

Ribbons

By
Bruce C. Dunzweiler

*"A soldier will fight long and hard for a piece of colored ribbon."
--Napoleon Bonaparte*

In spring of 2009, I attended continuing education courses in Baltimore, Maryland. Ed Peters and Rick Nardo lived nearby. Ed was in Philly, and Rick in Newark, Delaware.

We met subsequent to our serving in Vietnam together. This was our third reunion. Our first time together was at Ed and Janice's home near Philly about 1976, five years after we had been in Vietnam together. Rick came over from his home in Elkton, Maryland for the day. Pat and Ed's wife Janice heard some stories from our time together, and witnessed three guys reminiscing, three very good friends, brothers.

Rick and Ed were a couple weeks ahead of me while training for our Army jobs, Advanced Individual Training "A.I.T.," at Aberdeen Proving Grounds, Maryland. Rick and Ed seemed to make an easy match for friendship. My other buddy, Dale, and I were in a specialized fast track program as the Army had a great need for armament mechanics for attack helicopters, their most advanced and meanest killing machine, the Cobra.

Rick was our barber when we first met in A.I.T. Rick kept our hair a little longer than the post barber and cut most of the guys' hair who were in the same training program. Unless requested otherwise, Rick blocked our hair line on the back of our necks as an act of defiance to the Army which demanded a taper cut. Rick was more than a barber, he was a stylist. He would badger us and call us "conformist chickens," etc. if we wanted a straight military cut.

We all got in a little trouble for our haircuts, but nothing major. Rick's haircuts marked us as targets for the sergeants, and we were Rick's Rebels, *Rebels Without A Clue*. Rick never charged us much except for our attention as we discussed something tangential. He was often our portal to thinking outside the military, since he usually controlled the conversation with clippers and scissors in hand.

Out of all of the guys in the 334th Attack Helicopter Co. in Vietnam, Ed, Rick, Dale and I were the only four who knew each other before Vietnam, but only from A.I.T. Most of the guys had not known anyone in the company before being assigned to the 334th.

Now thirty-five years had passed since we had been with one another. This time, it was just us. Ed and Rick were now divorced. Pat did not come with me this time, as I had to attend classes for two days. I looked forward to having time together with just the guys. Brothers from other mothers.

Ed and I made arrangements to meet. I had travelled by rail from Philly where he picked me up at a railroad station at the end of the line toward Rick's place. We were about 20 minutes

from Newark where Rick lived in an apartment, memories of Vietnam served as roommates. We finally met up with Rick about an hour after arriving in Newark. Wow....finally together again, buddies or what?.....Buddies! Always Buddies!

As close friends and family know, it does not take long to rekindle friendship. Yes, we traded Christmas cards and an occasional phone call in the interim, but it had been a long time, too long since we had been in the same room together. Although our physical features changed over time, personalities had matured, but our demeanors remained the same. Mannerisms, speech, gestures, and body language continued as they were, just a little slower. We became very close while in the Army. Much of our tour we were together 24 – 7. Missing were Dale Farwell and Gary Hobson. Looking back, the five of us clicked well. We were compatible and became good friends, friends with a common bond: friends for life.

Ed had not been with Janice for a long time. They married within a week after he returned. He had been faithful to her while in Vietnam. Their marriage gave them two grown sons. Ed's marriage was a whirl for him but did not endure as he grasped to readjust. Coming home was difficult enough, but having a wedding within a week was not in Ed or Janice's best interest.

By the time we reunited again. Ed has been in a relationship and living with Joan for the last several years. Joan recently retired and had a home in Philly and one near the shore. When we were in Vietnam, we heard many stories from Ed about trips to the New Jersey shore.

Ed was a computer programmer, but when the old Univac computer died at his employer, Philadelphia's infamous Tastecake, so did his job. Ed still works with computers but had not found employment and pay commensurate for his talents. "Who wants a 60 something computer programmer today?" he asked wryly. He still ran and participated in 10K's and had qualified to run the Boston Marathon several times.

Rick's life paralleled Ed's in many ways.

Rick had married several times, but was now on his own, seemingly content with an occasional date. He has two grown daughters from his first marriage.

His family had had a barber shop before he was in the service., so after returning home Rick continued cutting hair. Over the last year or so, he turned his shop over to a relative. Lately he was cutting and styling for another shop. As the recession deepened, fewer customers spent as much on their hair care. Business was down. Rick saw younger women in the shop who were struggling to support families. Like a good soldier, he took a voluntary layoff.

His layoff gave him time to devote to his passions: music and art. His apartment held many of his paintings and sculptures. Leaded glass and artwork adorned walls and windows, pleasantly changing the hue of any available sun rays. Rick's apartment was not a man cave, but an artist's gallery. It was all Rick. Ed and I could tell Rick had thought about each piece of furniture, wall adornment, and the many items on display, down to the roach clip and ash tray with ash of mood soothing weed.

The businessman in me asked Rick if it was difficult for him to make it without working. Four divorces could not leave him a good nest egg. Rick then shared with us he had leuke-

mia, a type directly related to Agent Orange. He indicated it was under control, but he had to make sure he was current on his meds and had to keep his appointments at the VA for health-care. He seemed focused on maintaining his health. Consequences of his blood test numbers getting out of whack caused too much time in the hospital and more doctor visits. Rick now had total disability through the VA.

In Vietnam, he worked on playing the guitar. He was good then, but now he was polished on many stringed instruments. On our first evening together, Rick had a gig nearby. Ed and I were anxious to see him perform: he played guitar and other stringed instruments and sings. He and a friend sang and played the night away while we listened. We could tell Rick was in his element. It was great to see him getting into his “music” and harmonizing. Ed and I left after a couple hours to hit the road to Philly for the night.

We made plans for Rick to meet us again in the morning at Ed’s in Philly. Ed and I had asked Rick to bring his clippers. In anticipation of our reunion, Ed had not had a haircut for three months. I only had side hair and a few top nubs to offer. Rick did not disappoint us as he unpacked his clippers and scissors. With a practiced “frrrap,” he unfurled his barber’s apron with a crack. Like a matador, he slightly bowed his head as he looked his first prey straight in the eye with his apron open, gesturing and ready for a move to the waiting chair. Ed and I had missed our barber who cut, entertained, and counseled.

While in Vietnam, cutting hair gave Rick motivation to talk and discuss anything that came from the obscure recesses of his mind and imagination, or ours. Rick forced us to think and dream outside our common plight; cutting hair to him was an opportunity for a captive audience rarely experienced in uniform. Once you were in his barber chair, the performance began. To start, he always had a joke or two for the day, mostly bullshit, but bullshit with flair. Topics could vary from philosophy, the vastness of the universe, to women. Many times when he cut our hair in the service he would start asking personal stuff. “What do you really think?” Rick wanted to get into your head, and he shared what was in his head. Sometimes it was like “Point-Counterpoint.” Rick challenged his customers to think, to express themselves. Army talk never came up. In his way Rick helped us keep our head on straight and our hearts open. His heart was hardened by having to be in the military, but he knew there were so many other good things to experience other than Vietnam. He enjoyed talking to other guys who could see beyond our time in Vietnam, and he wanted to know of our plans when we made it back. Rick was our Robin Williams. You could never tell where the conversation would go, how it would end, but unless he was on a rant, you were assured of some laughs and many divergent issues to think about. I always looked forward to episodes involving Rick wearing his barber’s apron and wielding black barber tools.

