1975

A Vietnam Diary

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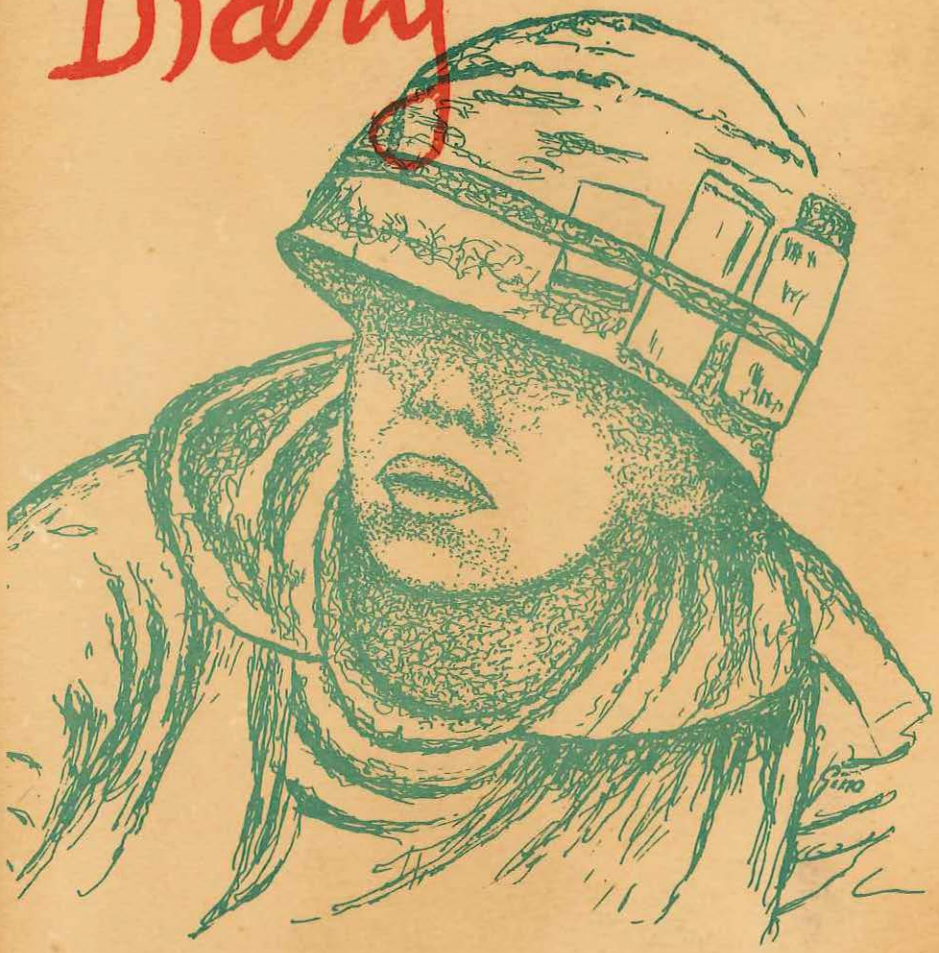

BY PETER N. SWISHER

To Bob –
A fellow Vietnam
vet & budding writer...
– Pete Swisher
May '77

A Vietnam Diary

BY PETER N. SWISHER

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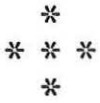
DEDICATION

To those who served and those who didn't.
To those who died, and those who couldn't care less.
To the hawks, and the doves, and the sheep—in the hope that somehow, in some way, we have all learned a painful lesson.



INTRODUCTION

This is a diary I kept while I was in Vietnam. It is for the most part unstructured, as many of us were, but all of it is true. History, someone once said, is trying to tell the truth through the most acceptable lie. But this book is not about history. It only tells the truth as far as one person felt it—a frozen spark of time embracing one American soldier in a Southeast Asian war.

War is never what we think it is. It is butchery, stupidity, and hate. It is 90 per cent boredom. It can be horrible beyond anything you have ever imagined. It can also be ludicrous and absurd, and technologically refined. Tragically, its lessons are always forgotten, only to be refought on still another battlefield. The Vietnam War was our first real Media War—spanning the globe in outraged unreality, bringing videotaped death and destruction into countless homes, fomenting protests and political justifications. Affecting the world's generations, it shattered our dreams of abstract morality, and—in horrible reality—re-educated our youth to a third world of suffering they had never known, and had now felt deep within their own countries world-wide.

Vietnam was a symbol of the times. The best of hopes turned inside out, a fear of no return. But for me, and many others, the Vietnam War was much more. It was, in a moment, our survival and death. In primitive sophistication our destruction and rebirth. It was, in short, a long imprisoned cry of what we all were not.

Peter Nash Swisher
San Francisco, California
Richmond, Virginia

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PROLOGUE

"We are not about to send American boys 9000 or 10,000 miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves."

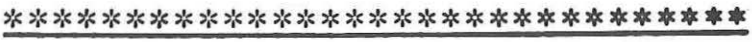
—Lyndon B. Johnson
1964 Campaign Promise

"The ultimate explanation of Vietnam must come from those involved there. An observer, even when blood splatters his clothes, remains, outside. The basic experience of Vietnam is to be bound to stay in that war for a year, or until wounded or killed. No reporter can impose this shackle on himself. He is like a doctor in an asylum. He can report; with compassion and empathy he can understand a great deal; but the final truth remains with those who must exist in madness, or in the combat of their war."

—Arthur T. Hadley
War Correspondent

"War's continuance seems merely a sacrifice of the idealistic younger generation to the stupidity and self-protective alarm of the elder."

—Robert Graves
1918 Memoirs



NOVEMBER 20, 1967: BASIC TRAINING

Fort Dix, New Jersey

"At close intervals, dress right dress!
Army exercise one, number seven...
Ready. . .Exercise!"

One—Two—Three—ONE
One—Two—Three—TWO
One—Two—Three—THREE...

M/Sgt G---- was a much feared and highly respected drill sergeant of the old tradition, with his thin, perfectly lined moustache, and a highly polished swagger stick. A matter of fact, Sgt. G---- was Hungarian. He had been a Hungarian Freedom Fighter who escaped to America after the 1956 uprising. His teenage sister had been tried and executed by the Russians and Sgt. G--- hated Communists. All Communists. "You Americans," he used to tell us in formation, "you'll never understand how much you have, until you lose it."

"Four times around the field before breakfast...
Keep the cadence and formation, or it'll be eight times around the field..."

I want to be an airborne ranger...
I want to live a life of danger...
I want to go to Vietnam...
I want to kill some Viet Cong...

Sgt. B---- was a young, black airborne instructor who hoped to go to college on the GI Bill once he got out of the Army. He was a good

instructor, he taught us well, and he played the game. And he had tremendous esprit on the outside, but privately he told a few of us that he'd sooner go to jail or to the stockade before he'd ever go back to Vietnam. He never talked about the war, but he'd had it pretty bad.

"What's the spirit of the bayonet?"
"To Kill!"
"What's the spirit of the bayonet?"
"To Kill!"

Sgt. H--- was our third instructor, another airborne veteran, and one of the two survivors in his Vietnam company who came back alive. Once, when his weapon jammed in combat, he had killed two Viet Cong with his bayonet and his rifle butt. Sometimes we heard him screaming in his sleep.

> "You see this poncho? You see it?! Smell it! It's got the same musty odor of the jungle—smell the fungus? Smell it! I wrapped up a lot of bodies in these ponchos, you goddamn stupid trainees—you'll see! You'll all be over there!"

PFC M--- had been a sergeant in Vietnam, when he'd been busted, made rank, and was busted again. He was a machine gunner. On various occasions he'd been found passed out drunk around the post. His nerves were bad, and he should have been let out of the Army sooner, but he still had eight months to go.

These were some of our drill instructors at Fort Dix who taught us many things—primarily survival, I guess. Our basic training company received top honors at graduation under these men, because they always drove us. They never let up.

They taught us early that Vietnam was not a game. We were the Infantry training for war—and here at Fort Dix, New Jersey we had already seen what Vietnam could do.

MARCH 5, 1968: RED ALERT

Fort Belvoir, Virginia

Robert Kennedy is shot in Los Angeles and two Marines have been gunned down—unarmed—in Georgetown by members of the Poor Peoples' March. You were in that same hamburger joint last weekend—in uniform....Always in uniform. Whose uniform?

Jesus, God—Can you get out of the barracks tonight? The humidity is unbearable....The radio blares soul and fresh disasters—no one listens. The PA box shreiks for Delaney. "Is Delaney there? Delaney is wanted in the Orderly Room!"

The heat and noise are everywhere—swaying, sweating bodies, four rows of bunks, head-to-toe alignment. No room to breathe, to break away. To talk to someone.

And you can't leave, you can't get away. You're confined to the Regiment—There's a Red Alert and you may be called into Washington to put down another riot. Your weekend pass is cancelled.

You break for a telephone. You're outside. There's a cool breeze, and at least you're away from the barracks....but the telephones are jammed—everyone has the same idea. You'll never get through tonight.

Your head begins to throb. You walk to the Club for a cold beer...to think, to unwind. But its closed tonight, remember? Red Alert.

You head for the lounge—you can at least get a Coke there, and maybe write a letter. But the lounge is crowded too—the wives must be told about the Red Alert. There's no room to move....Smoke, heat, and crying babies. You're out of place here. Hurriedly you search for the Coke machine.

Just one cold Coke...is that too much to ask? Just one cold bottle and everything will be all right.... Please God, just one lousy bottle of Coca-Cola.

Empty. Your dime is rejected. "Make another Selection"..."Make another Selection"...

Quietly, you return once again to the barracks.

FEBRUARY 13, 1969: ORDERS

It's not very pleasant to get orders overseas. The initial shock honestly scares you a lot. You think, Maybe I'll die. But later the endless reams of paperwork show you dying is not that simple. Take your plague, flu, typhus, and cholera shots, for example. One medical sergeant is Mack the Knife, especially if you're on orders.

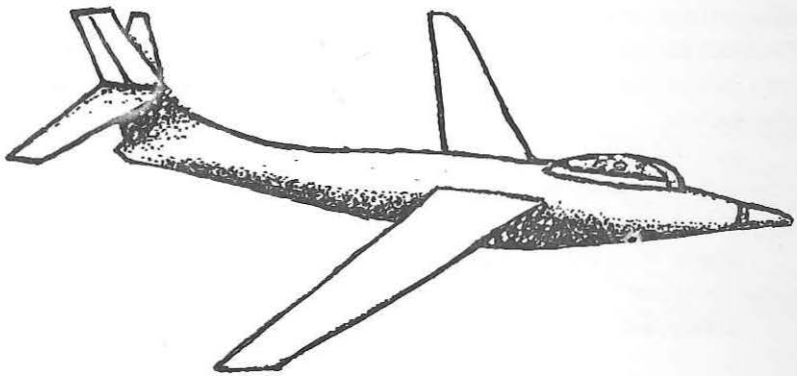
Then there's RVN training, and M-16 rifle qualification, and press orientation, and a multitude of sign-out sheets. (Do you have any overdue books at the Post Library?)

