well because we were still newly weds and it meant that she was home all night by herself. But I told her that once I had enough time in with the company I would be able to switch to daylight.

We were settled and doing well but I still couldn't shake the images of Vietnam. They were still fresh in my mind. I would have dreams that I was running and running trying to get away from something. The war was still going on and its images were broadcast every evening on the news. It was weird for me because I would see places I had been just a few years earlier. I still felt guilty because I was safe and my fellow Marines were still being killed. I would see a place I had been and would say to Mary Ellen, "Look at that place, I was there." She would shrug and say, "Sure you were," and start talking about something else. I hadn't told her all about the war and she just didn't understand how I felt or what it was all about. Sometimes I didn't understand the war either. I would have loved to talk to someone about it but there just wasn't anyone around who understood what it was like.

A movie came out about that time about Vietnam called "The Green Berets," starring John Wayne. I couldn't believe the way this movie distorted the men who were fighting in Vietnam. It was so far-fetched that I wanted to write a letter to the studio and tell them how wrong it was. My wife said, "It's only a movie, let it go." I never liked John Wayne after that and didn't care for any of his movies.

[There have been a lot of movies made about Vietnam but only three of them seem at all close to the real thing Marines experienced there. “Full Metal Jacket” is one I’ve seen about ten times and “The Deer Hunter” I’ve probably seen twenty times. “Platoon,” however, puts me back in Vietnam and I’ve only been able to watch it a couple times because it’s too real for me.]

Our next-door neighbors in the duplex were Mexican. Their names were Julio and Maria Cuero. They had a little boy Alex who was two or three years old. We became really good friends with them especially Mary Ellen. Often in the evenings after Maria had put Alex to sleep, Mary Ellen would go over to their place and the three of them would talk and drink. They had a good time.

After we had been in the duplex for about a year Mary Ellen became pregnant. We were excited about having a baby. I told myself this child was not going to be raised like I was. I was going to break the chain of abuse. This child would be raised in a loving caring home. I knew Mary Ellen had come from that kind of family and I knew we could be that kind of family ourselves. Even though there’s no simple manual about how to raise a child, I knew we could do it.

When it was time for the birth Mary Ellen’s labor lasted twenty two hours. She had a tough time but it was all worth it when we saw our daughter. Kelly Lynn Barber was born on May 21, 1974. She was a beautiful baby and I was scared to death. How do I raise a baby and have a family? Thank God my wife took control and knew what to do. She decided to quit her job to raise our daughter. That was the best thing she ever did.

Even though the duplex had been a good place to live, when we brought the baby home it seemed to us that we needed a bigger place. We moved about thirty miles away

to Lakewood. It was a nice neighborhood. Shortly after we moved, Julio and Maria moved there as well. It was nice having such good friends living two doors away.

In 1973 my brother Bill had decided it was time for us to meet our biological father. At that time I was twenty-seven years old. Bill had found out that he lived in Oceanside not that far away. Bill had talked to him a few times on the phone but I hadn't. Our father had a wife and three daughters but he had never told the daughters about us. Bill called him one day and told him we were going to come down and visit him.

The day finally came and I brought Mary Ellen with me and Bill brought Ellen. I wasn't really that nervous because I didn't know this man at all. I think I was more nervous to meet his wife and daughters and wondered about what they would think of us.

We pulled into their driveway and got out of the car. We rang the doorbell and a teenage girl answered the door. We said, "we're here to see your father." She ran and got her dad and our father came to the door. We greeted him with, "Hello. We're your sons." We hugged him and he invited us into his home. My father was really nervous. He introduced us to his wife Margaret and two of his daughters, Nancy and Susan. His middle daughter, Juli, had been in an accident a few days earlier and was in the hospital. Later that afternoon Bill and I went to the hospital to meet Juli.