Ed was Rick’s sidekick, like Ed McMahon to Johnny Carson. Ed always laughed at Nardo’s jokes and mannerisms and seemed to know when to restrain Rick when he was starting to get too worked up on an issue, such as Vietnam. The two seemed inseparable in A.I.T. and Vietnam. They always had something to talk about.

Ed was not only Rick’s sounding board of reason, but ours as well. Ed could project calm in close, tense times. He usually displayed a smile and friendly demeanor for everyone. He would help anyone if he could. I was comforted to be with Ed and his soothing personality once again. Who could not like Ed?

While in Philly we spent most of the day talking. Ed also took us sightseeing to the tourist traps of the City. He was a great tour guide, giving us a view of historic buildings including the building housing the Constitution. I requested a stop for an authentic Philly cheese steak in Little Italy. I had seen too many TV shows of the infamous, mouthwatering, arterial closing cheese steaks not to pass this chance.

Near the Philly cheesecake restaurants, Ed showed us many murals on nearby buildings with famous people from the neighborhood. Their features were painted on exposed sides of buildings with commonality of fame, Italian heritage and backing from a “family.”

We returned from Vietnam changed.

In the summer of 1971, after we were discharged, we had to wear our uniforms in order to have military stand-by status from the airlines. It was last time we had to wear our uniforms. After being gone so long, we eagerly anticipated returning to our homes: a place to shower and wipe clean the smell of the Vietnam and the military. Invariably, our conversations turned to our homecomings.

Nardo shared about getting off his flight and running to the rest room to tear off his uniform. He stripped down to his underwear, with surprised faces watching as he threw each piece of uniform, socks and shoes into the trash can. He could not change quickly enough into civvies. While leaving the airport and getting into a cab, he realized his wallet had been in his uniform. In the wallet was also more than \$2,000, all of his savings from Vietnam as well as his separation pay. Rick frantically ran back to the restroom and to the waste basket to find a bum going through the trash. The bum had his pants in his hands and was starting to go through the pockets. Rick pushed the bum aside and told him he could have anything else he wanted from the uniform after Rick found his wallet with all of the money.

Ed also shared the fact that he threw his uniform, ribbons and medals away after being home for a while. We all had the same two rows of ribbons, as well as the three unit citations from our unit. I still don't know what the citations were or what they meant, but they were part of the package. Dale and I also earned our flight wings for being on flight status. Apparently Ed had been thinking about his experience, went to the closet at his parents' home, and threw out the uniform, ribbons and medals intact. Our experiences in Vietnam, and especially the scorn we received after returning, sickened all three of us. We cherished circumstances that brought us together as friends, but despised the cause. (THIS IS A GREAT LINE)

I was most proud of my weapons qualification medal, Expert; the medal I worked to show Dad I could shoot like he did while he was in the service. Dad taught me how to shoot. I wore the Expert Weapons Qualification with pride when I showed Dad after basic. I had also been proud to have earned rank of E-5, Specialist 5 in only thirteen months. All of us in the armament section earned a meritorious service ribbon for working unsupervised. We did not have the Officer or NCO positions filled for much of our tour, but were still able to keep our pilots ready with dependable, lethal weapons. We had all worked hard and were well decorated for slightly less than two years in the service.

Several months after I returned, I remember being in my room while my mom searched for some of her stuff stored in my closet. Mom saw my uniform hanging and commented I

should cover my uniform to preserve it. Welling up in me was a feeling of disgust and anger. At one time I was proud to wear my uniform. I remember telling, maybe yelling, at Mom, “I am not proud of the uniform, I despise everything the uniform represents as well as my service.” I had more than enough of the military, and I certainly did not want anything to remind me of the endless memories I could not shut off since returning.

Mom shuffled down the hall, disappointed her son could think and say such un-American things. She did not understand. This was not the son she and Dad had raised. These were not the words or sentiments Dad had upon his return from the Navy. Dad still had his medals and some mementos from his three years in the Pacific. No one in our family said negative things about service to the United States.

While mom made her exit, I opened the closet—a gateway to Vietnam—and held my uniform. Feeling disheartened, I took everything off, ribbon by ribbon, that was not tightly sewn on the uniform and threw it in the trash can. Taking each ribbon and medal off was like touching something hot and poisonous. I then hung the uniform back up in my closet so she would not see what I had done. I remember being so angry, violated and hateful, not knowing why, but also less feeling so empty and alone.

So.....after nearly 40 years Ed, Rick and I compared notes. All three of us had thrown our ribbons and medals away. None of us questioned why. We looked at each other, sighed as we nodded, understanding our actions without saying another word.

Postscript – Mom emptied the trash and discovered my ribbons and medals. She retrieved them and gave them back years later. I have since put all of the medals and ribbons back on my uniform. Time has passed. The nation has changed its perception and treatment of Vietnam Veterans. I am again proud to have earned my ribbons and medals.

Thanks Mom



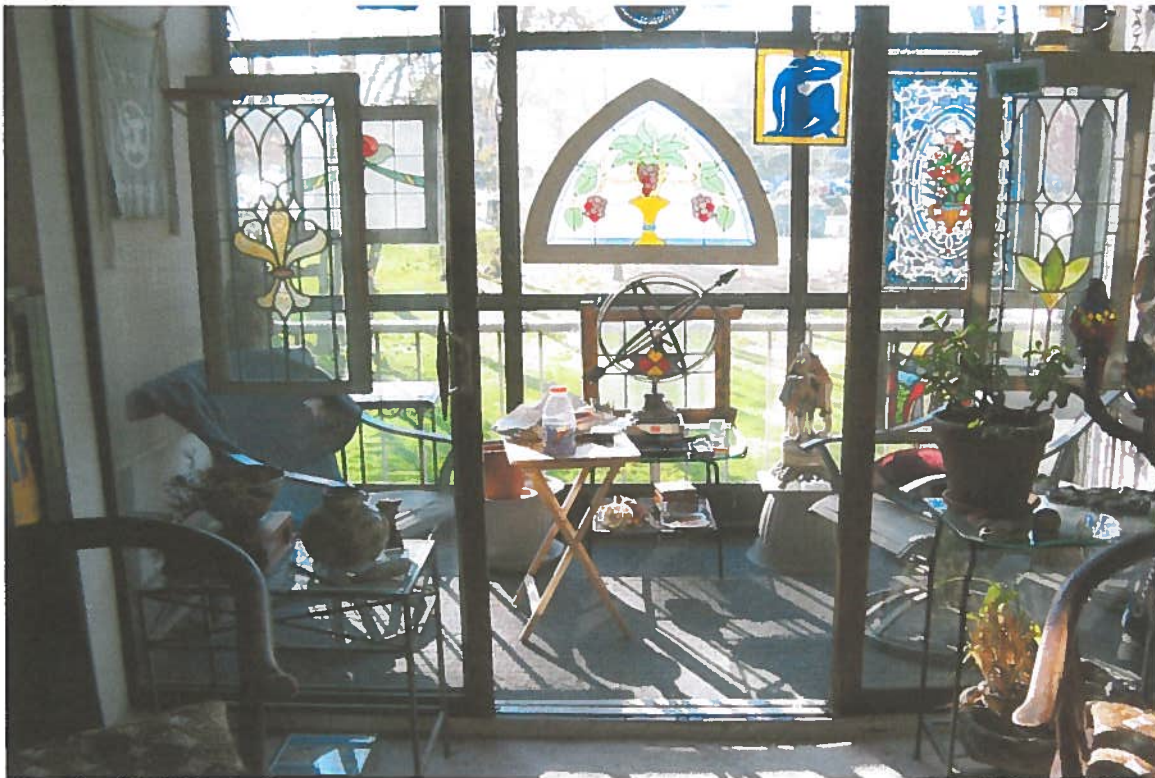
Ed Peters, Bruce, Rick Nardo at Pat's across from competitor Geno's Philly Cheesesteaks



