

**Recovering From the War**  
by Patience H.C. Mason

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## Chapter 1 Who Went

### The Draft

"When people ask me why I went to Vietnam, I just tell them my moma and daddy didn't have the money for a bus ticket to Canada. Besides," he continued, "I never thought of it." Clant Clayton did take the bus from Lulu, Florida, up to the induction center in Jacksonville. A tall, handsome, broad-shouldered country boy, he laughed, "I said I had flat feet. The doctor took my trigger fingers and said, 'Son, as long as you got these, we're taking the blind, the crippled, the lame, and the lazy.'"

Bobby Smith is a soft-voiced Southern black man. "I was eighteen. I felt like if I hung around too long I was gonna get into a slump. You know, you finish high school, you want to become a man, you want to get away. I said, 'Hey, I'll take the Army.' Like I say, I was a stickler for patriotism. I wanted to get in the Army. I just wanted to feel like somebody."

"I was afraid I was going to miss the war," George Hill recounted. I'm from Pasadena, Texas, and the recruiter told me later on-he's retired now and sells furniture there-that that area of the country was one of the highest for Marine volunteers during Vietnam. It seemed like everybody-I know ten or twelve just right off-in the few streets around me that joined the Marine Corps in '64-'65-'66. They were coming back and telling us, and we were afraid we was going to miss it. And I didn't like school anyway so I quit and joined the Marines when I turned seventeen in April."

"I joined the military," Archie wrote. "Some of my friends came back hurt and I was going to kill 'em all for that. I went to the recruiter on a Wednesday eve and left for Parris Island on Saturday."

Do you know the story of why your vet went? Was he one of the ones who felt "my country right or wrong?" Was he a reluctant warrior or was he gung-ho? What year did he go? Did he get drafted? Did he go while there were student deferments or during the lottery? How old was he? Was he in the military already? Did he plan to

make a career of it? Was it a way to get out of a dead end economically or a way to leave a bad family situation behind? You need to know.

I've seen some automatic anger at the question "Why did you go to Vietnam?" Now I prefer the phrase "How did you wind up in Vietnam?" accompanied by a commiserating grin. Somehow it doesn't come off as judgmental. When these guys came home a lot of them were blamed for having gone to Vietnam. "Why did you go?" was an ugly question thrown at a lot of them as if it had been a crime, or even a choice for most of them.

If you don't know the story, don't just ask bluntly. Be prepared for an eruption if your vet was blamed for having gone, or spat upon and called baby-killer when he got back. It is important, however, to know how, why, and at what age our vets got into the military. If idealism motivated your vet to join at a young age, the problems he has may be different from those experienced by a cynical older draftee.

"The VC violated the Christmas truce one hundred and twenty-seven times in 1966, so I joined up to stop them," a former marine told me.

"I was an admirer of John F. Kennedy. 'Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.' So I went when they asked me," another guy said.

"I loved my country." I can't tell you how many guys said this.

"I volunteered because I knew I'd get drafted." Another common answer.

"I simply wanted to serve my country," Jim wrote. "My father was in the navy in World War II. I felt I had to do better." He served sixteen months in Vietnam with the 9th Marines, a unit that saw so much combat they were called The Walking Dead. "Both my ex-wives say I have too much marine in me, too much Vietnam. I've been ruined."

"I grew up in a small mill town, working-class folks," Tim Beebe told me over the phone. "Everybody went. We felt it was inevitable . . . I didn't particularly want to go to war, but we felt 'It's our turn now.' All the fathers were veterans." Tim trained as a radio repairman. In the 1st of the 9th Cav, where he wound up, "even the cooks took off their aprons to fly door gunner when they were needed and so did I."

"I was the right age in 1966," Bill Hutchinson told me. "My dad was in World War II. When I went, my dad looked at me, holding and shaking my hand, and said,

'Remember, don't be a hero. Fuck the Army.' I enlisted for the band and they put me in the infantry."

Marty Rodgers, a grunt in the 1st Cavalry, said, "One of my buddies, Billy, had been to court that day. The judge told him to go to jail or go in the army, but Billy didn't tell us that. He said, 'We might as well get it over with. We're gonna get drafted anyway. Let's go together.' So we volunteered for the draft. I guess he didn't want to go alone."

"I was idealistic," Scott Camil said. "I signed up in the 120-day plan [which gives the new recruit 120 days of seniority over the other recruits for pay and promotion purposes] when I was in high school and was at Parris Island three days after I graduated. I didn't question Vietnam. I needed positive reinforcement from my teachers and parents. They'd be proud of me. They and I believed I was right. I also wanted to find out who I was. A coward? Brave?"

"I joined up because a school buddy had gotten killed over in Vietnam and I wanted to fight the people who killed him," Franklin Gale wrote.