Me (left) Bill (right) with our real father,  
John Barber (middle)

Bill and I spent most of the day with my father and his family. It was a pleasant time getting to know one another. It was so civil, such a good time, that we continued to see them and developed a close relationship with him and his family. We didn't think there was anything to be gained that day by telling him about our childhood so we didn't. It wasn't until years later that we found out that he had written letters to us that we had never received. We never mentioned this to our mother because we just assumed that Ray threw them out so we couldn't see them. It wasn't until I gave my real father a rough draft of this story to read that he knew the extent of the abuse of our childhood. It broke his heart and made him feel really guilty. He just had no idea that Bill and I had grown in that kind of environment. I told him we had both turned out fine and there was nothing that he didn't need to feel bad about, it was something he couldn't change.

I had been working for Western Airlines for almost five years when we found out Mary Ellen was pregnant with our second child. With our family growing, she wanted to

move back to western Pennsylvania. She said she had come to California for me and now it was time to move back to Pennsylvania for her. I couldn't argue with that.

I got back in touch with my friend from high school, John Spiegel, and asked him for his father's phone number. John's father was the personnel director for TWA Airlines in Pittsburgh. I got in touch with Mr. Spiegel and explained that I was moving back to Washington, PA. I asked if there were any openings at TWA since I had been working for an airline. Mr. Spiegel knew me pretty well since John and I had joined the Marines together. He said he'd be glad to help but that it would be about six months before there would be a job open. I told him that was fine and asked that he would contact me as soon as something opened up.

I gave Western Airlines my notice that I was leaving to return to Pennsylvania. They didn't want me to leave because I was a good employee and had done a good job for them. They gave me an excellent recommendation. They said if I ever came back to L.A. a job would be waiting for me. I thought that was pretty nice of them.

We put our house up for sale and Mary Ellen was really happy to be moving back home. We had a garage sale to get rid of the things we weren't going to take with us. Julio and Maria were sad and we knew we would miss them. We told them we would come back often to visit them (and we've remained close over the years). Mary Ellen was about six or seven months pregnant when we found someone to buy the house.

The couple that was going to buy the house was young and he was in the military. They liked the house and put money down to buy it. Our agent said everything was in order for the sale to go through. We had the movers come and load everything we were taking onto the truck. Mary Ellen and our daughter Kelly flew back to Washington Pa.

We were going to be living with her parents until we found a place of our own. I was planning to leave for Pittsburgh the next evening after I signed the closing papers for the sale of the house.

Just after Mary Ellen and Kelly left, I got a call from the wife of the couple buying the house. She told me that she and her husband had changed their minds and weren't going to buy the house. I couldn't believe it! I was in shock. I was standing in the middle of an empty house. I had just quit my job, sold the two cars, and shipped my wife and daughter back to Pennsylvania! I took her phone number and said I would call her back.

I tried to get a hold of my agent to find out what I could do but he was on vacation in Florida. What the hell was I going to do? I called the young wife back and asked her why they had changed their minds. She said that her husband was to find out shortly that he might be going overseas. They couldn't take the chance of buying the house if he was leaving. I have no idea why I lied to her and said the next thing, but I did. I told her I had told my pregnant wife what was happening. I told her Mary Ellen was so upset that she had to be rushed to the hospital. I actually said, "Mary Ellen was seven months pregnant and this stress might hurt the baby." I had the woman in tears. She said she was very sorry. I guess I was trying to shame her into buying the house. I called my brother in Hawaii to get some advice but he didn't have any ideas. Next I called Julio and told him what had happened and he came down to try and help.

The next day the young couple found out that the husband wasn't going overseas. They went ahead with the closing on the house. I went through two days of hell but was

still able to make my flight to Pittsburgh. Boy, did I have a story to tell Mary Ellen when I saw her!

By early January 1977 we were back in Pittsburgh. It was the worst winter they had had in thirty years. We put all out household things in my mother's house while we lived with Mary Ellen's parents. The first thing we did was buy a car. The next thing I did was look for a job but couldn't find one. We had a little money from the sale of the house so we were OK for a while.

I had to find a job but there just weren't any at that point. So my mother suggested that I work for Ray at his gas station. This was one of the hardest things I ever had to do. I hated him so much for what he had done to us and not a day went by that I didn't want to kill him. But I had another child on the way and Mary Ellen said it would only be temporary until I found another job. So I swallowed my pride and took the job but boy did it hurt. I made sure that Ray never got anywhere close to my two daughters.