You think, Yes—I do have an overdue book. Will they still send me to Vietnam if I keep it hidden under my laundry bag?

JUNE 1, 1969: THE LAST NIGHT

Before the plane leaves from Travis, you are together for the last time—stoic and brave. At least that's how it is in the movies. In reality, you are sick at heart, in the mind and belly. You talk of the past, pretending but knowing what each suffers silently. It isn't very pleasant or romantic at all.

"Why are we such stupid people," she sobs, tears on sweat, body close. You love her fiercely. Your country is another question entirely.



JUNE 3, 1969: H-HOUR

War should be dramatic, like the movies. Sweating in a landing craft, hitting the beach under fire. Who'd believe I went to war in a Pink-Orange Braniff International airplane, with a stewardess in purple leotards wishing us a Good Trip on behalf of the captain and crew. Going to war, for Chrissake, in a Pink-Orange airplane. I used to think war was somewhat serious.

JUNE 23, 1969: REMEMBRANCE ONE

All is heat and fire. A corned beef sandwich, a cold beer, and both of us together painting streets with sunshine.

Here at war our crazy orb still shines, beating over backs ripped and torn with pain.

All is heat and fire, yes—but never light.

JULY 6, 1969: AIRBORNE

Clouding dust below betrays a lonely convoy, dirt smothered, embraced in jungle vines and barren hills, sullen craigs and silence.

A flash of light below. Two more exploding mines. We see toy trucks crawling, clawing, spitting snake-like steel.

Too small for life-sized war. Too far away for death

JULY 17, 1969: MY FIRST BODY

I saw my first body lying west of Pleiku, stretched out on a poncho, waiting to be airlifted back to the coast. He was grey-white, and very dead. Even today I can see his gaping, bloody mouth, gasping for air. A young kid who couldn't have been more than twenty years old. And I thought, "Christ, he's really, really dead..."

I remembered some James Bond and John Wayne sequels, and those TV melodramas where the American love for violence is only make-believe. Where the movie and TV "casualties" can always get up and go home probably in time for supper.

But this kid would not. He would make Walter Cronkite's CBS News Report as just another figure, changing 229 American battle deaths reported this week to 230 instead. And then everyone—including the President—would turn to watch the Monday Night Football Game on Channel 5.

And here was my first body. I should have been trained for this sort of thing a long time ago. Playing Cops and Robbers. Cowboys and Indians. Bang, bang. You're dead. And he was. He really was.

JULY 25, 1969: REMEMBRANCE TWO

This is how I was when I saw you last. I was stagnant, going no place, and searching desperately for something I had lost long ago in the barracks.

And so we escaped to the grey New England coast, and the Boston fog, and a warm downy bed to greet the night. And I began to live again, and laugh.

I love you still for giving me that month, and for giving yourself without promise.

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JULY 31, 1969: MILITARY JUSTICE

A young captain serving on the East Coast was about to bring court-martial proceedings against a master sergeant. The sergeant, it was alleged, while in Vietnam, had become quite wealthy by operating a popular Saigon brothel, and also by embezzling a substantial amount of money from the NCO club where he worked

A week before the charges were to be brought forth, however, a letter came down from the Commanding General of the Post, ordering the captain that he would not, under any circumstances, court-martial the sergeant. It seems that the brothel in question was a field-grade establishment, catering only to Majors, Colonels, and above and the General did not want the resulting embarrassment when all the facts of the case came out.

The captain nevertheless felt it was his duty to see that justice be served impartially—even in the Army—and persisted with his case. Two weeks later he received his orders to Vietnam.

The case was ultimately dropped without a trial, and the captain was killed nine months later 20 miles south of Hue.

AUGUST 7, 1969: WHITE PHOSPHOROUS

A Navy destroyer shelled the big hill across the Bay this afternoon, raining down white phosphorous projectiles (we call it Willy Peter). There were many bright flashes, and very little noise (which surprised me)—and beautiful white smoke, much whiter than the clouds melting silently in the clear coral sky.

"Did you know," said the captain, "that a small piece of white phosphorous can burn a hole through your head? You have to cut it out of your skin or it burns right though the bone." Hell—our high school chemistry class knew all about white phosphorous long before we'd ever heard of napalm.

AUGUST 11, 1969: NEWS ITEM

"It was President Nixon's first visit to Vietnam as President. He insisted on going to Saigon rather than to Cam Ranh Bay, the huge supply base. 'Cam Ranh Bay doesn't count,' he said. 'That isn't Vietnam'."

—TIME magazine, August 8, 1969

Dear Sir:

In light of a Viet Cong sapper attack on a Cam Ranh hospital, I question the source of those people who believe Cam Ranh Bay "isn't Vietnam." I think the 98 men who were casualties, and the parents of those who were killed, would agree that Cam Ranh Bay isn't exactly Disneyland. You bastard.

AUGUST 12, 1969: MONTAGNARDS

—You're stationed up at Ban Me Thout aren't you? Isn't that Montagnard country?

—Yeah, that's the Montagnard capital of the world. Scrappy bastards. I mean, you mess with a Slope, he won't do nothing. You hit a 'Yard, he'll hit you back, no matter how big you are. Hell, last month we had an Instant Drunk with the Yards. They have a huge pot of fermented garbage that we all drank. It took me five weeks to get rid of the worm. Man, they're something else.

—Well, thank God they're on our side.

—They're not really. They're fighting their own war—you see, they're Montagnards.

AUGUST 16, 1969: SHORT

"30 days has September, April, June and Lieutenant Sherrill."

"I leave Vietnam with mixed emotions—joy and ecstacy."

"How come we can get to the moon, but I can't get home?"

VIETNAM HAIKU

Love me, cried her eyes,
But all he saw
Was his own reflection.

Naked lips
Upon the sand
Moon pale.

The surging crowd:
A vast and infinite
Loneliness.

Weeds in a ricefield:
The sparrows perch
On a headless child.

The war raged on
Unmindful that
The sun lay dead.

Doe eyes in the rain:
Your pleading gaze
Is not for sale.

Waves against a rock:
The dream
Endures.

SEPTEMBER 1, 1969: RODRIGUEZ

Jim Rodriguez was killed last week, after only twelve days in country. I remember as an upperclassman how we locked his heels together, and taught him the OCS version of military discipline.

It was double time, four times around the field, boonie runs, attitude checks, harrassment and constant pressure. Physically and mentally, Rodriguez never broke. A matter of fact, he met our challenge one better and went on to airborne training, briefly serving later as an airborne instructor.

I wonder how much we really influenced Rodriguez. We showed him how to play soldier, but no one ever taught him how to play war. It's hard to play games with dead men.

SEPTEMBER 8, 1969: NHA TRANG

Coral green, with fishing nets at dawn, the Bay slides down beneath our skids. Chopper rising blades churn symphonies of flight, astride high cliffs, the ceaseless crash of white-foamed waves by solid land prevails.

So lies the inland plain. Green swaying shoots of rice, the inundated field of paddy dikes. A farmer plods behind his beast, plows history beneath the soil his father once endured.

A temple rises eastward—roofs of tile and corrugated steel. Upon a mountain sits White Buddha, yes, and I at peace this day, transcending war below, observe how lightly falls the sun, and shadows Buddha's face.

SEPTEMBER 10, 1969: COMBAT ENGINEERS

Bronze backs bent to bridges, culverts, picks and timber trestles. Sweat and grime, and death by hidden mines and snipers. Construction, repair, and when will you fix my air-conditioner? asks Headquarters.

SEPTEMBER 11, 1969: ARTILLERY

Cannon crashes eastward. Magnificent, terrible thunder. Bright flash, night bordered, a surging mass explodes in thunder. Pageants of fire. Again...Again.... In savage awe, we celebrate the festival of death.

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SEPTEMBER 20, 1969: A HEAVY LOAD

On the way back from Qui Nhon yesterday, we stopped our jeep to help an old man with a heavy load which had fallen by the side of the road.

The old man was carrying home the remains of his youngest son who had died during recent fighting along the Cambodian border. The Saigon government, he said, had provided a free coffin and transportation back to his village, but the truck had lost an axle five kilometers down the road.

This wasn't his first tragedy. He told us that his eldest son had died two years earlier in the assault on Hue—but he never saw that son's body, since he was a Viet Cong.

He was an old man, he said, heartbroken and ignorant. He had lost two sons, drafted to fight on different sides of the war, and even now he didn't really know what they had died for.

SEPTEMBER 24, 1969: A NIGHT

The Heavens lie beyond us void, yet filled with substance, light and form. Infinity. From nothing all exists, as billions age, our world not yet a grain of sand, in mighty awe the Universe endures.

Mortal—weak and woman borne, look beyond the sky some clear and cloven night, by land's end meet the sea, embrace the stars. In infinite conceit deny from nothing all you feel, and celebrate the Overmind, original primeval force – the birth of all that is.

OCTOBER 2, 1969: THE CONVOY

Two hours before the dawn our convoy groups, quietly, efficiently—trailers, tanks and armored trucks with plated steel alert. Rows of limitless, inhuman war machines assembled in Detroit from America's great arsenal of doubt. Giant tinker toys of war—the mission always comes before the welfare fo the men. The all-pervading mission that no one ever knows.

The men come second. Rows of tired army ants in dusty olive drab. No longér young, grim and grimy, keep their faith in faded photographs of home—a virgin hope of things to come. Or some in beads, an albatross of peace medallions hanging from their tarnished neck—a human cry in muted rage to say at war "I am!" "I am!" The soon-forgotten symbols to a never-caring world.

It's time to move—a hundred muffled coughs and snarls of steel and iron trucks. The schedule must be met because we can't be late for war.

The dawn is rising as we rumble past our first awaking village. Here people move to fold and field—A farmer even now to toil behind his beast and plow the sacred soil his father once endured. His desecrated tomb of craters, mines, and shells across the ridge and down the dusty road. But it will pass. It always has. The land endures all things.

The village passes slowly now, so quietly at peace. The dawn is pure of hate and strife, its colors fill the sky—orange, coral green, and blue. A purple haze, blood-red beyond the hills to come.

A little boy of four or five with twig and trust takes out a herd of buffalo—to work and wallow in the mire and do what they must do.