Rick Nardo at bass



Rick's Apartment



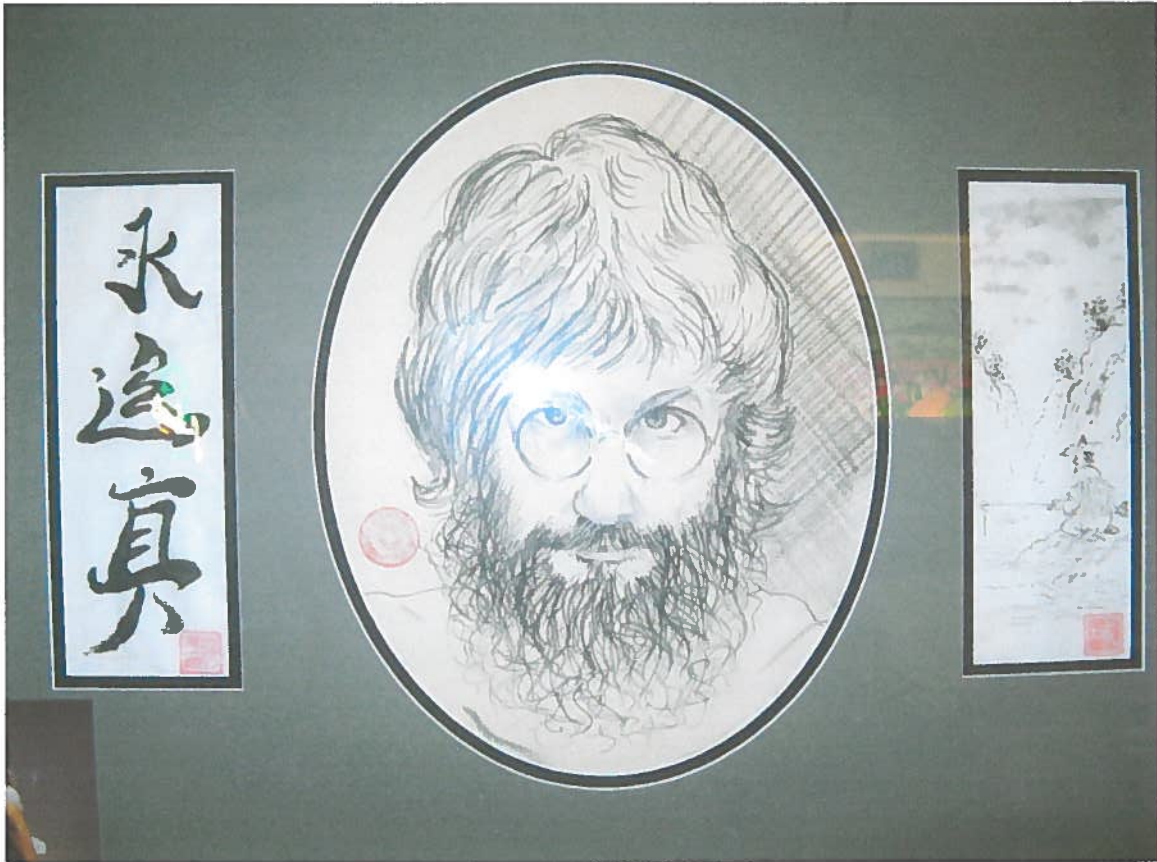
Rick's stained glass



The master at work



Haircuts with philosophy and sage advice



Self portrait

Dump

Not long after I was in-country, I was asked to help one of the short timers, Lee Davies, haul the trash from our armament shop to the dump off our base. In preparation we had to make every effort to destroy anything that could be used as weapons against us. My work was in armament. Some of our trash included parts from mini-guns, grenade launchers, rocket pods, and a host of other weapons meant to maim and kill.

Lee was skinny, about 5'5". His black hair was slicked back just right with his ever ready comb and he always had his shades and hat on. He was bossy; sassy. His fatigues seemed worn, but clean, with perfectly rolled sleeves as preferred proper dress, and he seemed to know everything, just ask him. Nah, no one had to ask Lee anything as he was already telling you what you needed to know. He was always heard before he was seen. He had an alligator mouth with a canary ass.

Smoking cigarettes like a fiend, he was a real tough guy. A cigarette usually was always protruding from his lips. He would light up with flare. His motion was practiced and scripted to catch someone's attention as he hit the pack for a cigarette to pop up, to be easily latched by his lips below his narrow, meticulous, dark, Clark Gable mustache. A flick of the wrist and thumb produced a flame from an ever-ready Bic lighter. His first puff was a quick inhale as he raised his chin slightly to the side for a quick exhale. He tried to augment cigarette smoke on his person with a heavy dose of after shave. Lacking in stature and mass he tried to project a larger than life image.

I had been asked to help because I had driven dump trucks from construction jobs, had worked fire trucks as a volunteer fireman, and had a chauffer's license before entering the Army. Lee and I were one of the few who had a military license to drive the larger trucks. No doubt when he was behind the wheel. The deuce and a half was a powerful, but lumbering, stiff riding truck. Lee could be seen with his head barely clearing the top of the steering wheel with a cigarette guiding his way. The engine often revved faster than necessary as he double clutched between every shift to show his command of the non-synchronized transmission, careful not to scrape between shifts. Little doubt as to who was behind the wheel by his touch on the pedal and clutch.

The runt thought he would take this "newby" to the dump to teach me a lesson and show me how to drive and dump trash. We were supposed to travel with a minimum of two anywhere we went off base. Of course, I wanted to go just for an excuse to get off base. It was probably one of my first times off base unprotected. So, it was just me and the Lee for some quality time off base. I had to listen all about his in-country knowledge as we travelled to the dump.

In the distance I could see what seemed to be a dark cloud over a mound along the otherwise flat landscape. Lee told me it was garbage, a huge mound of garbage. As we approached, I noticed some hootches along the narrow lane near the dump. I could smell the dump. A mix of 100 degree heat, high humidity, and trash not immediately covered with dirt is a recipe for odors, infestation, disease, filth, and clutter. I noticed more flies in the air than usual. Hootches near the dump were made of discarded trash. We travelled by a hootch with a multi-colored metal roof. Some poor soul had cut and flattened beer cans and used them as a metal shake roof and siding. The whole roof was made of beer cans. I had never thought of a beer can roof, but it was probably better than no roof at all.

As we approached the dump, the stench seemed to thicken, so thick I could not only smell it, but taste it. What had appeared as a black cloud was actually a swarm of flies. Flies, so many flies, it

looked and sounded like a whirring swarm of bees. Rats scurried among the open and rotting trash. Some open hootches were used mainly for shade, but in one or two appeared to be a family. It was so hot that day, as it was almost every day. We were sweating like pigs. How could anyone stand the flies, the heat, the stench?