Finally, on March 8, 1977, our second daughter was born, Kacey Elizabeth Barber. Kacey was born on my birthday. Shortly after her birth we rented a place of our own. It was small but was a nice place. My mother came over often to visit the girls but I wouldn't let my stepfather in the house. He would wait in the car for my mother. I didn't want him anywhere near my kids. To my knowledge, he never held either of the girls.

I had two girls and no job. Mary Ellen found me a job at a golf course. She knew a guy who knew another guy who pulled some strings and got me the job. I was a caddy master at a country club in Washington. The hours were long but the money was decent. I often worked from six in the morning until seven at night.

I worked at the golf course for about three or four months until I got a letter from TWA saying they had a job for me if I wanted it. I was really happy. I finally had a real job in the airline business, something I wanted to get back into. (It wasn't until years later that I would find out what a big mistake that was!) TWA was a good job. I would work thirty days of night shift and then switch to thirty of day shifts. The flying benefits were good too. Since the whole family got to fly for free, we flew back to California at least once a year to see Julio, Maria, and my father.

I was laid off two or three times from TWA while I was working for them. I did odd jobs at a golf course and collected unemployment. Mary Ellen would also get a part-time job to help out with the money situation while also taking care of the family. That put her under a lot of stress. Although money was tight we were able to buy a house. Kelly was starting kindergarten and we wanted to really settle down. We bought a house in Aliquippa not far from the airport.

The last time I was laid off from TWA I was told I wouldn't be called back. They had lost a lot of flights out of Pittsburgh. They offered me the chance to transfer to New York but we had just bought a house and didn't want to move. A friend of mine was able to get me a part-time job with USAir. I had been with TWA for over five years and now had to start all over again.

I worked nights for USAir for almost a year and a half when I got laid off again. Once again I was without a job. This time I was able to pick up work at a local steel mill until I got called back. Shortly after I was called back, I got a full-time job working the night shift. The night shift didn't last very long because they were hiring a lot of people and there was a chance to change to day light.

Looking back, I should've gotten out of the airline business a long time ago. As the industry got worse and USAIR (now US Airways) got worse, I went back to working nights. I hated it and so did Mary Ellen. I was recently able to retire. All I want to do is work on a golf course somewhere and give lessons to kids. That was my dream.

One night about twenty five years ago I woke up in a cold sweat and couldn't breathe, at least I thought I couldn't. Mary Ellen called the neighbor down the street to watch the kids and took me to the hospital. We thought I was having a heart attack. I was breathing into a paper bag the whole way to the hospital. The doctor examined me but found nothing wrong. He gave me some pills and sent me home.

I was fine for a couple months and it happened again. I woke up in a cold sweat and couldn't breathe. I said, "Please just let me die now." That's how bad it was. After the attack passed, I got up and walked around the house. I turned the TV on until I fell asleep. The attacks were a recurring dream about the collapsed bunker I had been in back in Vietnam. Every time I'd have the dream I'd have an attack.

I trained myself to go to a place in my mind where it was nice and calm. I love golf and would go to a golf course (in my mind) that I had played. I'd play each shot over and over until the attack passed. This seemed to work for me. I wasn't convinced that pills could help me with this type of disorder. I didn't want to take sleeping pills. I believed I could help myself without taking pills. When I do have an attack, I just lie there and tell myself to take it easy. It's OK. I'm going to live to see the next day. I don't know why, but I don't get these attacks very often anymore.

Even though the attacks have subsided, I still think about Vietnam. Sometimes when I'm driving down the highway and its raining and a little foggy, it'll remind me of

monsoon season. I'll look over at the hillside along the road and think, "That looks like a good ambush site." Sometimes I'll take a peek to see if the NVA could be there. I know they're not but I still look.

This is the legacy of being in the brutal combat of Vietnam or any war. It scars you for a lifetime. Some are able to manage it while many get overwhelmed by it. When a Vietnam vet complains about the lack of appreciation that was shown by the county, this is another reason why it's so important. Vets don't need their egos stroked. But we were in horrific situations trying to serve our country. Those horrific situations take a lasting toll and the support we desired was to feel appreciated for both fighting the war and dealing with its consequences.