"Do nothing and you'll be drafted," the army recruiter in Cocoa, Florida, told Charles Demchock. "Enlist for a three- or four-year tour and you get a guaranteed long-term training program in a noncombat job like computer operator. Or you can gamble: enlist for two years and apply for a short-term training program. Can't guarantee you'll get it, but we'll put you at the head of the waiting list." Demchock gambled and became an 11B, rifleman. His luck changed in Vietnam and he actually served as a clerk.

"I worked one summer as a DJ at a radio station." Ron Livingston laughed with just a trace of bitterness and said, "Got my FCC license. The recruiter told me if I went in the army I could get the same type of job. 'I got just the place for you,' he said. 'Field wireman, 36K20, climbing poles.' I took it because I knew it wasn't the infantry."

"I was drafted!" A former grunt in the 1st Cav grinned down at me from his six-foot-something height. Amazement and amusement lit up his face that I should even ask. He played football at Lincoln High, a segregated black high school in Gainesville, Florida. He's big and strong and smart. "The day I left, they had one of the first big antiwar demonstrations. People were laying down in front of the bus." He shook his head, remembering. "They wouldn't let us off the bus, though." A wry smile crossed his face. "This was 1967, and the whole busload of us, all draftees, was black. Four

white guys from ROTC were on the bus with us. They had volunteered to go. Miz Duncan was on the draft board then."

"Are you saying she just drafted black guys?"

"Well, that's the way it looked to us."

"I was drafted from Puerto Rico in June 1966." Angel Quintana, who served as a point man (the guy out in front) in the 4th Infantry in 1966-1967, has a thick Spanish accent. His next words surprised me, though. "I couldn't even speak English. The first months, Basic and ALT [Advanced Individual Training], were terrible. I couldn't have an English conversation with nobody. My sergeants thought I was faking when I say 'No comprendo.' They think all Puerto Ricans speak English because the ones from New York-but in my home we don't speak English. They don't understand that." How the hell could they draft someone who can't speak English? How would he function in combat? "They do it all the time then in Puerto Rico," Angel said.

"Yeah, they did that all the time, drafted Puerto Ricans who couldn't speak English," one Chicano vet from L.A. told me. "They always put 'em in the field, too. All the Puerto Ricans who didn't speak English got sent to the field. I was drafted when I was twenty-three, had four children. I didn't have to go but I saw it as a way to get out of the fields, being a farm worker, so I went."

"I'd just missed being a marine when I was drafted," Mike Geokan told me. "They had us count off in two's. One's were army and two's were marines. The guy on either side of me went to Pendleton [a marine boot camp]."

"I had just graduated from college and had been accepted in graduate school when I was drafted." Joe Haldeman writes science fiction. War Year, his Vietnam novel, is one of my favorites. He served as a combat engineer, carried an axe and a demolition bag along with his M-16 rifle, humping the boonies with the grunts in the 1st of the 22nd and other infantry units working the Central Highlands.

"Didn't they still have graduate deferments then?"

"Yes."

"Then why were you drafted?"

"My draft board had run out of blacks." He laughed at the shock on my face, but he didn't take it back, wouldn't clean it up for publication. "I guess they had run out of whites, too. Everyone at my third induction physical was in college, a junior or

senior. This was Bethesda, Maryland, a rich suburb." It was also the summer of 1967, when we were building up to our highest troop levels in the war.

"But with a degree-what was it in?"

"I had a triple degree in math, physics, and astronomy-"

"How come you wound up in combat?"

"My recruiter told me I could sign up to be a scientific assistant in the engineer corps. A two-year enlistment."

"And you believed him?"

"Yeah."

"Why did I join the Marine Corps?" Larry Raskin was an RTO (radiotelephone operator) in the 4th Marines. "I punched my teacher in the face for calling me a goddamned Jew." Larry laughed. "I was suspended, but I didn't want to go back to high school. I tried working for a while but found out work was not for me, and then I joined the Corps because I figured the uniform would get me a lot of dates. I never got the dress blues, though-they don't issue them-you have to buy them." He grinned.

"So did you get a lot of dates?"

"Yeah. When I got back the first time in 1966 people still supported us."

"And the second time?"

"I was wounded and spent a lot of time in the hospital."

"So what do you think about the guys who got out of going, the protestors?"

"I think they were just afraid."

According to The Vietnam War Almanac, 8,720,000 men enlisted in the military during the Vietnam era. Draft boards called up 2,215,000. Of the 15,980,000 men who did not serve, 15,410,000 were deferred, disqualified, or exempted. Randy Martin reported that of these, 483,000 were occupational deferments. Millions had student and graduate-student deferments until the lottery was instituted in 1969, and then those who already had student deferments, as David Curry reported in Sunshine Patriots, kept them until they finished their studies. Millions of kids with money and connections got exempted for physical or mental medical reasons. According to The Vietnam War Almanac, high-school graduates were two times as likely to serve as college graduates.