Another hootch we passed looked as if it was a dump day care full of toddlers and possibly some infants. How could they exist among the filth, the germs, the flies, and the rats? Now in the dump some other Army trucks as well as some local trucks were unloading trash and garbage. As we neared the unloading area, people of the dump surfaced and came to the truck. It was like we were in an old news clip shown before a movie when I was a kid. We were the liberators from WWII, parading down the streets of a newly freed town in Europe, a victory parade. Kids and people tried to guide our truck to the best spot for unloading. I couldn't fathom why a trash truck was such a big deal, especially in these surroundings.

We backed the truck in to unload in an area where dry trash was to be discarded. The little guy was backing the deuce and half and was yelling "Damned fucking gooks, stay the fuck off my fucking truck." He also yelled at the top of his lungs for the "little fucking dinks to stay the hell away." He swore and cussed in English and used so many Vietnamese expletives that he must have taken his whole time in country to learn how to cuss that well. A swarm of people gathered around the truck anyway. Pathetic people came from over hills of garbage, from beneath their shelters. Their clothes were dirty, torn, tattered, matted to their bodies. They stank, their hands and arms were filthy. These people did not have smiles on their faces. They were thin, they were sick, and they were gathering to fight for any salvageable scrap of useable, recyclable or salvageable material from our trash. Some were old and could barely walk. Some were so young they could barely walk, but they were all there trying to be first to get the best stuff we had to throw away.

It was like some of the nature movies with lions fighting over fresh kill. The strongest survive. People were fighting and cursing and yelling over who would get what. All the time the little shit was yelling and cussing. Jesturing and cussing Lee was larger than any of the Vietnamese and was making the younger stronger ones step back. He would not let the bullies grab some of the treasures, bags of pop cans, other pieces of metal that could be collected and traded for cash. He purposely threw some things to the old Pappa and Mamma Sans to the rear, to the little kids to the rear. Much of what we threw away was of little use to anyone, I thought, but well over half of our trash was recycled by these people at the dump. The people quickly dispersed when we had no more stuff to unload. They resumed combing through the wet rotting mounds, or waited to swarm the next Army truck.

Next to us, the good wet garbage area, I watched as a truck unloaded food/garbage. The swarm of flies was biblical in intensity. Sunlight was nearly obscured. People thrust their arms up to their armpits into the scraps and slurry thrown away from a mess hall. Some were eating stuff right from the pile as it was being unloaded. They would gather and run off with other scraps to take to their families before the food spoiled any more. I was repulsed, but my heart sank as the reality of the actions sank in.

As we left, I watched as the people left behind, their faces long and desperate. We again passed the hootches, where those who were too young or too old would stay out of the sun and had a roof to ward off rain, but were unprotected from flies, fleas, rats, disease, and absolute poverty. How could the children survive? As we passed the day care, I noticed that there were many kids, but

only a few mothers looking after them. Those children and babies seemed very well behaved, they did not seem to be yelling or crying much. They did not seem to be actively crawling, walking or playing. I now realize they must have been too weak, too sick, and too malnourished to cry or move. These children were dying a premature death and I didn't realize it till years later.

After that day I had a new respect for Lee. I thought he didn't care about anything or anyone but himself and his image. Lee told me the old ones and little ones would get nothing if he didn't keep the strong ones from taking all the valuable trash. He only seemed a little soft hearted for a few seconds when he explained that to me. It was the only time he seemed to let his guard down. He had come to know by sight some of those "damned slopes" at the dump. It dawned on me why he wanted to do the dump detail. I think I went back to the dump only once after that. It was just too much to see and experience very often.



Lee Davies bossing the kids at the dump as we unload rocket shipping tubes



Shelter from heat and rain at the dump



The Dump



Treasure found at the dump



Lee Davies bossing the kids at the dump as we unload rocket shipping tubes



Shelter from heat and rain at the dump



The Dump



Treasure found at the dump



Gary Hobson

Lima Lima

When I was first picked up at Cam Ron Bay—a new soldier in an unfamiliar, and unfriendly country, trying to figure out what I had gotten myself into-- I was put into a Huey transport helicopter, “slick,” with no seat belt. The side doors were not shut, but much to my surprise, we took off anyway. I soon learned that the doors have to be open for the door gunners to fire their weapons, positioned at each side and near the rear of the ship. Besides, it was hotter than hell and there was no air-conditioning in back. So there I was, hugging the middle of this ship as we gained altitude. When the doors are open you feel as if you are floating above the earth with nothing between you and the ground below, except the floor of the chopper. What was I going to say? I was a FNG. I didn't want to show I was scared, but what a view! What a thrill! Up high with the doors open going full-out was like going down an interstate 120 miles an hour with the windows down, and all the doors open. Going at that speed, the noise and the wind and the open, unimpeded view was like floating in the clouds, but with a lot of wind and noise. You can get a real rush when hitting a wind pocket, causing a sudden bump or dive. It was like being on a roller coaster at an amusement park, but without the safety devices. The door gunners were fastened in with a tether or two, in case they were hit. This kept them from sliding off the side into a free fall. There may have been seat belts, but seat belts weren't even required in cars at that time. Safety was not a big thing; besides, we were at war and there was a lot more being risked every day.

Out of curiosity, I asked one of the crew if he was scared about falling out. He explained that the wind was so strong at the sides of the aircraft that it was nearly impossible to fall out at full speed. You had to be going at slow speeds to fall out or be thrown out. Both happened. We lost some of our own falling out, but the captured Viet Cong lost even more. I heard, but never witnessed, GIs being pissed at having some prisoners after a fight. If you had several Viet Cong they would be interrogated by the ARVN. The ARVN were permitted to exert more force than we were during interrogation, including torture. If the grunts were having a particularly bad day and had enough prisoners, then they just might lose one at 500 feet or better. If the prisoner was not cooperating by giving information, they usually began to talk after seeing one of their buddies thrown out at 500'. There are newsreels of this, and it probably happened more than reported.

A real thrill was to tether yourself in the door gunner's seat and then lean out from the door gunner ports, or from the sides. The wind was so strong that it was a struggle to lean out. The wind just pushed you back in. It's the same as going down the road real fast and sticking your head or hand out the window, only faster. The thrill of being at the edge of the ship, just leaning out and being pushed back was a real rush. You were way up and had only the sky and the earth below to look at. Wow!

On another flight, I heard one of the crew ask one of the crazier pilots if we could Lima Lima. I had no idea what he was talking about. When the pilot and co-pilot agreed, they all started yelling. We soon escalated and did a wing-over. A wing-over is a steep vertical climb until the ship cannot go much farther vertically, then after achieving as close to vertical as possible, take a steep dive. Down, down, down, falling as fast as we could under full power, headed straight for the rice paddies. At the last instant the pilot pulled out of the dive. We were going full out, maybe 10 feet above the paddies. We would hit pockets of air going over the water, giving a little bounce to the ride, without much clearance below, making the dinks farming the paddies dive for cover. What a ride! I was scared stiff with everyone yelling at the top of their lungs. Although we did not do it that day, the top thrill was to fly low enough to graze the skids on the top of the rice paddy dikes as you flew over them. Lima Lima, I found out meant low level. The pilots were

thrill seekers and risked their lives every day. Lima Lima was just a way of taking the uncle's car out for a joy ride.