In 1985 my stepfather passed away. Bill and I were so happy. I know that sounds awful but it was really the way we felt. I went to the funeral for my mother's sake and took three days off of work for it. As I walked by the casket, I spit in it. My mother was finally free. She has been more alive since his death than ever before.

People have asked me if I ever saw Ray's face in the face of the Viet Cong during combat. Did I imagine I was killing Ray as I fought the enemy? But my response was just like I described earlier. When I was in combat I was scared. I was trying to stay alive. I didn't have any time to waste thinking about that asshole.

Growing up in an abusive family doesn't mean you have to become an abuser yourself. However, odds were I would turn out like my stepfather. Odds were my life would have been full of drugs, alcohol, and/or crime. I beat the odds. Bill and I made a choice not to turn out like Ray. We did everything in our power to be the opposite of

Ray. Although we grew up with no love or encouragement, we were able to come out of that heinous childhood strong, loving and successful men.

Mary Ellen and I will celebrate our forty-first wedding anniversary this March. We are still living in Aliquippa. We have two lovely daughters, Kelly and Kacey, and two lovely grandsons, Luke who is 6 yrs old and Dylan 3 yrs. old.



On November 29, 2006, my father John Barber passed away, he was 85. As I attended the service and looked around at my half-sisters and all the friends who came to pay their respect, I wondered (as I often have) what my life would have been like had I grown up with my father. My life definitely would have been different. Then I think of

my grandsons and the rest of my family and I realize that if I had grown up with my father I wouldn't have all this. I have an amazing and loving family.

My brother Bill is a very successful businessman and has his own company. In fact, he owns several companies. He, obviously, didn't turn out to be the bum my stepfather predicted. Bill had a lot of demons in him from our childhood and being in Vietnam, although, like so many, he would never talk about it. I think fighting with those demons gave him the strength to get where he is today. He and Ellen (his wife) divorced years ago. They have two sons, William, the oldest works for Bill as the CFO for one of his companies. Robert, the younger, works for a playwright company. They both are very successful young men and have a great relationship with their father.

Since my stepfather's death, my mother has been able to be back with the Catholic Church for over twenty years now. My mother is back in my heart and I can tell her that I love her and mean it.

Even though I was only in Vietnam for a little less than two years it seemed like a lifetime. I remember just about everything that happened there. From the intense fighting, the pressure of staying alive, and the pressure of performing in combat like I was trained. The different smells have also stayed with me over the years. The napalm the jets dropped, the dead and burning bodies, and the smell of the country itself.

Being in combat has taught me so much about life. When I'm down and out about something, I look at my Marine Corps emblem and think of what I went through and things don't seem so bad. I think back of what my buddies and I went through. I can't believe I did all those things. To return home alive with only scratches and bruises

is a miracle. Would I do it all over again? Yes I would. One of these days I will see all the Marines that I served with and died. Until then I will live my life to the fullest.

When I die I want people to know that I tried to be a loving husband and father but I also want them to know I was a Marine who did my duty when called upon and did it to the best of my ability. I appreciate it when others tell me I'm a hero but for me the real heroes of the Vietnam War are the ones with their names on The Wall in Washington, DC.

The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting the  
PRESIDENTIAL UNIT CITATION to the

THIRD MARINE DIVISION (REINFORCED)

for service as set forth in the following

CITATION:

For extraordinary heroism and outstanding performance of duty in action against the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong forces in the Republic of Vietnam from 8 March 1965 to 15 September 1967. Throughout this period, the Third Marine Division (Reinforced), operating in the five northernmost provinces of the Republic of Vietnam, successfully executed its three-fold mission of occupying and defending key terrain, seeking out and destroying the enemy, and conducting an intensive pacification program. Operating in an area bordered by over 200 miles of South China Sea coastline, the mountainous Laotian border and the Demilitarized Zone, the Third Marine Division (Reinforced) successfully executed eighty major combat operations, carrying the battle to the enemy, destroying many of his forces, and capturing thousands of tons of weapons and materiel. In addition to these major operations, more than 125,000 offensive counter guerrilla actions, ranging from squad patrols and ambushes to company-sized search and destroy operations, were conducted in both the coastal rice lands and the mountainous jungle inland. These bitterly contested actions routed the enemy from his well-entrenched positions, denied him access to his source of food, restricted his freedom of movement, and removed his influence from the heavily populated areas. In numerous operations, the Third Marine Division (Reinforced) demonstrated the great efficacy of combined operations with units of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. In July 1966, the Third Marine Division (Reinforced) moved to the north to counter major elements of the North Vietnamese Army moving across the Demilitarized Zone into the Province of Quang Tri; its units fought a series of savage battles against the enemy, repeatedly distinguishing themselves and, time and again, forcing the enemy to retreat across the Demilitarized Zone. Imbued with an unrelenting combat spirit and initiative and undeterred by heavy hostile artillery and mortar fire, extremely difficult terrain, incessant heat and monsoon rains, the Third Marine Division (Reinforced), employing courageous ground, heliborne and amphibious assaults, complemented by intense and accurate air, artillery and naval gunfire support, inflicted great losses on the enemy and denied him the political and military victory he sought to achieve at any cost. The outstanding courage, resourcefulness and aggressive fighting spirit of the officers and men of the Third Marine Division (Reinforced) in battle after battle against a well-equipped and well-trained enemy, often numerically superior in strength, and the great humanitarianism constantly shown to the peoples of the Republic of Vietnam, reflected great credit upon the Marine Corps and were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.



This is a citation my unit and I received from President Johnson for extraordinary  
heroism and outstanding performance of duty in action.

RECORD OF SERVICE

ORGANIZATION	DATE	REASON	PRIMARY DUTY	PROFICIENCY		CONDUCT	SIGNATURE OF MARKING OFFICER
				GENERAL MILITARY SUBJECTS	DUTY		
RecruitTrngBn, MGRDep, PISC	AUG 28 1965	Jd	Under RecruitTrng				182-65132112 ByDir
RecruitTrngBn, MGRDep, PISC	OCT 22 1965	Tr	RecruitTrng Compl	4.0	4.0		228-65132112 ByDir
2dITBn 1st ITR MCB, CamLej	OCT 23 1965	Jd	Duins Indt				312551 217-5
2dITBn 1st ITR MCB, CamLej	22 NOV 1965	Tr	IndivComptnk Completed	4.1	4.2		312551
	NOV 23 1965	ChPri Du	Du j...				
2dITBn 1st ITR MCB, CamLej	DEC 8 1965	Tr	EST COMPL	4.1	4.2		312551 253
	9 DEC 65	Jd To Lk					
	DEC 29 1965	To Du					41-6413202
	JAN 5 1966	TA					312551 253
CoH, 2ndBn, 5thMar, 1st MarDiv (Rein) FMF	6Jan66	Jd	0311 Rifleman				4-66-1173 ByDir
CoH, 2ndBn, 5thMar, 1st MarDiv (Rein) FMF	31Jan66	Semi-An	Auto/0311 Rifleman	4.1	4.4	4.4	J. J. J...
CoH, 2ndBn, 5thMar, 1st MarDiv (Rein) FMF	31Jul66	Semi-Ann	A/Rifleman	4.1	4.3		
Co "H", 2ndBn, 5thMar, 1st MarDiv (Rein) FMF	15Aug66	ChPri Du	0311 Messenger				
Co "H", 2ndBn, 5thMar, 1st MarDiv (Rein) FMF	28Nov66	Tr	0311 Messenger	4.5	4.5		233-7...
H&SCo, 3dBn 9thMar, 3dMarDiv (Rein) FMF	29Nov66	Jd	0351 AntiTank Asslt				240-66-13231 ByDir
H&SCo, 3dBn 9thMar, 3dMarDiv (Rein) FMF	28Dec66	Tr	0351 AntiTank Asslt	4.5	4.5		2-67-13231 ByDir
H&SCo, 1stBn, 26thMar, FPO SFRAN 96602	29Dec66	Jd	0311 Unassigned				UD# 34-67-15161
H&SCo, 1stBn, 26thMar, FPO SFRAN 96602	31Jan67	Semi-An	0311 Unassigned				
H&SCo, 1stBn, 26thMar, FPO SFRAN 96602	10Feb67	Tr	0311 Unassigned				
HqCo HqBn 3dMarDiv (Rein) FMF	11Feb67	Jd	0311				
MPCo HqBn 3dMarDiv (Rein) FMF	31Jul67	Semi-AN	0311 MP	4.6	4.5		
MPCo HqBn 3dMarDiv (Rein) FMF	13Sep67	Tr	0311 MP	4.6	4.5		114-67-13025
CoA, HqBn, HQMC	12Oct67	Jd	0311-Rifleman Code ABH				