How did the draft work? Men were required to serve our country in the armed forces unless they were mentally or physically unfit or had a deferment. Those who couldn't afford to go to college were drafted unless they qualified for a medical, hardship, or conscientious-objector deferment. According to Randy Martin, "Whites received twice the medical deferments of blacks." There was an art to getting deferments and books were written on how to do it, how to dodge the draft. As Myra McPherson put it in *Long Time Passing*: "[antiwar protestors] bought into the very system many of them professed to despise by going along with the discriminatory rules that favored the privileged."

Draft evaders starved themselves, took drugs, developed psychiatric symptoms, went to divinity school, produced proof that they were the sole support of their widowed mothers, developed or discovered convenient back and knee problems. I remember laughing at the cleverness of a guy from Gainesville who secreted a Hershey bar between his buttocks and got rejected by the draft when he reached into his pants and whipped out a handful of brown stuff and began to eat it in front of the doctor. It's hard for me to believe now that I once thought of this as brave.

The social and economic inequalities of the draft were recognized by Senator Edward Kennedy, who worked tirelessly for the lottery system. Unfortunately, when the lottery was instituted in 1969 to solve the inequities, it became even more important to become ineligible for medical, psychological or hardship reasons or reasons of conscience.

People who didn't go are often defensive. "I had my own war," one protestor said to me. In one sense this may be true. Still it seems insensitive to compare the possibility of being whacked on the head with a nightstick during a demonstration with the daily possibility of stepping on a mine in Vietnam and being blown to bloody bits.

It is hard to admit you haven't been brave, as James Fallows did in his essay "What Did You Do in the Class War, Daddy?" I quote: "He wrote 'unqualified' on my folder . . . I was overcome by a wave of relief, which for the first time revealed to me how great my terror had been, and by the beginning of a sense of shame which remains with me to this day." Fallows went on to say "the boys from Chelsea [a working-class neighborhood in Boston]... walked through the examination room like so many cattle off to slaughter."

Contrast Christopher Buckley's Esquire article "Viet Guilt." How badly he felt that through youthful folly he lost the chance to witness that rite of passage, war. What he (and David Stockman and Elliott Abrams and 15,000,000 other men and most of the young women) evaded was the chance to come home in a body bag, or with his nice face burnt off, or his legs blown away, or having lost, as my friend Steve put it, ". . . according to scientific measurement by the VA, 50 percent of my mind."

For seven years, people watched young Americans dying on TV until the body count became just a tiresome statistic on the nightly news. Politicians were willing to let the protestors sit out the war with college deferments. It kept their parents quiet. Most of the protestors weren't willing to go to jail to stop the war. Only 8,750 out of 209,517 accused draft offenders were convicted, and of them only 3,250 went to prison rather than be inducted. Most of them served less than a year. Civil disobedience, which had proved so effective in the civil-rights movement, was replaced during the Vietnam War by draft evasion, not draft resistance.

Recently Bob and I spoke at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire. When I made my point about the damage done to vets by individuals spitting on them and calling them baby-killers, one former protestor stood up and said we were trying to justify Vietnam and had spit on vets and would do it again. The war was wrong and killing was wrong. We asked him if he'd gone to jail to protest the war.

"No. Why should I let the system ruin my life?" he replied.

In a way, that expresses the heart of why your vet is pissed off. Other people's lives were being ruined, those of Americans and of Vietnamese they professed to care about so much, yet it wasn't worth this protestor's time to do anything but go to demonstrations, talk, smoke, get laid, and keep his grades up. He wasn't about to the fate of his own countrymen who were dumb enough to go in his place, or the fate of the Vietnamese, ruin his life, yet he still calls veterans murderers for not letting anyone take their lives in Vietnam. Lives were at stake, but not his.

In 1970, I thought the student protestors were against the war of principle. Now I wonder how the same guys who had such principles could let the poor and the powerless and the minorities be drafted in their place. Was it easy to have principles with a student deferment? Even easier as a girl? With twenty-twenty hindsight, easy to see that if more people had resisted (rather than evaded) draft, the war would have ended sooner. Col. William Corson, MC (Ret.), thought so, but when he told the

students at the University of Kansas that they should all turn in their 2-S draft cards, become 1-A, and refuse induction, "I was practically run out here on a rail," he told Myra McPherson.

John Chambers, who spent a year in combat with the 199th Light Infantry Brigade, told me, "I don't have much respect for the guys went to Canada. Now, I have friends who went to jail, and they suffered for their beliefs. I respect them."

Near the middle of the war, the military began offering enlistees guaranteed programs that would keep them out of combat. Draftees went into combat units. In 1965, 16 percent of the guys killed in action were draftees. By 1969, draftees were 54 percent of those wounded in action. This rose to 57 percent in 1970. In 1969-1970, 60 percent of the army killed in action were draftees. When you consider that 8,720,000 guys enlisted and 2,215,000 were drafted, it becomes clear that the draftees were bearing a disproportionate share of combat.