A young mother, almond-eyed and fair, who saw her brothers off to war, her father to the field—Madonna in the shadow of a new emerging dawn stands fiercely proud to nurse her young with eyes of love and hope.

The village fills its stage again. Another day—the people turn from dust to mud, they play their part and die. The stage endures. The soil prevails. The convoy rumbles on.

OCTOBER 9, 1969: THE SPORTING LIFE

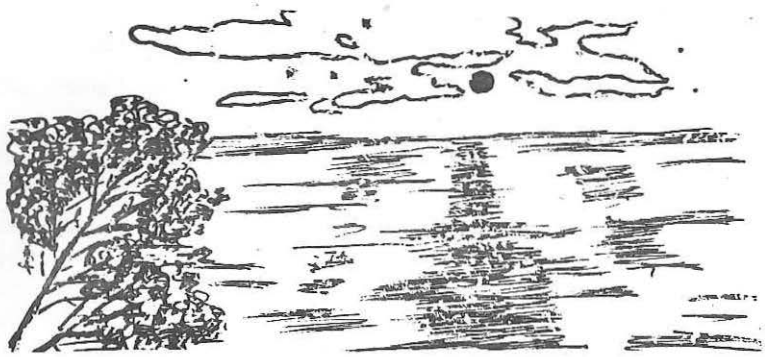
I met one Huey gunship pilot in Qui Nhon who had just extended his tour of duty down in the Mekong Delta. Most pilots did the job they had to do, and then went home. But not this one. He actually enjoyed his work.

He bragged to a group of us one night that during a dull day when there was little action in the Delta, he kept in practice by shooting at numerous water buffalo in the rice paddies, and sniping at the frightened farmers.

In one case, he said he played cat-and-mouse with an old papa-san on a bicycle, weaving frantically down the road...

"I scared hell out of him for a while," he said. "Then I got him good with a beautiful long burst. No chance. Hell, he was in a free-fire zone. Probably a VC anyway. All the slopes are VC down there..."

We look at him incredulously, and then left his table—leaving him alone, gloating to himself. Even at war he remained a leper within some strange, unwritten code.



OCTOBER 10, 1969: HOWELL BEACH AT NIGHT

I wish you were here right now, so I could hold you very close and tell you things there are no words for.

OCTOBER 14, 1969: HOME 1

We cling to something close at home, a girl or shadow on the wall, free sun, a ragged hope so precious in return.

If lost, we too are lost, not finding hate (as soldiers seldom hate), but bitter stale in passion dead, we lose our need to love.

HOME 2

I love you as a gentle dawn, spread out against the savage sky—A part of life so very far away.

OCTOBER 15, 1969: SWEATHOG

"If blue weren't a color, I'd be it."

OCTOBER 16, 1969: TRILOGY

1. Friday Night

The troops were relaxing at the Friday night movie, sitting in the sand, thinking of home, laughing. Suddenly about thirty soldiers appeared announcing that everyone but blacks must leave. They caught the last three whites and beat them senseless, sending all of them to the hospital. One boy was in critical condition with a skull fracture.

An alert was called. Tracers flew over the billets. A truck was burned. Armed guards with German shepherds surrounded the compound with bayonets and loaded weapons—but the burning, looting, and beatings continued.

2. The General

Headquarters heard about the riot long before TIME or NEWSWEEK did. The General flew in from Saigon. "I want no more rowdyism in this Command," he said. "Is there anyone who doesn't understand me?" He was a General. He could say things like that.

3. The Colonel

The Colonel faced the rioting troops armed only with a megaphone and fifty military policemen. "You men disperse and return to the barracks," he said. "This is a direct order."

"Fuck you" and "Get bent" the men replied.

The Colonel went over to a black captain who acted as liaison. The captain talked to the troops for a while. They piled up their rocks and pipes and weapons. Everyone stood around nervously, waiting for something to happen.

Later it rained, and everyone went back to the barracks.

* *

OCTOBER 23, 1969: MAI

I was talking to Mai today, a pretty Vietnamese girl who works in Headquarters Detachment as a secretary. Mai speaks English very well, and often we joke and talk about a lot of trivial things—but today the conversation was more serious.

"What would happen," I asked her, "if the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese take over the South one day?"

Mai's face remained impassive. "I work for the Americans, so they would shoot me. Then they would kill my family."

OCTOBER 25, 1969: SAU

Hey Chao co Sau. I no see you long time. Where you go, bom a lom? Ah, Saigon. Sure, you still our baby san men oy. Always Number One girl, for sure.

You see Birt? Birt dee-dee mou today. He go home. Lieutenant Meyers same-same. Go home last month.

Me? Choi duc! Never happen! Still have beaucoup time nine months. Say hello Miss Mo. Chao co.

OCTOBER 28, 1969: LITTLE FRIENDS

Every hooch has many little friends who come out at night to pay an unexpected call. Perhaps they're just passing through, or maybe they've come to sleep off a meal from the hooch next door.

Either way, they pose no problem until they decide to explore your young body. Lying prone in bed, you've been bothered before by mosquitoes—but a strange cockroach climbing up your leg, you're not too wild about. Who knows, after all, what really goes through the mind of an oriental cockroach?

REFLECTIONS

Wasp in a screen
Trapped by a maze
Of no escape.

So near to life
Yet search and probe
The wasp must die.

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* * *
*

EVERYTHING IS ABSURD—EXCEPT LOVE

So let us live
in pain and hope
And one day
die alone.

And though
the world is mad
Our love will be enough—
A grain of sand
against the wind
To give again
in waves unleashed
By wild
and surging life.

NOVEMBER 2, 1969: SLOPES AND DINKS

He was a young buck sergeant from Alabama, proud of his Artillery days at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and proud to defend America from world-wide Communist aggression.

The Vietnamese Communists, in his eyes, were sub-humans anyway—slopes and dinks—who felt no human emotion, and therefore who could be eradicated as swiftly as possible, without regret.

He saw this enemy, he told me, for the first time during the Tet offensive of 1969, when—for days and nights on end—his battery kept mowing down human-wave enemy assaults by lowering the howitzers to tree trunk level and firing "bumble bee" cannisters which sprayed thousands of anti-personnel darts into the enemy troops. But still they kept on coming. One wave after another.

On the night after the last attack, he went out with a small patrol to survey the damage, and found hundreds and thousands of the enemy dead. But he also found frightened young boys and young men, who had died clutching one another in terror, or who had died trying to bandage each others wounds.

And the young sergeant told me that he knew then they also must have mothers, sisters, and wives at home just like his men; and they had been terrified during the battle, just like his men—and they bled, and felt pain, and cried, just like his men.

And he never called them slopes or dinks, ever again.

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NOVEMBER 21, 1969: SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

After six months at war, a ten-day miracle. A beautiful, heavenly city on the Bay. The frontier spirit with a wry sense of Aussie humor. Drinking a schooner of Swan Lager with new friends. Invited everywhere. A genuine Australian openess. Up front and honest.

The Bay and the Opera House. Bondi Beach. Riding the waves. The restaurants and night life. Incredibly beautiful, tall Australian girls. Disarming and very real. Not afraid to be themselves—to disagree. Outgoing and direct. Deep and beautiful, like their city.

Sydney, Australia. The reality of heaven. Treating us as people again, and true friends. Making us feel more at home than home itself.

Our last night was spent in a seafood restaurant. Mrs. Murphy, the restaurant owner, told us "If you'd come earlier, boys, we'd have you some fine dates tonight." Unfortunately, no wine was sold after 9 p.m. with dinner. Another older couple approached our table. "Here, boys, take our bottle—Your fathers really helped us during the last war, and we know how you feel about this one.... God bless you, and take care, boys. Take care."

Sydney, Australia. A beautiful lasting friendship. A love affair with life that, back in Vietnam, had all too soon the unfamiliar face that precious things take on when our heart is left behind.

DECEMBER 1, 1969: REALITY

Reality—a flowing wave of belly heat and cold. I crave a disregard for time, and colormotion's many parts denying yet the whole.

And when one day the ego walks alone, the mind and soul (in daring plot) will leap upon its hoary chest, and strangle it with love.

DECEMBER 7, 1969: FEAR

My mother Life now spreads her wondrous legs of joy a fleeting day before us. Her laugh is future-close, elusive. Ragged in her mystery, we wait in pained pursuit.

But death is ever-present, coy. She smiles and sees me not, or so I think; Awaits me in the play she craves, misunderstood. Oh God, too soon she may detect my fear for love, and clasp me to the womb of no return.

DECEMBER 11, 1969: BACARDI RUM

Drink now the sap of joy, sweet troop, and jest with jaded youth. Thy fountain tide of blessed May, and having drunk go forth thy way, to pause and piss against the wind, or hear the cannons play.

DECEMBER 19, 1969: INCOMING

A dull thud–muffled close... Growing fearful (Thud)... Followed twice... Another Crash... CHRIST! ... Body... feet... flailing... Hands and sweat... Waiting... waiting... CRASH... god oh jesus... CRASH... Receding Thud... Still waiting... Not you, thank God... Move your head... not you... Move your arm... not this time.

DECEMBER 25, 1969: CHRISTMAS 1969

What can I say? The boys got a little drunk and thought about home... Miss America of 1960 gave a Witness for Christ over Armed Forces Radio, followed by "Silent Night" (Bob Hope told us to fake the words–they'd dub the sound in later).

And the only Peace Mike got for Christmas was a ragged Vietnamese girl with a terminal limp and a bad case of the clap.

JANUARY 7, 1970: THE PEOPLE

Once each year the People turn from dust to mud. It cracks their faces and sags their breasts for forty years and then they die. Knowing as much and expecting no more.

—Lt. Tim Kerns
11th Armd. Cav. Reg.

JANUARY 22, 1970: DISPATCH

"At 191145 hours, ten km northwest of Hoi An, a 16-year-old youth from a nearby hamlet entered Thanh Quit hamlet and threw 2 fragmentation grenades into a group of children and Marines of the USMC combined civic action platoon 2/3/7. There were four friendly killed in action (Vietnamese children) and fifteen wounded in action (11 Vietnamese children, 4 USMC). The youth who threw the grenades escaped."

FEBRUARY 4, 1970: DUC LAP

Small and pleading eyes, our combat medic with all his tubes and bottles could never heal that gaping wound, nor still your fearful cry.

Jesus, God—what a petty, callous war, when armies clash in hate to disembowel a child.

FEBRUARY 10, 1970: LETTERS

Letters—things you might say now, but can't. In constant flux the senses clash in love and hate, in pain and joy, but for a trapped emotion strangled by the ever-changing pen (the soul is gone, and yet remains). Small mirror in this game of fate, and swiftly spent in god miles of time and space, our letters show us how.