EMBOSSSED PLATE IMPRESSION

BARBER, JOHN W.

NAME (Last)	(First)	(Middle)	SERVICE NO.
NAME (18(3)-PD (Rev. 6-62) SUPERSEDES PREVIOUS EDITION WHICH WILL BE USED			

C 3078 C

This is my service record showing what outfits I was in and the dates I was in them. It also shows my performance rating. 5.0 was the best.

**COMBAT HISTORY—EXPEDITIONS—AWARDS RECORD**

COMBAT HISTORY—EXPEDITIONS				
DATE OF ENTRY	DETAILS	DATES		SIGNATURE
		FROM (ON)—	TO—	
13Apr66	In support of U.S. Forces, Chu Lai, Republic of Vietnam			
APR 30 1966	<del>PARTICIPATED IN OPERATION WYOMING REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM</del>	APR 26 1966	APR 30 1966	<del>No m. by dir</del>
28Jun66	PARTICIPATED IN OPERATION APACHE IN VICINITY OF QUANG TIN PROVINCE RVN	9Jun66	13Jun66	J. J. Graham Bydir
17Jun66	Operation Columbus	6Jun66	13Jun66	J. J. Graham Bydir
	Participated in Operation PRALIE, Quang Tin Province, RVN	20Oct66		
10Dec66	Participated in Operation Mississippi, Quang Tue Son Province, RVN	29Nov66	23Nov66	J. J. Graham Bydir
16Dec66	Participated in Operation STEELING in the vicinity of DaNang, RVN.	11Dec66	7Dec66	J. J. Graham Bydir
7Jan67	Served with 1st Battalion, 26th Marines in vicinity of DaNang in direct support of Vietnam Operations. (Quang Nam Province)	29Dec66	15Dec66	J. J. Graham Bydir
15Feb67	Participated in Operations against Communist Infiltration Forces in the Chu Lai Area, RVN	29Dec66	10Feb67	N. W. Clutey CO
		11Feb67	13Sep67	R. O. Adams

**AWARDS**

DESCRIPTION	STARS, DEVICES	DATE APPROVED	APPROVED BY	DATE MEDAL ISSUED	SIGNATURE
W/DCFS		5May66	JTC OF JBT		J. J. Graham CO
W/DCDL	w/1*	27May66	CC, CoH, 2dBn, 5thMar		J. J. Graham CO
Meritorious List		15Jul66	CC, 2ndBn, 5thMar		J. J. Graham Bydir
VCM		24Nov66	SECNAV IN TB 1650, 06		J. J. Graham Bydir
RVNOM w/Device (60-)		22Oct66	Sec Def		J. J. Graham Bydir
PUC		19Feb68	MCBull1650of29Dec67		J. J. Graham Bydir
GC:DL		26Aug68	CO, Coa, HqBn, HQMC		J. J. Graham CO

EMBOSSSED PLATE IMPRESSION

BARBER, JOHN W.