With so many people finding ways to keep out of the draft, in their desperation to supply the bodies the armed forces came up with a new program in 1967, which continued until 1971. Project 100,000 supplied the armed forces with a total of 240,000 men who had scores of between ten and thirty on the Armed Forces Qualification Test. Before this program, David Curry reported, a score below 30 percent (IQ about 80) disqualified the person from serving in the armed forces. Under the program, a man scoring as low as 10 percent (which meant his IQ was about 60) could enlist or be drafted and be sent to fight in Vietnam. What a boon to desperate draft boards.

Not only was this not fair to the inductees, it wasn't fair to the men who had to serve with them. One of my informants told me "I tried to get this one guy to play Russian roulette with a forty-five automatic. It took him fifteen minutes to decide not to. . . . This guy woulda' had to take his pants off to count to twenty-one."

The rationale for inducting these guys was to give them training that would ensure their future in civilian life. Seven and a half percent of them received remedial education. What were the rest trained as? Riflemen. There's not too much call for that specialty in civilian life. Phillips reported: "Thirty-seven percent of these Project 100,000 men were sent to the infantry units in Vietnam. . . . By the time they were an average of 18 months into their period of service, [they] had been decimated-10 percent were either killed, wounded, or received less-than-honorable discharges."

These statistics give you an idea of why many vets get angry at being asked, "Why did you go?" The implication is always that they were too dumb to evade the draft, or that they were suckers to believe the government, or that they were the kind of people who wanted to go kill women and kids. If your vet went for patriotic reasons and found the reality of Vietnam very different from a noble crusade against communism, his feeling of betrayal may be even stronger.

So asking your vet "Why did you go?" or "Were you drafted?" may be a simple request for information from your point of view, but from his it might be a loaded gun, more proof that people just want to get close and then kick him in the teeth. It may simply be more than he can bear to talk about if he lost someone he enlisted with along with his innocence and faith in this country. Or he may feel he was a fool to go. He may hear a sneer in your voice where none was intended, an echo of past experiences and other women. Sometime, when you feel like it, I'd like to hear how you wound up in Vietnam." There's a nice neutral opening, which gives him a lot of space.

Another reason not to ask him in a phrase also used by the hippie protestors-"Well, why did you go, (baby-killer, monster, murderer)?"-is that you will tap into how he felt then, and that was pretty angry: the kind of anger we all feel when we can't explain, can never get a fair hearing, never be understood and are falsely accused, judged by standards that are unrealistic and unmeaningful. Judged by people who not only have already made up their minds but who also have never been hungry, or thirsty, or covered with sores, never been splashed with the blood of a friend, and never had kick someone in the face in order to live.

Your vet may not want to talk about Vietnam or how he got there. I wouldn't press him. You can figure enough of it out for yourself from what you know of him by trying to put yourself in his place. I suggest doing the following exercises in a notebook. I was amazed the things I thought of the second or third time around.

### Exercises

Think back to when you were eighteen. What were your interests? Your pressing concerns? Boys? Hair? Clothes? Music? A car? World peace? What your friends thought? Your education? Politics? Were you more mature than the boys your age?

What were their interests? Think back to an eighteen-year-old boy you remember.  
What was like?

After you've thought about it for a while, close your eyes and try to think of yourself as eighteen and a boy. How would you feel to know that you had to go to war?

Scared? Proud? Will it prove you're a man? Do you want to get out of it? You don't want to look chicken, do you? Can you do it, though? Will you be brave? What if you're a coward? What if you can't make it through basic? What other thoughts and concerns, hopes and fears, do you think an eighteen-year-old boy might have? Will my girl wait for me? Will I be crippled life?

How does it feel to know you might die because you can't afford a lawyer, or aren't willing to do whatever it takes to get out of the draft, or can't get into an all-white National Guard unit? How does it feel now for those who survived Vietnam?

Look at an eighteen-year-old and ponder the fact that most Vietnam vets, especially the grunts, were over there at that age. And the current crop of eighteen-year-olds is much less naive than our generation!

## The Training

Step two in the process of getting to Vietnam was basic training (boot camp for marines):

Another day in the Corps, Sir,

For every day's a holiday

And every meal's a feast

Pray for war

Pray for war

God bless the Marine Corps

Pray for war

God bless the DI of 353

[Drill Instructor and group  
number]

Pray for war.

Marines recited this litany every night for eleven weeks of boot camp at Paris Island in 1965. (To really get the feeling of basic training, I recommend watching the first half of Stanley Kubrick's movie Full Metal Jacket.)

Basic training is intended to remove the constraints of civilization and turn a normal person into one who will kill when he's told to or when he feels it is necessary. Basic training has to be rough, tough, and ugly, or the soldier is likely to get killed when he goes into actual combat. If your vet was seventeen, eighteen, nineteen when he went into the military-the years that Erik Erikson called the psychosocial moratorium during which young people are finding out who they are-unless he was very mature and very cynical, basic had a profound effect on him.