Flooded rice paddies from the air – as far as you can see

Woods

Across the crest of the hill was the remnant of a pasture from a farm outside my hometown in the foothills of the Appalachians. It had been some time since the cattle had roamed the field. Long grass and weeds had grown in areas cleared for an orchard.

Only a few old apple trees remained on the north slope. Slowly dying from age and neglect were rows trees that once fed families for the next year.

Across the new gravel road from my house was the crest of a grassy knoll with trees lining a woodlot behind. Trees tall and mighty, which had been spared from clearing and plow, lined the wooded area. Close to the cleared area formerly used for pasture, vegetation was thick. It was a tough walk, as many sticker bushes lay in wait ready to defend the woods lined between the large trees like barbed wire. I often walked this ground, and if the stickers did not tear at my clothes and skin, then there were other smaller plants with sharp points or with barbed hooks to stab me. Some seeds with harpoons would separate from the plant to hitch a ride like a hobo hopping a train looking for a new place to depart looking for a fresh start, or a soldier running away from his past. Making it through the dense line of defense was almost too much, especially on hot days for a boy of 10. Mom was never too happy when I returned with burrs and other seeds clinging to my clothes as she sometimes made me pick them off before washing. I learned to watch for the hitch hikers, as they also were prickly and gave a good fight not to be removed.

Learning the paths of least resistance took time and persistence. Most paths were narrow, used by smaller animals like groundhogs, squirrels, chipmunks and rabbits that inhabited the woods. Little creatures close to the ground could maneuver under the dense foliage above. Finding a deer path provided better width and better protection from the aggressive plants with spears.

Once beyond the lines of sentry stickers, the underbrush thinned and walking became easier. Walking downhill was easy, but as a young boy I learned to hold my excitement and energy as weeds and thick undergrowth grabbed at my feet like suckers on tentacles of a giant squid seen on late-night Chiller Theatre. No way did I want to fall and be face to face with the undergrowth and the snakes and animals that lived out of sight. I also had to be ready not to be too startled by a scurrying ground squirrel or a fat ground hog making straight line power run like Ohio State's Jim Otis, through anything in its way and a dive to the hole.

The canopy of trees, possibly hundreds of years old, tower overhead, taking the sunlight mostly for themselves. These trees do not have to fight with the undergrowth, given life from the sunlight of the cleared field. As in many environments, the strong do survive. The inner forest is the tall trees' kingdom, and they will cause others to fight to for life giving light needed for existence.

My uncle owned the land and was developing a subdivision. There were not logging trails or evidence of chainsaws, just annihilation by something stronger than I could imagine. This low wooded gully area had been set aside for a park to be shared and enjoyed by all of those

buying lots in his subdivision. Parts of the woods had been spared, but much had been downed from a violent storm which many thought was a fleeting touch down of a tornado.

Progressing downhill, the destruction became evident. The large trees which once towered over all others were recently uprooted and downed. Other trees that had not fallen had been broken, some in half, or were missing limbs: bending and broken in defeat. The fallen kings of the forest were now relegated to the forest floor in large piles like a game of "Pick-up Sticks" for what seemed a long distance for a boy of 10. As I walked among the ruins, sunlight was again able to shine to the undergrowth and seedlings. A new generation was in a race to tower over all else. Because the powerful had fallen, the sentry stickers, pricklers and briars all had sunlight to thrive. They were already lining up to protect their fallen kings trying to outgrow the Kings' children before they would soon force them from the light of life.

I had never seen so much destruction...until ten years later in Vietnam.

We were flying back from a mission in Buh Dap, on the Cambodian border, as our pilot flew into territory I had never seen. I noticed more bomb craters than usual. From the air, bomb and artillery craters could be seen over most of Vietnam. Explosions had created small ponds as the armament did its job, exploding and sending shrapnel, Willie Peter, flachetes and/or napalm as far as it could with the intent to wipe out whatever was in its path. A thousand or two feet up, the sites looked like pock marks. Some water looked pretty green or blue, others held liquid tainted with red or orange hue.

Proceeding on course, I was informed we were headed to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, south of the Fish Hook area in Cambodia. More small bodies of water filled the horizon. As far as I could see were ponds, many so close together they formed larger bodies of water. Nearing our destination the landscape changed once again. Gone were the tall trees of the jungle. Trees were still there, just blown down, twisted gnarled and broken. The ground became visible, red dirt with dead trees and murky ponds. This area had been obviously been hit numerous times with tremendous amounts of explosives which obliterated most trees. Only a few standing, stripped of their dignity, remained with only a few broken branches bare of leaves. The area had been a killing zone purposely cleared, carpet bombed and sprayed with Agent Orange to expose any trails or hiding places. Nothing moved on the ground below, void of man, animals and vegetation, a dead zone.

Although we had rendered an area lifeless in order to close a trail, the life line for supplies to our enemy continued. There were many more of them than us. We were in their backyard. Yes, we had taken this part of the Ho Chi Minh trail from them. We had won for the day, but went home at night. Like army ants, the NVA simply moved the trail farther within Cambodia, farther from sight or detection. Supplies may have been slowed, but not stopped.

As the underbrush at the edge of the woods, the sticker bushes, grew along the wood line, protecting the under belly of the darkness of the forest behind. Like the small animals who found shelter at the edge of the woods, Charlie hid in the underbrush and burrowed into the earth. Almost nocturnal, he crawled out of his burrows at night, more familiar with his own backyard than we. Night and density of the jungle were his domain, not ours.

Seeing this destruction propelled me back to that little boy walking the Appalachians and introducing his innocence to the larger world.

Pursuit

Summer, 1987: Defiance, Ohio

Pffffump....ssshhuuu, I awake from sleep. Not opening my eyes, hyper vigilance kicking in.....I listen beyond the sounds near me. Lightly feeling presence of movement, not near me, not in the same room.....farther away. Now, instantly, fully awake, I am on full alert. Adrenaline surging, rushing, hot, *not again, not another false alarm, leave me alone, not again!* Opening my pores, craning for sound, slightly opening my eyes, not moving, searching, feeling for movement, for presence.....All senses on high alert searching, searching, searching by any sense. Softly pffump, ahhbove me, feeling slight concussions, pressure from movement, sound so slight, but noticeable by me. *How? I know. Damn it! I know!* Perceptible farther than the din of our large window unit air-conditioner. Discernible away from gentle breathing, Pat beside me. Brian, Micah and Mardee softly sleeping, curled in their sleeping bags next to our roll-out couch. Gently they sleep. My family! I can feel them, all of them, as I strain to see through the slit of the huge wood pocket doors to the light in the half bath on our first floor. *No one else in the room, but someone upstairs. Only one? Are there more?* Ever so quietly sitting up, double checking for the kids, no, I could hear them, each one of them. Another muffled footfall, above. *Someone is in our house!*

Damn it, where are my glasses, gently groping, where are they? Quietly rummaging again, *where are my glasses? 20/500 vision, I need my glasses! It is too blurry.* Three times frantically feeling, groping quietly, *I can't find my glasses!*

We are yet to be discovered. Solid wood pocket doors are in the same position, wide enough for only enough light to filter through so the kids could find their way to the bathroom, enough to see. Sounds of moving the doors will wake me. I want to be woken. Pat and I do not want the kids wandering in the house at night, it is too large and they are too small, especially Mardee. Scanning, *no one else is in the living room with us. I know.* Thank goodness the upstairs air-conditioner quit, we are all in the same room. *How would I know if we are not together?*

Tips from a TV show aired not long ago, flash before me.