DA LAT

On a withered branch
A raven sits
In an autumn evening.

The stream hides itself
In the shadows
Of departing day.

In the dark forest
A pebble drops—
The sound of water

Night is falling—
A fathomless, infinite
Loneliness.

FEBRUARY 12, 1970: RETROGRADE

The 155 self-propelled howitzer is truly a massive steel monster—a super tank of fearful thunder, girded to the hilt, encased in armor.

Three of them, late of Charlie Company, 24th Artillery, lie waiting in the harbor—all three untouched, stand proud and tense. Except that in the turret of each tank there is a small, finely bored hole, no larger than a circle made by your thumb and forefinger. One small, insignificant hole where a target charge, penetrating the armor, spewed out schrapnel, fire explosion, and black charred waste.

And from their gutted belly sent home men, twelve strong, before their time had come.

FEBRUARY 15, 1970: A GREEN BERET IN NHA TRANG

One can never generalize about individual divisions, regiments, or any particular unit. It's hard enough generalizing about particular people.

But in Nha Trang I did meet a Green Beret who, as one individual, was at least honest about his motivation. I was sharing his bottle of Jack Daniels and ice.

"I joined the Green Berets for excitement, I guess. On one hand we're living' with the 'Yards, raisin' crops, growin' pigs, and huntin' Charlie. On the other hand, you kill and drink, smoke, and whore.... Every minute may be your last, you know what I mean?"

"Man, if I were back in the States doin' this sort of thing, I'd either be dead or sittin' on death row by now. But over here, we've got a free license, you know what I mean?"

He said he was thinking of settling down after the war. Getting into a business trainee program when he got back to the States. Or maybe into some branch of law enforcement.

FEBRUARY 19, 1970: II CORPS

Chopper rising, whirling blades, the land below of hills and trees, of war and sudden death. We fly along the dusty road just above the spreading trees at 60 knots. Our two door gunners scan and probe the woods on either side.

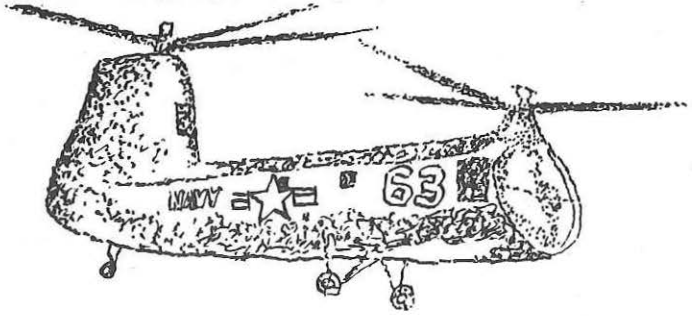
We pass a small patrol of fire teams abreast along the road. The point man waves and I from 60 feet above, wave back.

The road turns left. Our chopper dips. The pilot keeps his course too low above the trees to give a sniper time to concentrate his fire right and bring us down in flames.

We pass a crawling convoy caked with mud and clay. Trailers full of ammo, diesel fuel, repair parts, food, and medical supplies. Between the trucks ride armored cars, gun jeeps, and hardened trucks with plated steel alert. Flak vests lie on shoulders bare and helmets trap the heat below. A gunner gives thumbs up. Another "V" for victory. A third a "V" for Peace.

Further on a village in the clearing stands alone. Montagnards in long grass huts with woven walls. The children watch us from the road, their fathers group with rifles, and their mothers keep the peace. Another village passes where a crowd is grouped about a duster—small red cross on white—beside the chopper quickly loads a casualty of war.

Two shots ring out—our chopper rises quickly now embracing hills and mountain peaks ahead. The wind is cold against my face. We fly within a falling rain, above the pass, and home.



MARCH 1, 1970: INTERLUDE

I saw a movie tonight that made me think of you. It's bad thinking, you know. Yesterday I thought of Lee who was killed last month in I Corps.

The movie was one of the few we saw last year together. How different seeing it again, alone, sitting in the sand at war. It made me think of our own interlude. Why we could never accept less than we had, and would never have again.

MARCH 4, 1970: REMEMBRANCE THREE

When you smiled at me that night, I knew you were different. You had no snide remark for my uniform, or unuttered, a look of mock pity which seemed to say "Look everybody, it's one of Them again."

And you didn't approach me with a fashionable over-riding concern, or preach to me from a preassembled dreadnaught of morality. No, and you didn't stare away from me, or at me, or through me.

All you said was "hello," but through that one simple word, I no longer was alone.

OBSERVATION

Flower petal
pushing through
the crusted earth
Embraces light
and dies

The ugly root
Endures
but never blooms.

MARCH 7, 1970: THE ICE CREAM GENERAL

A well-known general in Vietnam took great pains to visit his troops, and see they were always well-supplied with the crucial necessities of war—which in this case was ice cream, at least twice a week.

"When was the last time you had ice cream, son?" the General would ask on his numerous visits to the troops in the field.

"About nine months ago, sir." replied one young soldier.

"Nine months ago!" the General fumed and raged.

Immediately, he called logistical command headquarters and chewed out the commanding officer there, who was only a brigadier general. The BG became very uptight at this pending military crisis, and lambasted his Colonel, who likewise passed the buck down to his Major, an infantry Captain, and finally to a young lieutenant why decided, for the first time, to confirm or deny the story straight from the soldier himself, since he knew most of the supplies had been getting through without apparent difficulty.

The lieutenant was right after all. The ice cream was getting through, but it was also true that the soldier in question hadn't had any ice cream for the past nine months. The reason? The trooper didn't like ice cream, and seldom ate anything he didn't like.

Thus, another crisis was successfully resolved, and the chain of command could once again return to a vigorous prosecution of the war, and to the ultimate goal of winning the hearts and minds of the people.

MARCH 10, 1970: DAI

Saigon at dusk, the streets below of motorbikes and cabs. The people move—a smell of fish and smoke. The Opera House, a fountain square, young girls with almond eyes and flowing skirts—A leper in the street, legless, armless, begging by the dead with eyes that never die.

I look away at life and long silk hair. Her body moves in beauty—holding hands we dance, and talk of life and war.

"You come home tonight and be with me?" she asks.

"I can't," I lie.

"You come tomorrow then, and stay with me a while?"

Soft and pleading eyes. "All right," I lie again.

Our world is sad, so sad in war and hate's forgotten past—our lives have crossed from what we find in lonely eyes.

"Tomorrow, please, you come" These eyes that never die.

"Yes," I lie, and lie again for all that love in timeless years has felt and lost and hurt. For all that war has strangled from our lives, and leaves us cold, and takes our love away.

For feelings seldom shared in countless years, I need her close tonight. "Tomorrow," yes tomorrow—Our lie endures until the dream is lost again tomorrow.

MARCH 14, 1970: THE PROVOST MARSHAL

Jeep-stealing in Vietnam was a national past-time. The Vietnamese nationals had acquired chain cutters, and became very adept at Western automechanics, with special emphasis in jumpstarting the engines, and removing all serial or identification markings with lightning speed.

Even the shorebound Navy installations took great delight in their midnight requisitions of Army material, and the Green Berets from Nha Trang had on one occasion brought in a CH-47 sling helicopter and airlifted away a brand-new vehicle that was apparently impossible to obtain through ordinary supply channels.

The new Provost Marshal at Cam Ranh Bay decided to do something about these thefts—and implemented a stern directive from the Military Police to all personnel who had their vehicles stolen. They would now have to write an extensive report in triplicate to the Provost Marshal, explaining the surrounding circumstances, and further appear before a Board of Inquiry, remaining liable to possible Article 15 or Court Martial proceedings for negligently allowing these thefts to occur.

These orders were to take effect, by the Provost Marshal's directive, on March 11. That would really take care of the problem, the Provost Marshal promised the General, by the sternest measures and prompt prosecution of any negligent offenders.

On the morning of March 13, the Provost Marshal was seen walking to work. Someone had stolen his jeep.

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MARCH 15, 1970: GRAFFITI

1. Lifer—986 days and a wake-up.
2. Befur Ah Kame in the Urmy, Ah Koudn't spall Enjuneer—Now Ah are one!

3. The U.S. Army—184 years of tradition unhampered by progress.
4. The Army's like a rubber—it gives you that false sense of security while you're getting screwed.
5. Hi! I'm Uncle Sam! Fly me to Saigon!
6. It's not a real war yet—we're just 550,000 military advisors.
7. Relax—this is not the pot they bust you for.
8. Fighting for peace is like screwing for chastity.
9. Share in the fight for freedom—go home with a friend.
10. Give me your hearts and minds, or I'll burn your fucking hut.
11. War is hell-but a year without women is a real bitch.
12. How come we can get to the moon, but I can't get home?
13. Mickey Mouse wears a General D----- wristwatch.
14. Colonel S----- is Rosemary's Baby.
15. Those personnel with short stacks and low manifold pressure, please taxi closer to the urinal.
17. Yossarian lives.
18. Would the last American soldier leaving Vietnam please turn out the light at the end of the tunnel?

MARCH 16, 1970: THE PHOENIX PROGRAM

A lieutenant I met on leave was stationed outside of Qui Nhon—in a Vietnamese army compound serving as an American "advisor."

Actually he worked for Military Intelligence with the Phoenix program. The Phoenix program attempted to root out the Viet Cong political infrastructure in South Vietnam—by intimidation, assassination, and the like. One method of political assassination was to "by accident" allow a list of known Viet Cong agents to fall into enemy hands. The trick was to omit one or two names, and the VC—thinking these agents had defected to the Saigon government—would kill their own men.

Another method was to dress former VC in black pajamas, arm them with AK-47's, and land them off the coast in small fishing boats. They would then enter surrounding hamlets of questionable loyalty, and declare an important meeting was to be held, with new NLF instructions. When the Viet Cong sympathizers assembled in the village, the V.C. would be shot down by "their own brothers."

The Phoenix program had its limitations, however. It was estimated by the lieutenant that one-third of the ARVN troops within his own compound were Communist sympathizers.

MARCH 19, 1970: LUV

We once had a little puppy called Luv. She was the Company mascot, and dug just about everyone. She was one of those beautiful little creatures who hadn't ever learned to hate or fear. She trusted everyone.

Luv trusted the sergeant, too, even though the sergeant wanted her wasted as a damn nuisance. So Luv never came home with us. But neither did the sergeant.