In basic, teamwork is emphasized: Don't let your buddies down. Killing is the job. How easy it is to glide over the fact, ignore it, forget it, miss it, drop it from consciousness. For the kid in basic during the Vietnam War, it was not easy to forget that he was expected to be able and willing to kill people in Vietnam. This meant that he had to put aside some of the most closely held beliefs of civilized Western society about the sanctity of human life. He had then to adopt the set of values of the military-warrior code: Killing my job; not just a duty but an honor. We kill them, whoever "them" is. We are a team, and we don't let one another down. We obey orders without question.

When Bob went through basic in 1964, he had to charge a dummy with a bayonet, screaming "Kill!" By '65, the marines were already using the litany of racist names: gook, slanteye, slope, dink, zip. A shift from political enmity (killing commies) to racial enmity was taking place. Due to the guerrilla nature of the war, this spirit intensified as more and more of the instructors were Vietnam vets themselves, who knew what it was like over there. Returning vets wanted to save the recruits from dying at the hands of some woman child or old man or the barber in the village, so they taught them, very understandably, to trust no one. To toughen up the recruits, prepare them for the insanity that was Vietnam, they began to dehumanize the enemy. "They are all gooks. You can't trust anyone in Vietnam. Kill them all and let God sort them out. American lives are worth more than Vietnamese lives. Gooks don't have feelings like we do. Shoot first. Ask later." The cartoonization of the enemy, as Dr. William Gault called it in "Some Remarks on Slaughter," published in 1971 and one of the first scientific papers about the exceptional problems caused by

conditions in Vietnam for returning veterans, was an attitude that eased many young men into actions that would later haunt them.

At eighteen, resisting the thinking of your drill instructor is really hard. Can you remember how naive you were at that age? Do you know that this was also the youngest army we ever fielded? The average age of the Vietnam combat soldier was nineteen. That means that for every forty-year-old in Vietnam there were more than ten eighteen-year-olds. Some of the older recruits managed to resist thinking of all Vietnamese as the enemy, but many couldn't. They believed. They identified with their instructors, with the military, with our noble cause in Vietnam. Everything was clear and bright to them: why we were there, our goals, our goodness, the enemy's badness. Simple patriotic duty took them to Vietnam. They went there willing to die to do their duty. More than 58,000 of them did.

Older recruits like Charles Demchock, twenty-two, were harder to mold: "Fort Polk [Louisiana, where many men took Advanced Individual Training] was a hell-hole, made Fort Benning look like the Hilton. It felt like Vietnam: dirty, oppressive. The cadre [lifers] was stupid. I hated it. Guys told me you don't want to go as an 11B [grunt]. It's a death sentence or a maiming sentence. . . My Dad [a former air force officer] was against the war because it was being fought wrong and he did not want me wasted, so he offered me money and a car when I was home on leave. I felt it would be cowardly. I wanted to see what Vietnam and the war were like. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and also might be the end of my life. I showed up five days late at Oakland to go to Nam. They asked how many of us were AWOL and three-quarters of the room raised their hands. They only took out those who were more than five days AWOL."

Our vets faced a lot of double binds: heads-I-win-tails-you-lose situations. One of them was the training they received. In most programs standards had been lowered. The training Bob was allowed to give in flight school was substandard compared to what he'd had. He was required to pump students through. I remember his coming home really upset because one particular student would panic when Bob spoke to him while he was flying. When he panicked, he couldn't remember the radio frequencies. I had a lot of sympathy for the student because Bob made me nervous when I was just driving the car. He epitomized the instructor-pilot, always watching like a hawk for mistakes.

"Maybe you just make him nervous, Bob."

"Patience, he can't be nervous. If he's nervous here, how do you think he's going to be in Vietnam when they're shooting at him? He's going to flick up and kill himself and everybody on the helicopter with him."

Put that way, I could see why Bob wanted him washed out, but he wasn't. Standards were lowered all through the military because of the need to fill slots in Vietnam with men, however ill-prepared. The fact was there was no training for what Vietnam was actually like. A lot of veterans will laugh bitterly about OJT, on-the-job training, but it wasn't much fun at the time. "I'd never thrown a grenade before. I was raking leaves or something that day," one vet told me.

Okay, so here we have our seventeen-, eighteen-, nineteen-year-old recruit. He has joined up or been drafted, but basically he has put his faith in the United States government. He hasn't gone to Canada. He may have doubts about the war, but he figures the politicians know what they're doing. He's entitled to believe that. The grown-ups are supposed to know what they are doing. One grunt put it this way: "I was doing what was expected of me. At nineteen was not mature or interested enough to be able to have a mature opinion. Now I feel like I was taken advantage of."