If intruders are in your home:

- Do not confront them
- Do not fight them
- Make noise, lots of noise
- There may be more than one
- Make them aware you are aware of their presence
- Give them reason to flee
- Do not block their access
- Let them out
- Hope they leave
- They could be armed
- Do not confront them
- Do not give them reason to fight you
- Scare them if you can
- Make the intruders want to leave your home

I am the only one up. I gently wake Pat, whispering.

“Shhhhh, Are all the kids in the room with us?”

“Yes”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I am sure.”

“I hear someone upstairs.”

Softly...softly....*I am aware.* Not every step. He is headed toward the stairway. Quietly padding down carpeting of the front stairway; now at the bottom of the stairs. He does not try to open the other set of pocket doors between the hallway, to us in the living room. *Good move, too much noise.*

Slowly, quietly I sit up. I am where I need to be, where I want to be, between him and my family. Waiting...now in the family room. I am in position to see him first. A dimly lit silhouette comes through the doorway from the family room to the dining room. Louder than I have ever yelled, I shout,

“Get Ouuut!”

“Get Out of My House!”

“Who are you?”

He jumps! I scare him. He is confused. He cannot tell who is hiding in shadows. Which way to go? The house is so large. He is lost. He stumbles, running in the direction to the front door, with me yelling, keeping distance one room away. Far enough away, not seen, but definitely heard as I continue to scream.

“Get Ouuut!”

“Leave!”

“Get Ouuut!”

Clumsily he fumbles to unlock the front door. He jerks the door knob. He uses his shoulder to bump the door, break the door to get out. No way, the house is too well built with solid doors, heavy leaded glass. No way, unlock the door or face the voice booming in the dark behind. Finally he opens the door, only to be in the air lock facing a larger solid exterior door. He had not come in this way, and does not choose to come back toward me as I yell, scream at him from the dark, blocked by me, my territory. Giving him time as he desperately claws to open the last door. Finally he opens the door and bangs against the storm door to leave as quickly as he can.

As he passes through the storm door. I move to the interior door of the air lock. He is young, muscular running to the front steps....barefoot, clad only in his plaid boxers.

What?

Boxers?

Only his boxers?

In slow motion, I watch him leap down the steps. Even I can see he is not armed. I am not going to live in fear in my own house. I was not going to wonder who broke into our house, our home and let them leave. Just leave. I choose not to fear the shadows of the night; not me, not my family. Adrenaline gushes as rage takes over fright and common sense.

I run after him, as fast as I can yelling at the top of my lungs “Help, Help, Call the Police.” I am one house behind him when he passes the second house and cuts left between Steve’s

Marathon station and the Linebrink's house. As I turn left, I hit a concrete block used to keep the Linebrink's down spout in place. Did not see it, hit it square, *broke a toe, dig, dig, dig. No time to stop and limp. No time for pain. Trail him! Wake the neighborhood!*

He gains some ground and suddenly takes another left at the end of Linebrink's house, trying to cut between the house and garage...back towards my house. Too bad for him because 25 feet farther the owner had added to the house, enclosing the space between the house and garage. He is trapped as I round the corner. Three walls block his plan to circle back to my home. The only way out is through me. I see the look in his eyes as he turns to face me.

He has about 25 feet to make a move to run by me. I had made many open field tackles in football and rugby and am able to get a good piece of him and drive him back to the house as we hit vinyl siding with a solid thud. The Linebrinks have to be awake. I continue to yell. We separate, and he wants to fight. He started this, so I take the first swing, connecting to his face, stunning him. He lurches forward, low on me as we fall to the ground with me on top. I turn, beating him in the face and neck. He turns over as I continue yelling, beating him in the neck and head. I can really hurt him, maybe paralyze him, but this is not a matter of life and death. No longer am I in a war zone. I can jeopardize my freedom and my family's future. I only want to detain him. He is no longer in my house.

Don't go too far! But let him know he violated my family, our home, my space.

He turns over, face up, his arm jutting up, fingers extended as he reaches my face not to hit, but his finger claws into my eye socket. I feel his finger scratching my eyeball. I back off to get his finger out of my eye. I maneuver for control again. His finger again finds its mark to my other eye socket. Again, I back off, but lurch back on him. He reverses me. I am on the bottom. He does not try to hit me, but uses both hands and fingers trying to probe into the depths of my eyes. He scratches my face, my eyes, as I guard and fight back. *He is trying to take out my eyes!* He rises from me while I clutch his arms and he uses his weight to penetrate into my eyes.

He looks, turns, looks, raises from me and runs to the alley. I get up, barely able to see, but able to yell. Damn my foot hurts. I cannot run, only limpingly jog, as I follow him to East Second Street. I stop at the street, exhausted and barely able to see. My eyes itch, and pain sears from my foot. I want to chase him. As he crosses East Second barefoot, only in his boxers, a Sheriff's car spots him and appears to follow as he cuts the corner and heads to Washington Street.

Irony sets in. Me, early middle aged guy only in my whitey tighties, yelling and gesturing madly to the Sheriff's Deputy to follow the guy running clothed only in his boxers.

I stand for a moment feeling hurt and defeated. *I let him get away. Please....please catch him.*

Slowly, I turn. I can feel every pointed edge of crushed limestone in the alley poking my tender feet. I never did well in my bare feet. Each step hurts as adrenaline recedes, exposing me to my injuries and pain; eyes still burning. Hobbling past the area where moments ago we fought, I think about waiting till someone comes for me. Everyone within earshot hopefully called the police. No, I do not want Pat to worry if I do not return now.

I pass the concrete block used to hold the Linebrink's downspout, it was about 6 inches from the bare spot where it had been minutes ago and think of my hurting toe and foot. As I turn the corner, approaching my house, I can see the front of my house. A police car with lights flashing is out front. I hear Pat scream, "there he is." Several neighbors, one policeman, and my family are out front.

I try to walk straighter, but I am coming home without an intruder in hand. Like an empty-handed hunter approaching home while his hungry family watches, knowing, but saying nothing.

So much had flashed before me during the brief encounter. I am exhausted, scared; so many questions. What happened? Pat fields questions, more than me, I think. I do not feel well. I feel something strange, not now, as I sway away from everyone to puke my guts in bushes along the front porch before them. Humiliating! Pat holds me as I arch my back between heavens. No one says a thing. No smart remarks as I stand bent weakened, only in my underwear. Pat leaves, quickly returning with my pants.

It is time to climb several steps to the front porch. Damn! Pat takes me inside.

As we go in the front door, the officer tells me the intruder left a calling card. His Pants! He had taken off his pants as he entered the back door of our home.

"Were his pants here when you left the house?"

"I don't know. I was looking at him to see if he was armed. I did not go to the back door."

The officer reaches inside a pocket and retrieves a card. He comments, "the idiot stole his mother's driver's license." He knows the perpetrator well, as does the entire department.

We walk through the first floor to the back door. As we reach the enclosed porch the officer points, as he discovers the intruder's sandals. Sandals make more noise than bare feet.