BETTER HALVES

Truck convoys and mechanized patrols often wed many men to their vehicles during most of their Vietnam tour. The names of such better halves included:

Battlin' Bob
Psychedelic Flower
Old Faithful
Road Runner
Acid Rock
Hell for Certain
Puzzle Palace
Pusher Man
Grim Reaper
Iron Butterfly
Grass Bender
Artful Dodger
Moritorium
Malfunction Junction

And the motto of the 10th Battalion Chaplain:
"We work to beat hell"

MARCH 20, 1970: THE TWO FRONTS

The kid was caught out in the open by a stray mortar round. (They don't make coffee the way they used to, the businessman said. And those kids with long hair? Jesus!)

The impact cut his arm off, the lower half of his right leg, and blew off half his head, oozing red-black blood into the sand. He was 19 years old from Ohio. (Well, the President must know what he's doing, and he has my full support. Where the hell is that waitress?)

The kid only had two weeks left in Vietnam. Three days before, he'd already framed a copy of his orders home.

APRIL 2, 1970: A BOND OF FRIENDSHIP

It was hot. The ambush had been effective. Out there in the brush where there was little protection from sight or hail of gunfire, the soldier caught sight of his buddy, seriously wounded.

"Sir, please let me get him, please." The officer, well aware of their deep friendship hesitated, then said, "Go—but its not worth it. Your friend is probably dead, and you may get killed trying."

But the soldier went. Miraculously, he hoisted his friend onto his shoulders, and under heavy fire the two of them tumbled back into the trench. The officer looked tenderly at the would-be rescuer. "I told you it wouldn't be worth it. Your buddy is dead, and you are badly wounded."

"I know sir," the soldier replied, "but you're wrong, it was worth it—Because just before he died he looked at me and said: 'I knew you'd come.' "

It didn't matter that day that one man was white and the other black... Thank you God that out of a hellish war we can still learn the meaning of true brotherhood.

—Chaplain Donald J. Robinson
101st Airborne Division

APRIL 4, 1970: COLONEL S------

Many officers and NCOs in Vietnam know their business. Even though they hate the war—a war not of their own making—they really take care of their men, and don't give a damn about front-line formalities. All they want is to get as many of their men back alive as they can. The men deeply respect these officers and NCOs, and justifiably so.

Other officers are little people with rank authority and little else. Thy cannot command respect by their action, so they must command this respect verbally, and for petty offenses—for haircuts, polished boots, and front-line salutes.

Colonel S------ was one of these men. A little puffy hamsterman who would not hesitate to lick the General's boots on any occasion, and he had the audacity on numerous occasions to lambast various troops for their sloppy haircuts and uniforms at the Base PX. Such troops had just come in from the field, or from a long, exhausting convoy, and had not seen the likes of a shower—much less a barber—in a number of weeks. They always looked at the Colonel in total disbelief, and then—comprehending—in a long-imprisoned rage for this antiseptic staff toady.

Colonel S-----'s written directives were likewise incomprehensible, unnecessary, wasteful, and—in a word—unbelievably stupid. Many of us thought Joseph Hellers CATCH 22 was an unreal parody about war until we met Colonel S------.

One night, some Viet Cong sappers blew up our petroleum storage dump. It was an incredible blaze for three days and nights...

Anyway, immediately after the attack, Colonel S------ jumped out of his jeep, grabbed his .45 caliber pistol, and went chasing after the VC hell-bent for musty leather, stumbling over the sand dunes like a long-retired propman in a John Wayne war movie, attempting a futile andembarrassing comeback.

We all sort of hoped that the Viet Cong would follow the logical

rules of guerrilla warfare and leave one sniper back to cover their escape, waiting for our much-beloved staff Colonel to come panting over the hill.

But no such luck. Apparently, the VC knew all about Colonel S------, and wanted to leave him right where he was. And who could blame them?

APRIL 7, 1970: THE ARMY BUILDS MEN

There was a kid from the South who worked for a while in Headquarters Detachment down the hall from me. He was a nice enough kid, about 18 or 19, and his prize possession was a large, framed picture of his mother, who apparently was a well-known Country and Western singer back in the States.

But the kid didn't know how well off he was in a staff job, and yearning for excitement, he put in for a transfer to a combat unit.

A few weeks later his transfer came through, and the kid was radiant. He told us excitedly how he was going to be a door gunner in a UH-1C Huey helicopter, and how he couldn't wait to get his hands on that big, beautiful M-60 machine gun.

I asked him, "Do you really want to kill people?"

He looked confused for a moment, and then in a tough-hurt tone replied, "I'm a fighter, not a lover."

APRIL 9, 1970: WAITING

Any war tries to run on a schedule—some form of an organized plan that will replace chaos with stability, and further the mission of actually winning the war.

However, this schedule also depends on the enemy—and in a war like Vietnam, with elusive guerilla tactics, there are few, if any permanent schedules. The conventional American and South Vietnamese Army is resupplied periodically with food, ammunition, and material. And then it waits. It waits to be attacked.

We do send out "search and destroy" missions, but it is the enemy that chooses whether or not to fight us—and when the enemy does fight, he usually has the upper hand. This is the classic rule of guerilla warfare.

It means that the front line in Vietnam can be anywhere—fighting in the jungle, slogging through the Delta, or getting hit by rockets and mortars in the supposedly "safe" military compound or a civilian community. Getting blown up by a booby-trap, a mine or a grenade thrown by a 65-year-old mama-san. Anytime, anywhere anything can happen. The fighting starts and ends abruptly—sometimes in minutes, but seldom longer than hours. The rest of the time you wait.

Waiting is 90% of the game in Vietnam. You keep busy. You do your job 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Occasionally, there is a half-day off, a stand-down, or 10 days of R&R outside of Vietnam. But the rest of the time you wait—seven days a week, 24 hours a day. Until things happen, you wait. and when it happens, you're right in the middle of it.

When you're not working or sleeping, you're still waiting—and time can play some horrible tricks on you. Vietnam may be a one-year tour of duty for most soldiers, but they have actually spent many more years there than they care to talk about.

Time in Vietnam slows down almost to a stop—every minute of every day. The Vietnamese have lived with this phenomena for centuries, but the Western soldier cannot. Your last two weeks in Vietnam, like your first two weeks, are measured in months—and you're especially paranoid about getting hit during these last two weeks. And you wait.

Your off-duty time is short-lived and very precious. With a 24-hour day and a seven-day week, it is the only time you have to blow off your stress and anxiety; your loneliness, fear and frustration. Sometimes you can almost—but only almost—forget the war.

There are two important safety valves to help blow off pressure

during your off-duty time. The older sergeants and officers use alcohol, and consume fantastic amounts of tax-free booze. A bottle of excellent scotch or bourbon costs as much as a six-pack of beer back home. Brand-name gin, rum, or vodka are never more than $2.00 a bottle. And a hangover is healthy. Better to take it out on the bottle than on your buddies. Still, occasional shootings are not uncommon in Vietnam. Pent-up grudges sometimes result in a bullet in the chest, or fragging with a hand grenade.

Other troops and company-grade officers smoke pot. No hangovers, no problems—and Vietnamese grass gives many people a mellow high rather than a crazy drunk. Unfortunately, some others get started on the harder drugs, and everything is available.

But contrary to popular belief, most American soldiers in Vietnam who get into drugs stick with grass. It's not addicting, nor apparently all that harmful—at least when compared to a bullet or a booby trap.

During this time, we grew together with our friends. We shared each others' hurt and pain—our love and hate for home and war. We got to know each other in a very deep sense—maybe better than our wives or girlfriends ever would. We talked philosophy and we talked nonsense. We laughed and we cried. We learned to live and grow. We looked back and we looked ahead. We talked about changes. In us and in America. We committed ourselves to both.

Without these friends, Vietnam would have been much worse than it already was. To paraphrase a Woodstock theme, "There is always a little bit of paradise in every disaster area."

Our friends made this waiting bearable.

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APRIL 11, 1970: MEDICINE MEN

Many doctors assigned to the Medical Corps in Vietnam devote much of their very limited and very precious, off-duty time working with Vietnamese civilians. Most medical assistance, from either side, is gratefully appreciated—but there are exceptions.

My brother Charles, who was assigned to the 6th Convalescent Center in Southern II Corps, worked with many Vietnamese civilians in Cam Ranh Village and My Ca Village, among others. But three weeks after he ended his tour of duty in Vietnam, a small group of Viet Cong sappers blew up his hospital, killing and wounding 98 bed-ridden patients.

Another Army doctor, working in a small village not far from Cam Ranh Bay, successfully saved the life of a young girl, twelve-years-old,who had both of her hads blown off by a hand grenade. The little girl's grandmother was also injured in the blast. A short while later, the the doctor learned that the young girl's injuries occurred while she and her grandmother had been attempting to booby-trap the doctor's own jeep with this same grenade, hoping to kill him when he started his engine.

A third unarmed American medic spent much of his free time in a similar small village attempting to fight an outbreak of cholera and typhoid. One young Vietnamese boy was too sick to be saved when the medic arrived in the village, but rumors circulated throughout the hamlet that the American medic was responsible for killing the boy with his "poisonous medicine." Consequently, the village allowed two Viet Cong snipers to ambush and kill the young medic when he drove back into the village a few days later with another shipment of life-saving drugs. Few medical personnel dared to enter this village after the episode, and half the villagers later died as a result of a cholera epidemic.

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APRIL 12, 1970: O.D.–CAM RANH BAY

Its beautiful tonight. Radio is a crude word, but the music isn't–it floats a web of strange desire far above the room. The sound is old and quiet. Alone. Just looking at the piers. Three ships, dim lights–drifting, floating... The sea and just the four of you together. No one else.

APRIL 15, 1970: A SHORT, SHORT STORY

Once upon a time there was a politician who, all by himself, blustered and stormed, and committed half a million young men to risk their lives in war. Some fat-assed, power-hungry politician who in all his potato-faced ugliness had the gall to consider himself a statesman and a man of decision.

The American sheep went baa-baa, and the young boys died. And Bulbnose lived happily ever after.

Kirchmayer

Lee

Cothran

Daley

Rodriguez.

Just names.

Just figures.

APRIL 19, 1970: OFFICERS AND MEN

American soldiers in Vietnam came from all walks of life. And so did the officers. Most of the officers I worked with in Vietnam—in Saigon, Cam Ranh, Ban Me Thout, and Nha Trang—were citizen soldiers, like I was, graduates of ROTC or OCS. Only Colonel S-----, Major T-----, and Captain D----- were West Point graduates. Colonel S------ is discussed elsewhere in this book. Captain D----- didn't get along with anyone, and Major T----- was a good officer, well-liked, and very much respected. One out of three ain't bad.