The recruit goes off to boot camp and is taught how to kill people in various ways. He gets a lot of positive reinforcement if he's good at following orders, if he's a good shot, if he can be meaner and tougher and better at pretend-killing than the others. "The Marine Corps makes men," or at least larger, meaner, and more dangerous boys, but the military is telling him, eighteen-year-old impressionable, human him, that this training is making him a man.

If he's not sure he agrees with what they are teaching, it's still going to take an amount of character that most eighteen-year-olds don't have to protest or resist the conditioning. Because that is what is—a well-planned program to break down the recruit's normal reactions and train him to do things without question that will often get him killed, or make him wish he had been killed. If he resists, they come down heavier on him. Piss them off and you will wind up an 11B in Vietnam, a rifleman, a grunt.

The boot also assumes that his instructors are training him as much as he'll need. He assumes he's learning how to stay alive. He assumes they are telling him the truth

about the character of the war. He assumes that they won't waste him, that his life is of some importance. He doesn't assume that he's just a number aimed at filling a slot in Vietnam.

"Eleven-B's were like tissues," Bill Hutchinson told me. "Use 'em and throw 'em away."

The future tissue doesn't know this. He assumes they want him to survive. Imagine Jerry Gilbreath's feelings at eighteen when his colonel (who never goes out into the bush) gets out of his chopper one day and says, "I don't care if you can do it or not: Do it. How you feel is not important. It's your ability to do your job that's important. I personally don't give a fuck about any of you. What I do care about is your ability to do your job. You get a higher body count or you will go out longer."

He went on to describe the contrast between the colonel and the men: The colonel had on "a nice green uniform, shiny boots, a haircut, crisp hat, bloused pants. Our fatigues were bleached by the sun and washing. We'd get clothes back to wear with bullet holes in them."

Our conversation covered an incident in which his patrol blew up a bunker full of VC wounded, including two nurses. I asked how he felt about it now. He gave a heavy sigh. "Uneasy, if I had to pick a word, in that those people were killed just because they were there- more than anything else. We called in and told them what we'd found. 'Whaddaya want us to do?' They sent us a LAW [light antitank weapon, a disposable bazooka] out on a chopper, and we blew it [the bunker] up."

"I get the feeling you feel responsible," I said.

"I am responsible." He looked at me. The painful answer. "I am responsible for everything I did. I was misled." He flushed. "I was expected, if necessary, to give my life. 'Do what you're told,' is what they wanted from us. 'Everything's been figured out. Just do what you're told.' Why the fuck are we here? 'The reason you are here is to do your one year and get out.' Not to fight communism, not to save South Vietnam, to save your ass. Realistic paranoia. If you don't develop that kind of attitude, you are gonna die."

These kids grew up on World War II movies, on John Wayne and Audie Murphy. A lot of them wanted to be just like those guys.

Exercise

First of all, rent a videocassette of Full Metal Jacket if you can, and think about going through basic. Imagine yourself charging a dummy with a bayonet, screaming "Kill!" Play the game, get with the spirit, brainwash yourself. Think about those influences on you at eighteen. Think about how important it is for men to do well, how at that age they hassle one another at the slightest sign of weakness. Think of how our culture values being the best, being brave, being strong, being tough. At eighteen, wouldn't you have wanted to excel?

Now think about what you are going to excel at.

### The Career Military Dilemma

If your veteran was older and already in the military when he went to Vietnam, the habit of subordination, of obeying orders, of not questioning authority was already ingrained in him. He had chosen this life because it met a need in him to be useful, to work in a structured and worthwhile job. Societies need soldiers. Societies have to be very careful how they use them and whom they tell them kill. Soldiers don't get to pick the wars they are sent to fight.

I talked to several officers who wrestled with their consciences about going to Vietnam and killing people. One said: "I consulted with my pastor and he said, 'You have to understand, you're not the only one responsible. You're representing those who are standing back, the whole country.'" It surprised me that a person in the military should have such strong feelings about the evil of killing, I realized to my shame that I do a lot of stereotyping of men. One of the things I learned in these interviews was that men care about things that women don't even know they think about. Another thing I learned is that there's a big difference between talking and doing.

For many career men the conduct of the war in Vietnam, the body counts, the lack of unit cohesiveness, the inability to win due to the rules of that particular war and the political situation (most of the Vietnamese who were willing to lay down their lives seemed to be on the other side), combined sometimes with the desire for military glory and sometimes with simple patriotism, made it impossible for them. They ceased to think. It was too painful. They ceased to feel; that was also too painful. They were careful not to question, because what could they do? They could resign,

which would not stop the war, or they could fight, which would not stop the war. All roads led to losses, but if they stayed and fought, at least they could save some lives. Choices like that don't make 'em easier to live with.