Pat and the officer tell me he had already searched the house. "Robert" our culprit, works alone. He has never had an accomplice. I am asked if Robert was naked when I chased him. I quickly answered, "No"

"What was he wearing?" the policeman asked, continuing to gather details.

"Plaid boxer underwear."

"It was dark, are you sure he was wearing underwear?"

"There was enough light from the street lights. He was wearing underwear. I fought with the guy. I was not fighting with a naked guy."

We were told Robert was followed by the cruiser and cut east after the third house on Washington. Apparently he was not aware of the shallow depth of the lots. He lost footing, tumbled down about 30' of brush and stickers along the steep bank and into the Auglaize River. Another squad car sped to the east side of the River and had a beam of light on him as he swam across the river to them. Out of steam he came out of the water, butt naked. He either lost the underwear in the River or shed them to reduce drag.

The officer asked, "are you hurt?" "No," I reply. *I will not admit I am hurt.* I will not give him the satisfaction of going to the Defiance Hospital Emergency. But, my eyes, my eyes are stinging, burning. "He fought me, clawing at my eyes. He jabbed his fingers in my eyes. He scratched and tried to take out my eyeballs." The officer explains, "he learned to fight in jail. He learned street fighting without regard to anyone. He does not care if you are blinded." Jim, my next door neighbor, asks me to go with him to the hospital. I need to have my eyes checked. Pat needs to stay with the kids and try to calm them.

The doctor tells me my eyes and cornea are scratched. "You are lucky, he could have caused much more damage. He nearly took out your tear duct in your right eye. That would be a real problem." The doctor examines my toe. "Yes, it appears to be broken. We can x-ray it, but it is not a compound fracture. We don't use a splint or cast. It is going to be painful for a while." I go home medicated, bandaged, a patch over my eye, but I will heal.

Next morning I am asked to stop at Defiance Police to view a picture line-up. My fear is that I won't be able to identify him due to my impaired vision before the eye gouging. Relief! Defiance had a population of only 18,000. Three of the six pictures are townies I recognize. Robert is the first one in the second row, no doubt. His picture shows a black eye. I smile.

Over the next week we find out Robert is 17 years, 10 months. Juvenile Judge Steve Ruhle, whom I have known since moving to Defiance, tells me Robert earned the distinction of having the longest current juvenile record in the County. Robert's mother does not try to bail him from jail. We are told his mother does not have the money and feels he needs to be in jail. We find out Robert had broken into other homes and sometimes he left his semen on the walls and furniture. A juvenile calling card of sorts.

I am told Robert was involved in a sustained chase, by me, then the Sheriff Deputy and Police. He cannot say he was picked up without cause. He is going to trial.

In the meantime, police tell us a young woman had come forward declaring she had been raped by Robert not long before. She did not immediately report the rape, fearing her husband would blame her. Enough evidence is available to charge him with rape. Due to the rape charge, a motion is made and granted to try him as an adult.

Time passes slowly, now several months, as the trial draws near. Charges of burglary, assault, breaking and entering from my encounter are dropped. Rape is reduced to sexual battery, due to the victim not wanting to be victimized again on the witness stand. Sexual battery is a felony. The prosecutor, known for plea bargains in order not to have to prosecute, cuts a deal with Robert. This gave me a real empty feeling.

Several months pass before all of our children can sleep in their own bedrooms. Several months pass before we felt we can let them sleep in their own bedrooms.

Our lives are changed due to our encounter with Robert. Vietnam surges back into my life. My thoughts are not occupied by the invasion or fight from that evening, but with Vietnam. After years of being buried, memories of war now exist at the forefront of my existence, haunting me. Maumee Valley Guidance does not have staff to help a guy who is victimized, and now is more concerned about his memories of Vietnam. PTSD is new, new to Maumee

Valley Guidance. After a few sessions, I do not make another appointment. They are not prepared to help.

Before Robert broke into my life, I had been commuting to Toledo. I have a new job to head Webstrand Appraisal Company. I have not sold my appraisal company in Defiance and continue to maintain the business. Three days in Toledo and two in Defiance. Since Robert entered our lives, I tell Pat the house is no longer a home for me. Pat's dream house is too large. Too many doors, too many windows; too much to guard every night. My energy is spent. I tell her it is time to move to Toledo. I sell my appraisal business and all rental properties. Within one year we move to Toledo.

A month before sentencing, I openly tell the Prosecutor, and fellow Optimist member, what I think of him. He is walking on East Second Street across from his office and Defiance County Court House. I raise my voice and let him know I think he is a poor Prosecutor. I let him know he is not doing his job to protect the best interests of citizens. His main concern is not trying a case so he does not risk losing a case.

Three days before sentencing my best friend Dave Westrick, now Defiance County Sheriff, gave me a call.

“Bruce, (Common Pleas) Judge Bakle is strongly considering giving Robert probation. He is concerned he is too young to go to prison. Robert is only 18 years old now.”

“What can I do?” I asked.

“Judge Bakle feels this will pass without much publicity, so he will probably let him go. The rape victim indicated she will not show up at the hearing. If I were you I would fill the court room. Even though charges had been dropped from your incident you can voice your opinion before sentencing.”

Shit!

The system pisses me off. Like a good soldier, I set forth to fill the court room, another mission to accomplish. Pat's parents are called. Our minister, neighbors, friends, Fire Chief, Assistant Fire Chief (Jim my neighbor), Editor of Defiance Crescent News, other community leaders all agree to come. Sheriff Dave Westrick is in uniform and in the court room. The court room is filled!

Out of Robert's view, standing in the back corner is the rape victim. She asked me to speak for her.

I had prepared a speech. Write, rewrite; rehearse silently; rehearse out loud; practice; practice; practice!

I stand, hesitate and deliver a speech, a plea, to remove this person from our community. I am drained.

Robert is sentenced to multiple years on multiple counts. He is not coming back to Defiance for several years.

In the ensuing years, Robert is denied parole two times, release coming at the third hearing. Within a year he commits burglary. Several times he is released, only to commit other offenses and head back to prison. Twenty four years have passed since he entered our lives in 1987. Approximately twenty years he has spent behind bars. I hope he may attempt to learn a new way of life outside of prison. As of this writing he remains in prison.

Enemy

Vietnam – 1970; Reflections from the present

Questions plague me. Questions asked by many but go unanswered.

The foreign policies of unknowing, or worse, uncaring politicians and presidents are my enemy: Why has my country supported so many corrupt rulers and weak governments? Why can't they learn from their blunders? Why does my country still have McCarthy-era thinking? So what if some other nearby countries fall to communism? Nearby governments have corrupt rulers who drain the economic benefits of their peasants who work seven long days a week. So what if the country becomes communist? Where is the benefit in watching young Americans die to establish a corrupt government?

Military strategy is my enemy: Vietnam is a poor, war torn, many times conquered country that cannot support a free enterprise system. Why does supporting one more puppet government make any more sense than the last one? Why is the fear and fight against communism more important than a country and its people? Why are we sending ill equipped kids to die in a jungle half a world away? Since we are sending troops to fight, why aren't the decisions made in Vietnam? Why is the war run from Washington? Why can't the Generals be allowed to fight the war to win the war? My enemy includes my country's political leaders who are primarily from the Greatest Generation. Why can't our leaders understand that conditions and strategies are not the same as they were in WWII? We should not use the lens of one experience to look into the future.