For six months, my superior officer was Major P----- from the 173d Airborne, and I couldn't have worked for a better man, in or out of the Army. He treated us all like human beings, no matter what our rank was, and we were all fiercely loyal in return. When Major P----- left, however, we became expendible to the greater glories of someone else. The Army, like any civilian counterpart, has its equal share of the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Captain H----- was a quiet, soft-spoken Mormon elder who had few, if any, real vices. Lt. E----- was a Texas fraternity grad who kept us in high spirits most of the time, and showed us what to do to make the next morning bearable (two aspirin, two salt tablets, and a tab of Vitamin B). SFC K----- had seen it all before, three wars ago. And SP/5 B----- was a real magician at scrounging. If you wanted a battleship, B----- could get you one with black leather upholstery.

Major B------ was the Detachment warthog. He once asked me why I grew hair under my nose when it grew wild on my ass. I told him as long as it was within Army regulations, it was none of his damn business.

Major P----- came to my defense, saying he'd rather have someone with brains and long hair on his staff than a dud with a crewcut. Major B------, who also had a crewcut, argued unpersuasively for the dud. We pointed out that three of America's most famous soldiers had long hair and beards, and still did all right: Robert E. Lee, Ulysses S. Grant, and Stonewall Jackson.

But it was strange with all the other problems at war how some people could get so up-tight about long hair. Christ with a crewcut —the model soldier.

One of my closest friends in Vietnam was none of the above. He was a stevedore officer, a pentacostal minister's son, and Zorba the Greek. He treated his men as individuals, rankless and unique. They did their job well with a minimum of hassle, and they loved him. He was their counselor, their friend, and their equal.

When he was about to leave Vietnam, his men all gave him a symbolic christening in beer, and threw him in the ocean. He told them to treat each other just like you'd want the otherdude to treat you.

The golden rule in a tub full of beer. An inner light, forever branching outward.

In Vietnam, when most of us were plodding through the absurd inhuman procedures of war, he alone remained a man of substance.

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APRIL 20, 1970: AUNT MAGGIE

Hi Peter—

So glad you liked the cookies. Thank your buddies for their nice compliments too. I just got through baking some more for you—I tested them out on Uncle Augie, so I know they are okay to send.

It has been raining so much here lately that we can't wash windows, or work out in the yard, or paint, so I do the next best thing I bake. So you just keep hoping it rains plenty here, and then I'll keep you well supplied with cookies.

Uncle Augie says he sure is glad you're not getting Spam. He says they must have better cooks in the Army now.

Love, Aunt Maggie

APRIL 24, 1970: SOUTH CHINA SEA

Gliding through the coral green and sky blue sea, against the cliffs, our mother womb of life, deep and silent. The world of craigs and coral caves ancient aged in lust for life and terror in our love—we mortals now embrace an underwater world.

Observe the ultraviolet finger fish, tripping in the tide of rainbow coral light—of fear the sleek and subtle tiger fish who stalk their prey among the craigs as they are sought. And pause to praise the blunt-nosed elders, speckled green and red, who listen, watch, and never speak—but live to see the morrow.

Yet here is horror hosted in a sad depressing school of dull grey fins—unlike their brothers, colorless and void. Swimming circles far from life, shamming love, a multitude of grey-black waves.

We mortal men with mask and rubber fins, we also know this fear.

APRIL 27, 1970: A HIGHWAY ACCIDENT

Yesterday we saw the results of what happens when a small Lambretta scooter-bus filled with twelve Vietnamese civilians hits a Viet Cong mine buried along the side of a main highway.

The mine was primarily an anti-personnel device, used—as the military abstractly explains it—the "harrass" the civilian population.

There were a lot of mangled bodies lying there until they were policed up—primarily older people, women, and children...the elder sons and husbands had already be conscripted to take their chances on the "conventional" battlefield.

In America, a big highway accident or related disaster usually draws a huge, morbid crowd to stare and gawk. Yesterday, in Vietnam, no one seemed to notice.

APRIL 30, 1970: THE KOREANS

In addition to American and South Vietnamese soldiers in Vietnam, the "Allied Forces" also consisted of token troops from Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines, and Taiwan. An exception to this rule were the Koreans, who fielded in excess of two crack divisions during the Vietnam war.

The ROK troops were greatly feared and respected by the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese alike. They asked for, and gave, little quarter to the communists. Once, when one of their troops was ambushed outside a small village in Northern II Corps, the Koreans hunted the sniper down, brought him back to the village, strung him up on a tree, and skinned him alive.

The Koreans' bravery, devotion, and ferocity as a fighting force was legendary in Vietnam. During the Tet Offensive of 1968, every major Allied headquarters and military compund in Vietnam was attacked by the communists except one—the VC and North Vietnamese gave wide berth to the Koreans.

I knew an American captain at Nha Trang who helped coordinate Korean personnel and re-supply movements to and from Vietnam. Korean officers were paid American equivalent salaries and were largely supplied from U.S. firms. The U.S. government, it was rumored, was picking up the entire Korean war tab—including burial expenses and pension plans.

Nevertheless, I could never understand where one Korean lieutenant, with my equivalent salary, got enough money to send home 8 refrigerators, 12 TV sets, 9 stereo tape deck components and speakers, and a jeep in his hold baggage. He complained loudly when he learned that he was only limited to four TONS of hold baggage (three wooden crates took care of everything I had).

Perhaps one explanation lay in the Cam Ranh Supply Depot, a huge, unmanageable Quartermaster conglomerate that various Korean convoys resupplied their men from.

It was not until the Army changed its TCMD movement document forms that we learned of an untold number of Korean convoys which had been "resupplied" at the Depot on forged documents. And these supplies always had a way of showing up on the Vietnamese black market, even when the Depot itself was out of stock.

True, this is just one incident, and a lot of things happen like this to every Army in almost every war. But it helped explain why the VC never blew up our Depot at Cam Ranh, when they did in fact hit our hospital, our petroleum dump, our air field, and our ammunition dump.

Simply stated, the Depot was too valuable. It maintained the needed supplies and material to equip combatants on both sides of the war. And it probably did.

MAY 4, 1970: IT'S BEEN SAID, BY PEOPLE WHO KNOW

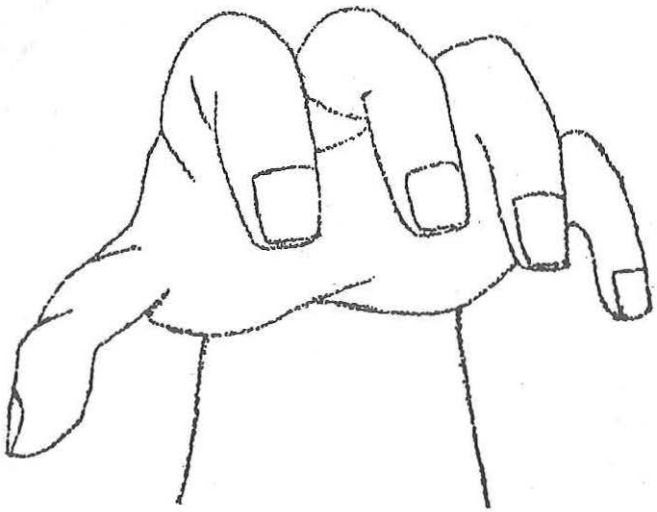
It's been said, by people who know, that most of the heroin and opium coming into Vietnam from Laos and Thailand is being flown here aboard South Vietnamese Air Force planes, and the money from young American addicts is being salted away by South Vietnamese Generals in Swiss bank accounts.

It's been said, by people who know, that some of the heroin is manufactured by Laotian mercenaries on CIA bases, financially supported by the American government.

It's been said, by people who know, that a Sergeant Major of the Army and his friends have gotten quite rich by embezzling money from various NCO and Officers Clubs in Vietnam, from running field-grade brothels, and from asking visiting entertainment groups for sexual favors and kickbacks.

It's been said, by people who know, that all of this is true. Sometimes, during an apparent lull, we even fight the Communists.

Lay on McWorld
Your slip is showing
And you've got hairy armpits,
But I love you.



IN MEMORY OF A FRIEND KILLED IN ACTION

Is it weakness
for a strong man
to be moved by inner touch?
Must he spurn
a lonely blade of grass
and damn the ocean's roar?
Or must he look
at sentimental beauty
as a crutch
And choose to play
the game of pride
By calling life a whore

No, I have seen
the strongest man
Defend a withered rose—
and fall from grace
because the people
didn't understand.

They thought it was his weakness
they exploited, I suppose,
And killing him in ignorance
they trembled in his hand.

MAY 8, 1970: TAIPEI

A week away from war—by temple walls and boulevards where centuries of China's pride encased in modern steel are hidden sadly in the concrete towers of commercial progress, forsaking the surrounding hills of solitude and peace.

A clean, well-lighted place. Our afternoon finds half the island coming home from school. Little tots in uniforms, neatly dressed and groomed, with book bags strapped across their back, half as large as they.

At night the neon lights of restaurants, bars and clubs embrace the sky. A falling mist sweeps past the Hong Kong Bar, the Playmate, and the Taipei King. We barter in the stores ("For you a special price—very cheap, for sure.") and dine at the Naples Restaurant owned, no doubt by Antonio Hin-Wai or Giuseppe Woo. And see "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" with Chinese subtitles.

Free from war we joke, and laugh, and learn to hate the condescending round-eyes—American and European tourists—fat, loud, and stupid. ("Going up? The elevator can't take any more people. Well, maybe a Chinese... Yes—we do have room for a Chinaman.")

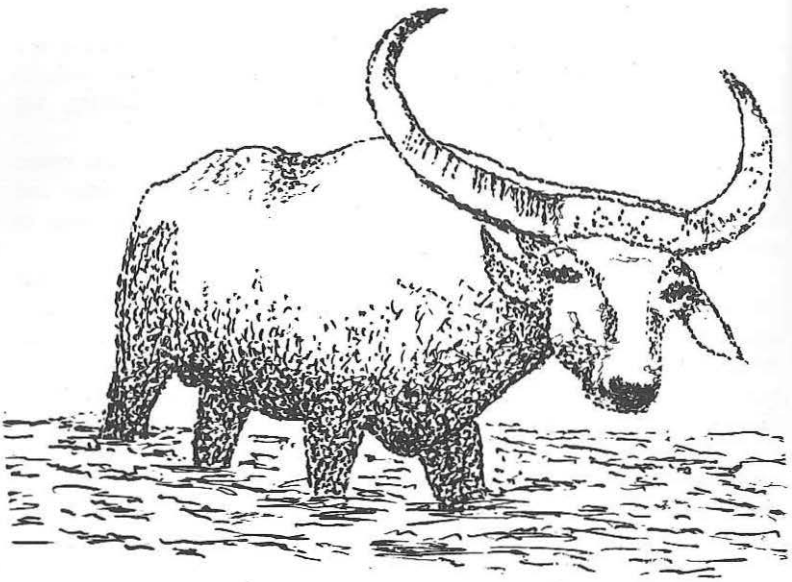
Young, with long black hair, she smiles and laughs unlike her older sisters moving down the stairs with burned-out eyes. She is curious, we see the city's night, laugh, ask questions—I meet her family, play with her sister's little boy, feel strangely at home. I play chess with her brother losing badly. The night again is innocent of hurt and pain. The dream tonight endures.