I'm trying to put things in the best possible light. There is another view: "Some aggressive commanders were willing to get their career tickets punched by leading troops into the right kind of combat action, even if this entailed a needless expenditure of their own men's lives." William Mahedy was a chaplain in Vietnam, but he doesn't pull any punches in *Out of the Night*. He isn't the only one who felt that way about officers and lifer NCO's. Mahedy wrote further: "Lifers tended to 'buy into the bullshit' in Vietnam. They planned and executed the strategy that cost lives, and even worse, they seemed to do it without question . . . They often seemed perfectly willing to sacrifice the lives of their men to get their career tickets punched." One former grunt told me that while he was in Vietnam he 'hated lifers more than the enemy.' This was not an uncommon emotion."

"Officers," Mike Morris said. "You had some good ones and you had some real bozos, the real gung-ho gentleman that would do anything to further his own career. We had one lieutenant... puts a couple of M-79 rounds into this hooch and a piece of shrapnel comes back and grazes him on the cheek, drew blood. He was the type of guy that went back, put himself in for a Purple Heart, and they gave it to him."

Jon Anderson, an operations officer who went to Vietnam in 1970, had this to say: "By then the NCO's that were still alive-they took those guys and they would do one year in Vietnam and one year back and one year in Vietnam and one year back, good sergeants. These sergeants who could do everything. They started going to Vietnam in '65 and '66 and invariably they were platoon sergeants, you know out there in the thick of things and you just didn't live that long, or if you made it through your tour in '66 did you make it through in '68? 'Cause you were back. The ones who were left, the old sergeants had done two tours there or maybe three and they knew what was going on. It wasn't gonna be won." He went on to say, "The young kids had no illusions about it. The officers had studied warfare and knew that we had lost it. Everyone knew at different levels and in different ways that the war was really over but stay alive and kick ass when you can."

While senior officers lived in air-conditioned trailers and fussed about painted rock borders for their flower beds or custom-camouflaged jeeps, their men sweated and

died in the jungle. In The 13th Valley, John Del Vecchio sarcastically mentioned an officer who gets a Silver Star for remaining on alert in his quarters while his men fought a major engagement. One marine told me about rear-echelon officers to the rank of colonel-including two dentists-going on one patrol with his outfit and receiving medals for it. Bob's unit broke ranks and left when the operations officers were given medals that they'd put themselves in for, although they had never flown more than the four hours a month required for flight pay, nor anywhere but in the traffic pattern at An Khe.

"The medic was useless, a lifer, such a wimp. To advance his career he had to go to Vietnam to get a Combat Medic badge. After we got in a firefight, he had the Combat Medic badge and re-upped for six years to get out of Nam," one vet said. In the Peninsular War (Spain, early 1800s, against Napoleon), Wellington's British troops divided officers into two categories, either come-on's or go-on's. Why were there so many go-on's in Vietnam? I don't have an answer.

I think the war was fought all wrong," Steve wrote me. "I think enlisted men should have shot the lifer dogs, and then come back shot a bunch of Congressmen and General Hershey Bar . . . It definitely 'Us vs. Them,' with them being the lifer dogs."

### Exercise

How would you deal with this kind of double bind? You want to serve your country. Your ideas and ideals revolve around courage glory and service and sacrifice. Or maybe you joined the military for the retirement benefits. How do you deal with the lives entrusted your care? How do you win? What are you winning?

### On the Way

After training, how did your vet get to Vietnam? Did he go over boat at the beginning of the war with a whole unit, like Bob with the 1st Cav in 1965, or Joe Pearson on his second tour with the 25th Infantry in 1966? That was rare, but it did happen. Did your go over alone in a civilian airplane with stewardesses serving drinks and fear sitting on one shoulder? That's the way most of them went, lucky if they knew even one guy on the plane. Alone. Eighteen. Facing the real possibility of death.

Maybe your vet was older. Maybe, like Jules Goetz, he went back into the military at thirty-seven because he had critical technical training and wound up driving a jeep and manning a machine-gun bunker at night for five months before being assigned to a specialty which reflected his training as a calibration technician.

When he arrived in Vietnam, what did your vet see and feel? "We flew into Long Binh," Frank Hewitt remembered. "It was clear that day, picture clear, and I can see craters and junk. Arc-lighted areas [bombed in B-52 raids and always described as looking like the moon, cratered, dead] looked weird. When we're letting down, seeing all this, I wondered what am I in for?"

"We came in on a Pan Am flight." Joe Pearson recalled arriving at Tan Son Nhut Air Base in July 1965 for his first tour. "They rolled steps up to the airplane, and halfway down the steps, there's a heavy mortar attack. A truck came running up to the airplane, and they threw M-14's and M-60's at us-'Charlie's trying to overrun the perimeter!' We're in Class-A khakis and qualification badges. They put us in a truck and take us to the perimeter of the airport, spread us around the bunkers and machine-gun emplacements. . . It was a rude awakening. I was petrified. And I got wounded. I always thought I was shot in the right leg and got shrapnel in my left arm but last month at the VA, a doctor told me he thought it was the other way around, shrapnel in my leg in two places and a bullet in my arm..." He shrugged, bewildered. "How long were you in the hospital?" I asked.