Television is my enemy: It brings war to my living room for the first time in my life, in anyone's life. Announcers cannot come to a consensus. Is it "Vet Nam," Viet Name? Where is it on the map? Why would anyone want to fight over a skinny country, where? Why couldn't the French defeat the enemy when they had superior weapons. Why is my country so interested in this place on the other side of the world? Why are protestors receiving more media time and acknowledgement? Why are the names of the dead relegated to the back pages of newspapers?

Fatigue is my enemy: Working all day in 100 degree heat with 100% humidity saps my strength and energy. My day is not eight hours, but as many hours as it takes. Sweat all day. Sweat all night. My rotation at guard duty means another night without sleep followed by trying to sleep during the day as temperatures and humidity again reach 100 degrees. Sleep in the day, with helicopters taking off from their berms near my hootch. Sleep with whirling dust and grit from the wash of props.

Sound is my enemy: Sleep to the tune of the hootch maids' music so foreign to my ear. It is so difficult to dream of home with these sounds never heard back home. Can't these people tell their tightly corded instruments are terribly out of tune? Noise, not music, like resonance of finger nails scratching on a black board; a child learning to play the violin, or a clarinetist learning to play at a first concert as the instrument squeaks like a wounded bird. Wailing, whining voices screech to the beat of the bad strings.

Night is my enemy: Night is dark, some darker than others with the fullness of the moon or the cover of clouds. Faint sounds amplify as I listen and analyze. Lights are out at night, not

to draw fire. Rumbblings in the distance with flashes of light indicate artillery, or a nearby perimeter with a reason to fire or nervous guys thinking they saw or heard something that did not belong. The bed bugs, and all of their cousins and buddies, come out to bite. Enemy rockets are launched to find their mark on our flight line or a sleeping hootch, only to be betrayed by the sharp pitched “shhhh” before the boom. Night is for sleep for some, but vigilance for me as I listen, listen into the sounds of the dark, taking a glance for dim shadows or movement, like in a child’s story of fearful things that bump and bang in the dark. A monster behind the closet door surrounds my hootch, capable of going through my walls, door, and roof. Lying in my squeaky bunk sweating, hearing the sharp whine of the mosquitoes outside the screens of the hootch, determined to have their way with me or anyone pumping blood they all needed to exist and procreate. Like the rockets, they seek a chink in my armor, a hole in the netting or an untucked corner. Although the mosquitoes may not cause instant death, they can leave me with some of their fluids and the possibility of malaria and disease for the rest of my life.

Night is my enemy on guard duty: I sit in a bunker or in the tower for a better angle to shoot down to the perimeter. Dark is never dark enough, when I sit above the perimeter silhouetted in the sky, making me a better target than those I can see staring down at the ground and perimeter lined with dark dikes of rice paddies.

Night is quiet time, time to think and remember: To remember my family and home, to remember I am not where I choose to be. Night is a time to silently cry, not with sound, but with tears welling, my chest heaving, but I dare not make a sound. No one must know I am crying, but I miss them so much. I long to be home living life without fear. Yes, I am afraid, petrified and ashamed I am so weak, I am crying. Exhausted, I fall asleep only to be startled by the next sound or change. I fall to sleep again, but my dreams often wake me as they are not of home or happy times, times of comfort and contentment.

Sleep is my enemy: with sleep comes dreams. My dreams are not pleasant, but dark like the night. My dreams wake me from a deep sleep as fear and horror fill my time of rest. Once I awake it is so difficult to fall asleep knowing dreams will certainly follow. Happy dreams seem to be of the past. Good dreams are often of my past, of home. I miss it so much. Will I ever return? I am so tired, but cannot sleep as I listen or if I doze off the same thoughts will creep into my rest; a cacophony of sounds informs me and everyone else someone is taking or receiving fire.

God is my enemy: How can He let this happen? I don’t feel He is protecting me.

Drugs are my enemy: I have tried them out of boredom, out of frustration, out of not caring, out of giving up. Somehow I am keeping my distance from them as I watch many of my friends use a little, then a little more. I watch as they lose weight, become dependent. I watch their eyes give a hollow stare as their bodies lose 20 - 30 pounds in a month. I hear them complain of not being able to shit, DT’s, trying to quit. Few are successful. They need something for the pain so they light-up, snort, main line for relief, relief of pain, relief of their environment, relief of reality. Some were taken off base in stretchers, mere skeletons, some caught, sent to detox and prison. All became addicts for the rest of their lives.

A culture that does not value life is my enemy: Soldiers willing to fight to be fed and taken from abject poverty finding a better life as a soldier than a poor peasant. Soldiers who are

fighting for their families' lives. If they do not fight, some know their families' will suffer or die at the hand of others. Soldiers fighting the foreign invaders, occupiers of their country, they know their back yard better than we do. Workers in the rice paddies by day, soldiers by night. They wear no uniform, but clothes of the locals. Some are the locals. Discerning who is who is a challenge.

American people are my enemy: You who do not agree with sending troops to Vietnam, why are you punishing your sons and daughters, soldiers you are sending to war? Most of us do not want to be in this hell hole. Most of us quickly see we are not winning with one or both of our hands tied behind our backs. What are we fighting and dying for? Why do you spurn us? Why do you spit at us? We only want to return and be a part of life as we knew it, the type of life you are living. Now we are changed, innocence lost, hardened, hurt, angry.

Agent Orange is my enemy: Occasionally I watch as a soldier from my company (probably dead now) sprays herbicide around the wooden posts supporting 55 gallon recycled drums holding our water supply. Spray is applied to our open wash area where we brush our teeth and shave in the morning. What is shipped in those cans? The guy with the sprayer can be seen around the company area spraying anything green growing up from the pea gravel or stone in our company area, around the 55 gallon drums that hold the wash water for the hootch maids to wash our clothes, around the shitters and the shit pots also cut from 55 gallon drums. No one mows grass. Watching a helicopter spray our perimeter to keep it free of vegetation is almost surreal as a faint orange mist follows to keep the concertina visible and less cover to hide for anyone trying to make their way through at night. Why do some of my buddies have life ending diseases? Why are their children being born with congenital defects? Why does it take so long before our government acknowledges problems to all forms of life from Agent Orange? Why are so many hurdles placed in path of those who need help?

The Veterans Administration is my enemy: Yes, help is available, but why does it take so long? Why do I have to feel humiliated when trying to process my claim? Why is it so time consuming, so inefficient, so cumbersome? Why when I made my claim did I have to be told nothing is wrong? Why is denial the typical first result? Why did I feel weak and full of despair after my first visit? Why did I feel like a liar? Why did I not bring this to their attention sooner? Why did it take so long to come out to acknowledge there is such a thing as PTSD? Why did it take so long to acknowledge Agent Orange can kill or cause disease for the rest of our lives?

I am my enemy: The WWII vets may have figured out the best way of handling issues. Deny and forget, put anything that happened so far away from family and friends. Don't share, don't feel, just forget and go on. Take your locked safe to the grave.

But, have they been successful in their efforts? On the surface, possibly.....but is suffering in silence better.....or worse?

Each day is a challenge. I try to learn, to manage, to accept help, and to love. Hopefully I will find a balance. Hopefully, I will find solace for myself and those whom I love and who love me.