Morning comes, I feel the need to get away—to think—to find the lonely hills and peace.

She cannot understand that I must go. I can't explain to innocence how life is changed by death and war—how life, like she—a gentle whore, needs pain and hurt to keep our faith alive.

I see her again two nights later with another American, and I feel strangely sad. She at least, could smile.

* *



MAY 17, 1970: DISPATCH

"...Enemy combat activity continued at a low level during the week, with the most significant fighting occuring north of Phu My and southwest of Tuy Hoa.

At 170010 hrs. May 70, an ARVN unit made contact with an unknown size VC force at BP 955388. The unit requested gunships and flareships for support. An ARVN sweep of the contact area at 0600 hours yielded the following: one blood trail, one dead cow, four wounded cows, and 3 expended B-40 rounds. No bodies were found."

MAY 19, 1970: THE MEDIA

Vietnam was a Media War throughout the world—so why shouldn't it be one in Vietnam itself? Marshall McLuhan would have been proud. Even while tromping around in the Boonies you could still tune in to Armed Forces Radio, which ran both an AM and FM network. There was also Armed Forces Television, but not many people had time to watch it, except the American civilian contractors in Vietnam, who worked occasionally, drank and griped a lot, and were thoroughly hated by the Vietnamese women.

The music on Armed Forces Radio varied from hard rock to folk rock, through Soul, to Country and Western. Current hits were mixed with such Vietnam favorites as "Leaving on a Jet Plane," "We Gotta Get Out of This Place," and "Green, Green Grass of Home." Quite a few anti-war songs from home got through the censors and were played by the Army DJs. I can't remember the title of one song, but I'll always remember the refrain—

Go ahead and kill you neighbor,
Go ahead and kill you friend—
Do it in the name of Heaven,
You can justify it in the end...
There won't be any trumpets blowing
On the Judgement Day...
On the bloody morning after
One tin soldier rides away.

The Armed Forces network was based on an American commercial radio format—primarily music and news—and, sure enough, there was also advertisements, even in Vietnam. But our commercials were a little different—such as explaining what the South Vietnamese "Peoples Revolutionary Cadre" was doing (translation: just because they're wearing black pajamas doesn't mean they're Viet Cong...they're still on our side, so don't shoot them).

Other commercial messages included a strong anti-Venereal Disease campaign, and an anti-hard drugs program; and occasional snowy pitches to take your R&R in Bangkok or Sidney (the Thai and Australian governments weren't dumb—an average GI blew well over $600-$700 during his precious 10-day leave).

As far as publications went, the Army was more open here than in its broadcasting. There were, to be sure, official—and heavily biased—publications put out by the Army itself. This included the US Army Vietnam's quarterly magazine entitled "Uptight." "Uptight" had some good human interest and feature articles, but it also had to dabble in the required amounts of official doubletalk. For example:

> "Vietnamization is working," said Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird in mid-February (1970) as he wound up a four-day visit to the Republic of Vietnam... He said his four days in Vietnam had convinced him the Vietnamization program was so solid that no enemy initiative could have a major effect in Vietnam despite continuing withdrawals of American combat soldiers...

We all wondered what Melvin had really seen during his four days in Vietnam. Someone elese went home and told the American media that American morale in Vietnam was sky-high. We wondered who he'd been talking with too.

The "Uptight" magazine, alas, was somewhat of a joke, since the Army and civilian understanding of the word itself were totally contradictory. But there were more news sources.

The Stars and Stripes, Pacific Edition, was our daily—when we could get it—newspaper. It kept us fully informed of home, international, and Vietnam news. Since Bill Mauldin's World War II days, the Stars and Stripes continued to support the average American soldier, sometimes at the expense of the brass. One colonel, I remember tried to clamp down on the Stars and Stripes editorial board, but the staff raised hell, and the colonel was quietly transferred somewhere else. They tried to clamp down on the Radio staff, too, with a little more success.

In the PX, there were plenty of American magazines—almost like a local retail drugstore chain. The racks were heavy with the skin trade, but there was also TIME and NEWSWEEK, the NEW REPUBLIC, and even the latest issues of the anti-war RAMPARTS magazine.

If you were close enough to a "library," you could read yourself crazy. An awful lot of books were donated by various clubs and organizations all across America—and they covered almost every subject imaginable. These books were also sent to individual units, but not many soldiers knew about their availability.

And if you were at a larger base, you could take night school classes for your high-school equivalent GED degree or, sometimes, for higher level degrees through the University of Maryland, Vietnam Campus.

I taught some high school English courses while I was in Vietnam and I had some very happy young men in my class who got their GED degree, after dropping out of high school back in the States. They planned on going to vocational training schools, or junior college after Vietnam, and when President Nixon announced that he would veto any increase in the GI Bill because it was "too inflationary," I couldn't believe it. These kids were risking their lives in the President's multi-billion dollar war, and yet Nixon couldn't find an extra forty dollars to help them with tuition. I wrote a letter of protest to my Congressman, and Nixon later changed his mind. He did that a lot under popular pressure. Maybe to maintain some sort of image. Like every time he'd order a new bombing raid, he'd always justify it as "peace with honor" when it was clear we had neither.

A third form of media entertainment in Vietnam was—if you were lucky—the movies. The Army must be commended for its foresight, but not much for its programming. Most of the time the movies were pseudo-Italian Westerns with Clint Eastwood-type strangers encountering fat Mexican bandido leaders, and shooting up half the town. Really great action to forget war and all. People dying all over the place. The same thing happened in the Cops and Robbers movies. Violence, and more violence. Do people really love this stuff back home?

Sometimes, though, there were good movies shown, and even great movies. The Army induction scene in "Alice's Restaurant" was gleefully appreciated by one and all—sort of like the tremendous catharsis at San Quentin prison when Johnny Cash sang to the inmates "San Quentin may you burn and rot in hell..." We, too, were prisoners—and we loved it.

The Army was touchy about other war movies, though, and

did not permit the showing of M.A.S.H. in Vietnam while I was there. My first week home I saw M.A.S.H., and I loved it. Many civilians think M.A.S.H. is a tremendously outrageous parody on war. To a lot of ex-soldiers, M.A.S.H. was very real.

This then, was a very small perspective of the Media in Vietnam.

MAY 21, 1970: SANITY

I met an Army psychiatrist in Ban Me Thout. He was a Major, and he had done his residency in Greenwich Village, New York—so you could tell he was more familiar with the GI drug problem than many other moralistic brass were.

He used to give his anti-drug seminars in terms of ALICE IN WONDERLAND—pointing out that the Mad Hatter—as other hatters of that age—had become mad by sniffing too much mercury glue while making his hats, and this glue vapor had gradually destroyed his brain.

He also talked and quoted from the Caterpillar sitting on the mushroom smoking his hookah, Alice's pills and bottles that made her larger and smaller, and the Cheshire Cat among others—it was an intriguing analogy to our present-day drug problems.

But the Major also knew why many GIs turned on to drugs in Vietnam, and he had no patent answers for their "recovery."

"Hell," he said one night, "we don't hesitate to spend 40 billion dollars in a foreign war to napalm villages, defoliate crops and forests, and generally kill Vietnamese peasants with our massive American technology. On the other hand, the President never fails to veto any domestic health, education, or housing programs in America because they are 'too inflationary!' "

"If this is sanity, how am I supposed to deal with those people who can't cope with it? Are they really the weird ones, or are they a whole lot saner than we are?"

MAY 22, 1970: HURTIN'

"We gotta go now. We don't want to cramp your style."
"That's all right, man, We don't have much style to cramp."

MAY 25, 1970: KENT STATE

In the futility and rage over President Nixon's Cambodian invasion, the killing of four student demonstrators at Kent State University by the Ohio National Guard mystfied many GIs in Vietnam. We felt this outrage too, but we had a hard time comprehending how the press and the nation could make so much of an issue out of these four student deaths, when we were losing friends and comrades at an average of 250 men killed each and every week. It made us feel, as unwilling participants, that we were a subhuman species, neglected and alone. Forgotten pawns in a confused and god forsaken war. And we were. On both sides of the ocean.

MAY 26, 1970: THE REAL HEROES

The Medics and Medivac personnel in Vietnam almost to a man were beautiful and very dedicated people...braving the fiercest fire and most harrowing odds to comfort and evacuate the wounded and dying—military and civilian alike, often from both sides—from the heat of battle.

In any war, the real heroes are those who try to maintain a basic humanity, time and time again risking their own lives so that others might live. In Vietnam, the Medics and Medivac people were such men.

MAY 28, 1970: ANTI-WAR PROTESTORS

There were various reactions by Vietnam GIs to the anti-war protestors back home. The bulk of the Infantry were high school graduates who knew that college deferments kept most of the more affluent anti-war protestors out of the draft, and thus out of the war. To these GIs, Vietnam was viewed in terms of a deep gut reaction—a sort of misery-loves-company affair. "I wish those goddam protestors could be over here for one week, and see what the VC did to my buddy...it'd change their goddam minds quick enough."

Other GIs were torn between two extremes. They knew the protestors hadn't started the war. They also knew that Congress had

never officially declared war in Vietnam, as the Constitution mandates it must. And when the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was later repealed by Congress, we were STILL in Vietnam. Furthermore, the American government always refused to bring its Vietnam "justification" before the United Nations, as we had done in the past with Korea. Even the Supreme Court refused to hear any lawsuits based on the war's "legality."

In other words, the President alone appeared to control the entire situation—in an apparently immoral and illegal war—and everyone else appeared powerless to do anything.

Concerning these questions, each one of us had to act in our own way. Some of our contemporaries had chosen jail, or Canada and Sweden. And we had chosen Vietnam. At least the anti-war protestors could show the world that we were not ALL supporting the President's actions. Even at war.

On the other hand, we had to survive in this war. Since the VC and the North Vietnamese had designs for killing us, and we had designs on them, we were both de facto "enemies." I was not then in the Infantry, and I did not have to kill anyone per se. But I WAS equally responsible for the war, as every American was, including the hawks, and the doves, and the sheep. And I would have killed if I had to.