"Oh, a medic came around and gave shots and bandaged up wounds. He sent me to the hospital." He stopped for a minute. "I felt guilty when I got there. It really didn't hurt-I was too scared to feel it, I think-so I went into the dispensary. I'm walking-" He looked at me to be sure I understood. I nodded. "There are gurneys running around-one flew by-I remember the injury, but not the color of the guy. I saw the remains of a charred leg hanging off the gurney, and I'm walking in under my own power. He may not live, and I'm walking. I was seventeen. I wanted to get out as fast as I could. There was a tremendous feeling of guilt at being there with my little scratches. ."

"The plane landed under fire." Ron Livingston arrived in August 1968. "I was petrified because I was so green-never been in anything like that. As soon as we hit the door, they're yellin' 'Squat and run! Keep down! Keep down! We're under fire!' We ran to the closest bunkers and stayed there six-eight hours, thinking any minute

we're gonna get blown to pieces. A couple of guys got shrapnel from mortars, about six people, not real serious." The last words were from the perspective of a vet, calm and casual.

"I flew into Tan Son Nhut, came in on World Airlines," Lynn Whittaker recounted. "Coming in and landing, we started getting airbursts [enemy fire] and went back up. Came in for a second landing. Got off fast. They threw our seabags off. They took us in jeeps to hotels in Saigon with sandbags all around them and we had to walk a half-mile to an Army chow hall through Saigon traffic. Three days later I was chief engineer on a patrol boat."

"I got off at Cam Ranh Bay," Joe Haldeman told me. "It was huge. There was fighting all around the perimeter. Gunships, Puffs [C-4's quipped with Gatling guns that sent down a solid column of fire] all round. It was night. I had to go to KP and shoveled mashed potatoes for hours. Lots of people showed up. Afterwards I sat on the back porch of the mess hall and watched the war going on-with a beer."

Not everyone flew into a literally "hot" situation of bullets flying when he landed.

"As we got off the plane," Tom Comiskey, a Seabee who landed at Da Nang in 1965, wrote, "the hot humid air hit us in the face like a slap. I was stunned. It was hard to breathe any air. As we stood in formation the sweat was running down our bodies. My God, I thought, how can human beings stand this heat! One doesn't get used to this heat, one only endures it one day at a time. every day was 95 to 110 and humid. The only exception was the monsoon season-the temperature went down, but it never stopped raining for six weeks, day and night."

"Heat. I couldn't believe it. The heat hit me. I'd entered a sauna. I couldn't believe it. I could hardly breathe . . . and I'd been in Florida and Louisiana," Charles Demchok remembered.

Even if his arrival was peaceful, did your vet see a pile of body bags on the runway? Smell death? Bob says it's a smell you never forget and one that you know immediately. This is not a dead dog. It is a man. It could be me. "If you've ever smelled human flesh burn, you never forget the smell." Frank Hewitt shook his head. "I was raised on a farm. We killed five-six hogs at a time. Smelling hog blood didn't bother me . . . It smells sweet. Human blood- there's no other smell like it."

Did your vet see a line of men with haunted eyes getting on the freedom bird, the plane back to America, back to the world? "You get off the plane feeling like you'll

get shot, catch the clap or malaria right away after the indoctrination they give ya," John Dexter laughed. "After twenty-six hours on an air-conditioned plane, it's sweltering-heat and humidity. You're seeing people leaving-catcalls, jeering-FNG's [fucking new guys]-We're going home! You're staying!' I had sixteen weeks military training at that time."

Maybe your vet was pretty scared.

"We got off at a big hot huge military base," Mike Costello said. "Got on buses with the heavy screens and wire on the windows and drove." Why did the bus from the airport have wire screens over the windows? Your vet realized it was to keep the random grenade or satchel charge out. Gives you pause, eh? Someone got it; someone was blown up on one of these buses. Maybe a lot more than one someone. It meant that here in Saigon, Tan Son Nhut, Da Nang, Cam Ranh Bay, wherever, here in the rear, he isn't safe. The whole year here, 365 days (395 if you're a Marine), people will want to kill him, plan to kill him, try to kill him. Them. The people out there with the little bodies and inscrutable faces.

My God, she just squatted down and went in the street!

What kind of people are these?

What have I gotten myself into?

Exercise

Picture yourself landing in Vietnam, the heat, noise, smells, maybe a rough landing, and running for cover. How would you feel when you realized why the buses have screens on the windows? Aren't we here to protect this country? How would the sight of returning vets affect you, grunts thin and sunburnt with haunted faces, fat colonels sweating in the sun? How about body bags or piles of coffins? Would you think about death? Would you be afraid and try to hide it?

[End of chapter]