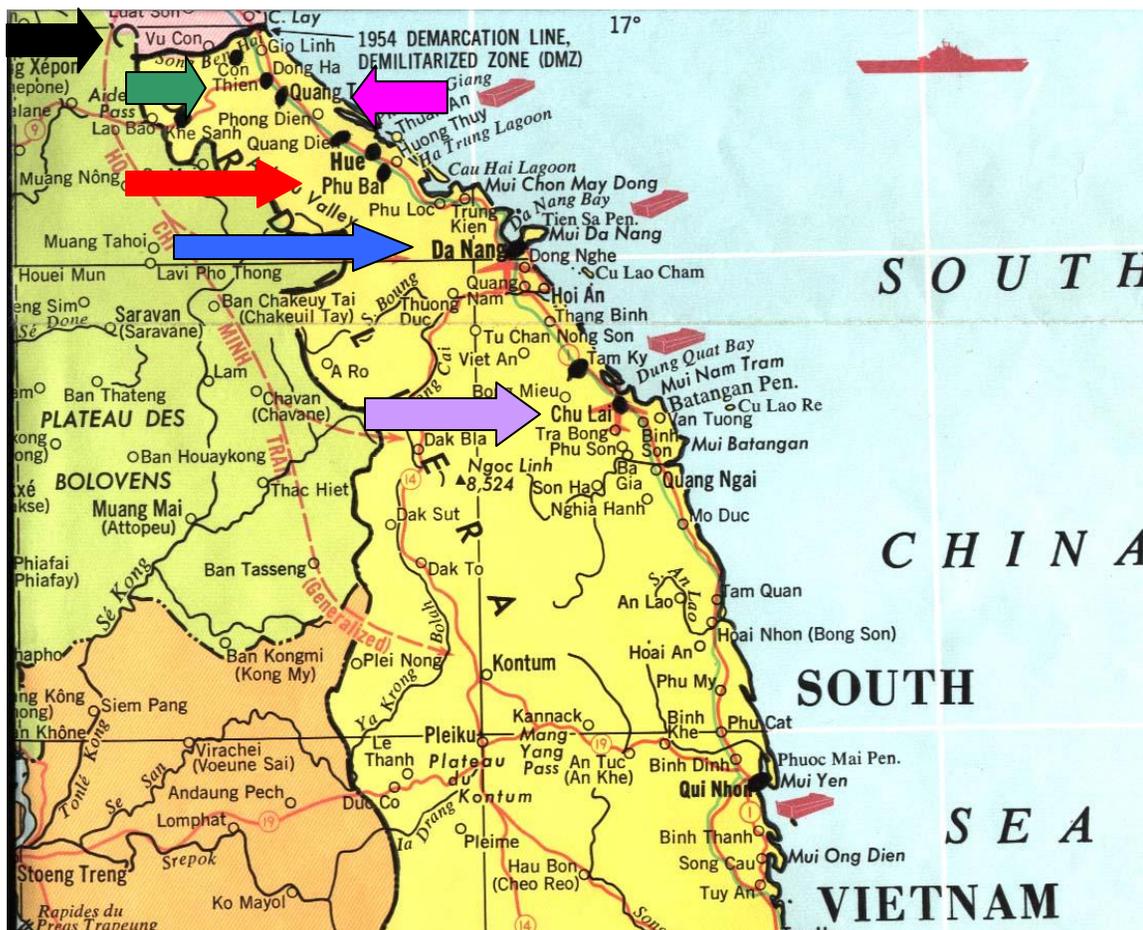
NAME (Last) (First) (Middle) SERVICE NO.

NAVMC 118(9)-PD (REV. 1-63) SUPERSEDES 11-35 EDITION WHICH WILL BE USED.

U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE: 1963 OF-872608

This is my combat history. It shows the different operations I was on in Vietnam. It also lists the medals that were awarded to me.

Map of South Vietnam



The purple arrow is pointing to Chu Lai. This is where I landed for the first time in Vietnam.

The blue arrow is pointing to Da Nang. This is where Hill 69 is located.

The red arrow is pointing to Phu Bi. This was where I was stationed for my second tour of duty.

The pink arrow is pointing to Quang Tri. This was where many firefights took place.

The green arrow is pointing to Con Thien. This was one of the worst areas in Vietnam.

The black arrow is pointing to the DMZ. This is where we did a lot of patrols.