Nevertheless, most Vietnam GIs and the Anti-War protestors back home had something in common. The front-line troops hated the war, and they hated the "safer" combat support personnel. The combat support personnel hated the war, and they hated the organizational general staff. The staff personnel hated the war, and they hated the troops in Europe, and the troops back home. The troops back home hated the war, and they hated the placid, non-caring American civilians. The American civilians supported the war—at that time—and they hated the anti-war protestors. And the anti-war protestors hated the war, and they hated the government. Therefore, the protestors and soldiers alike had one important thing in common. We both hated the war.

This over-all feeling, perhaps, can only be described by a related story:

As the American troop withdrawals in Vietnam began, an armored outfit—the 2/1 Cav.—pulled into Cam Ranh for its long-awaited departure home. For over four years, the 2/1 Cav. had

performed a combat and a combat support role in and around Phan Rang and Phan Thiet. They had eaten dust and mud, been shot at, mortared, and booby-trapped throughout their tour. And now they were going home.

To honor these brave and gallant men, General D----- of the Cam Ranh Support Command decided to give them a fitting welcome home, amid banners, bands, and flags. General D----- himself was on the reviewing stand.

And as the overly-tired men of the 2/1 Cav. rumbled by in their tanks and armored personnel carriers, the General proudly saluted them.

The first man in the lead tank, not knowing it was a General saluting him—or just not caring—returned the General's snappy salute in the only way possible. He gave him the finger.

JUNE 6, 1970: COMING HOME

Coming home, we had to go through American customs—sort of like weary tourists, back from a year-long overseas jaunt to the enchanted East.

Did we have anything to declare? Not much. Most of our prized PX possessions were shipped home beforehand, some having been ripped off by certain civilian stevedores along the Coast.

Anyhow, one young trooper was getting the royal once-over from a middle-aged customs official, who took great pains to search through everything in the soldier's toilet kit. When he came to a small, brass pipe, he reamed it out with his little finger, and then sniffed the bowl. And this was too much for the young soldier.

"What are you trying to do, lifer? Get me arrested for smoking pot, right this moment, while I'm being welcomed back home as a hero—for doing legal, patriotic, and righteous things like burning huts and killing people?"

* *

JUNE 7, 1970: FORT LEWIS, WASHINGTON

A big, monster idiot tube welcomed us back to the world. A third-rate TV comedy in the sweaty lounge, with grotesque, absurd commercials screaming and clawing at their dazed viewers with a never-ending buy-me fervor.

"I'm sorry," I said, as I turned the monster off. "I'm just not ready for all this yet."

"I know what you mean," another voice said. "Spending a whole year overseas, fighting to defend all this crap."

"IF THEY'RE LUCKY, THEY'LL OPEN UP"

"One of the most crucial let-downs in the Vietnam war was failure of those to whom American troops' emotional and spiritual guidance was entrusted, according to a Yale psychiatrist. After interviewing some 400 returned veterans, the majority of whom saw combat, Dr. Robert Lifton, who holds the Foundations' Fund for Research in Psychiatry professorship at Yale University, declares:

> "The veterans were trying to say that the only thing worse than being ordered by military authorities to participate in absurd evil is to have that evil rationalized and justified by guardians of the spirit. Chaplains and psychiatrists thus fulfilled the function of helping men adjust to committing war acts, while lending their spiritual authority to the overall project..."

Some three million Americans served in Vietnam, and while many civilians agree that this war's veterans differ from those of other modern American conflicts, Dr. Lifton finds nothing strange in their behavior. A veteran of another conflict, he notes, "always came to some terms with his war," and usually came to believe "that his war had purpose and significance beyond the immediate horrors he witnessed."

But the "central fact" of the Vietnam war, he says, was that so few participants believed in it, while so many could see with their own eyes that the tactics and weapons used against civilians, as well as a uniformed enemy, had nothing to do with preserving democracy in that country.

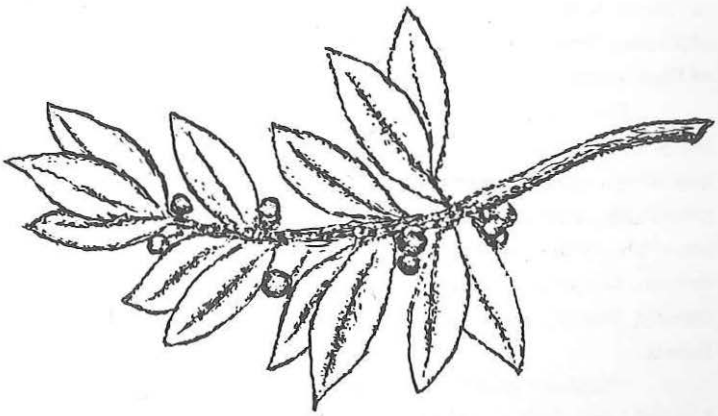
He leaves it to a Veteran's Administration psychiatrist to define this war with the "deadpan professional observation" that "Vietnam combat veterans tend to see their experience as an exercise in survival, rather than a defense of national values."

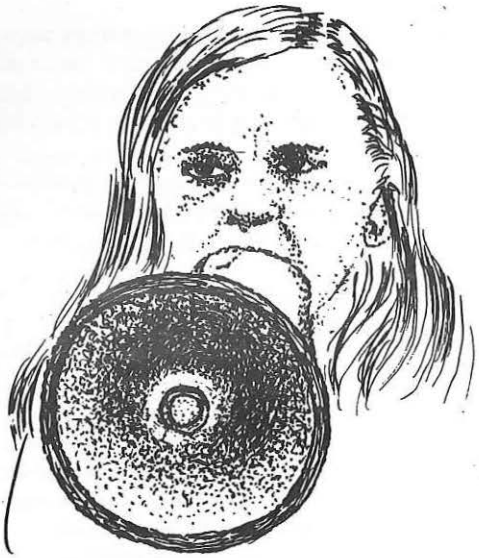
World War II had its psychiatric problems, Dr. Lifton admits. But the ordinary soldier, he says, at least could rationalize that his "collusion in killing and dying was in the service of combatting a force that promised killing and dying on an infinitely larger and more grotesque scale" had they emerged the winners.

The psychiatrist doesn't know what ultimate emotional price many Vietnam vets will pay. But he quotes one anti-war veteran as having told him that he constantly hears people say, "We know Vietnam veterans and they don't feel the way you do."

Confiding his reaction to Dr. Lifton, this veteran said: "Wait and see. If they're lucky, they'll open up."

—News Item
June 24,1973





MAY 5, 1971: A MARCH IN SAN FRANCISCO

There was a huge anti-war protest march in San Francisco this week. Over 700,000 people walked down Geary Street and in memory of some friends, we found ourselves in front of a contingent of oldtimers from the Lincoln Brigade, and directly behind a large group of Businessmen Against the War.

There were students and Veterans, housewives with baby prams, burly stevedores and electricians, grandmothers and grandchildren, policemen and hippies, minorities and majorities—all Americans, peacefully asserting their constitutional right of free speech and assembly. After the speeches in Golden Gate Park, one badly crippled veteran in a wheelchair had just enough strength to hurl some hard-won combat medals into the field—a Bronze Star Medal and two Purple Hearts.

"Nobody cared when they sent us over there," he said, "and nobody cares about us now."

MY OLD IDOL

Old Idol, I remember when you rode pell mell
Through dusty hills
in search of western justice.

Always in that wide, familiar stetson
And always on a snow white horse—
never, ever a grey one.

And you fought with your fists
When the Bad Guys like Lefty, and Lucky and
Sitting Bull used dirty tricks and foul play,
but not you.

And when firing those pearl handled revolvers
You always aimed for the wrist or shoulder
And rode into the sunset without the girl—
We never thought at the time
how naive you really were.

I saw you only yesterday
on Armed Forces television...
Your stomach lay over the saddle horn
like a fat cat dreaming of sparrows.
And everyone was pleased to see you again.
And it was sad.

APRIL 2, 1975: REFLECTIONS

It was still going on, this never-ending war, five years after I left it.

But now all the places I'd ever been, and all the nameless villages, jungles, and hills soaked in blood were now in communist hands... Ban Me Thout, Da Nang, Qui Nhon, Nha Trang, Cam Ranh Bay, Da Lat, Phan Thiet... and thousands of panic-stricken refugees were now fleeing toward Saigon, which itself was crumbling.

The horrors of the enemy were now muted by stories of government Marines raping, robbing, and shooting their own civilians in a final, bloody and hedonistic Armageddon.

And what had it all meant? Were all these years, the countless lives, and fearful slaughter only a futile and senseless waste?

I have a sick and empty feeling today that what died in Vietnam is far greater than most of us realize.

*
* * *
*

APRIL 29, 1975

It's over now, America.
The war's over for all of us.
But the scars will never heal just right–
Maybe over time.
Maybe never.

We've both learned
A horrible, painful lesson–
And we've begun to ask questions.

And we can never turn back,
Ever again.

ANOTHER TIME, ANOTHER PLACE

This morning, January 21st, another picture of war was the worst I have ever seen. It is just east of where the engineers have established a ferry service across the Giagliano River—at a point where the river first bends in toward the road.

Until they were buried, there lay what was left of eight or ten British soldiers. Perhaps one of their mortars was hit, as some were burned, and there had been a heavy explosion—but no shell crater was to be seen nearby.

Of two men, only the lower halves remained. Another two were each lacking a head, and another had a leg off at the hip. All had been horribly injured.

A Christmas card lay on the ground, bearing the words in a child's handwriting—"To the best Daddy in the world."

—Captain George Nash
Royal Artillery
Italy, 1944

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Nash Swisher was born in Oxford, England in 1944. He spent his childhood years in Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin and his high school years in Louisville, Kentucky.

Mr. Swisher received his BA degree in American history from Amherst College in 1966, and his MA degree from Stanford University in 1967. In 1973, he completed his JD degree at the University of California, Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco.

After induction, he took his army basic training at Fort Dix, New Jersey and he was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant from the Engineer Officer Candidate School at Fort Belvoir, Virginia in 1968. He spent a year at Fort Eustis, Virginia before his tour of duty in Vietnam.

Mr. Swisher served as a 1st Lieutenant in Vietnam from 1969-1970. He was primarily stationed at Cam Ranh Bay, but his duty assignments took him in and around Qui Nhon, Ban Me Thout, and Pleiku in Northern II Corps, Phan Rang and Phan Thiet in Southern II Corps, Da Lat and Saigon. He was awarded the Vietnam campaign ribbons and the Bronze Star Medal.