

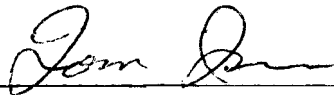
AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

David M. Welch for the Master of Arts degree in American History  
presented on June, 1991.

Title: The Falcon and the Dragon

*Vietnam and Fairfield Rural High School's Class of '66*

Abstract approved: \_\_\_\_\_



The year 1966 straddled two eras, the complacent '50s and the radical '60s. Much of the social strife of that time, spawned by the unavoidable clash of cultural values, revolved around the Vietnam War. While thousands of Americans spoke out against U.S. involvement in the conflict, millions answered the call of duty, honor, and country and served there. Among them were ten members of Fairfield Rural High School's Class of '66. While these men served at different times under widely varying circumstances, they did come to share a common experience of sorts. Beyond the physical journey of traveling 10,000 miles, they also journeyed emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually from the Home of the Falcon to the Land of the Dragon. And for each there came a point in time, place, and self when he saw through the confusion and doubt of everyday existence in a combat zone, when he beheld his own moment of truth.

THE FALCON AND THE DRAGON  
VIETNAM AND FAIRFIELD RURAL HIGH SCHOOL'S CLASS OF '66

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Division of Social Sciences  
EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY


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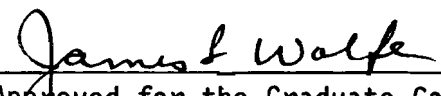
In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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by  
David M. Welch  
June 1991

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Approved for the Major Division

  
Approved for the Graduate Council

## PREFACE

This work is essentially an oral history. While published sources have been used to provide context, the vast majority of source materials were questionnaires completed by and interviews with the subjects. People, as one of my professors likes to say, are documents, too. Of particular value have been the many letters and the one journal written by some of the subjects during the time treated here. They served to refresh my own recollections of the period as well as those of the authors.

This is a personal kind of history, too, since I am one of the ten subjects and have known the nine others at least since our high-school days at Fairfield. As such, I have treated myself as I have the others, in the third person, to maintain consistency. And I have exercised as best I could the objective perspective developed during my years in newspaper journalism. I think, though, that my more-than-casual knowledge of these men and our shared experiences in high school, in Vietnam, and since are invaluable assets in writing about them.

While it is not possible to present all the details on a number of topics in a work such as this, I have attempted to cover the major incidents and issues as thoroughly as possible in a chronological organization, although there is some topical deviation within some chapters. I hope this work gives a clear picture of these ten men's Vietnam experiences and adds to the understanding of the larger issues.

My thanks goes to Professors Thomas Isern, Samuel Dicks, and Edwin Moreland and my nine fellow Vietnam veterans from the Class of '66.

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## 1. CLASS OF '66

The era we now remember as the '60s, with all of its accompanying sociocultural baggage--hippies, peace marches, the Beatles, LSD, flower power--gained its focus in mid-decade, making 1966 a year on the edge. *Encyclopedia Britannica* compiled a list of new words, showing that the times were indeed a-changin': "acid" (a drug), "a-go-go," "cable TV," "chip" (as in computer), "hippie," "in" (the "in" place to go), "disco," "dove" as opposed to "hawk," "IUD," "LSD," "miniskirt," and "pop" (as in art).<sup>1</sup>

President Lyndon Johnson declared that the United States "is mighty enough, its society healthy enough, its people strong enough, to pursue our goals in the rest of the world while building a Great Society at home," thus announcing a guns-and-butter policy setting the nation on an inflationary track that would bedevil it for years. Placard wavers took to the streets: civil-rights marchers (the term "black power" appeared in 1966); feminists founding NOW, the National Organization for Women; and, as food prices soared as much as 10 percent, homemakers picketing and boycotting food-store chains.<sup>2</sup>

In the space race, unmanned American and Soviet craft orbited and landed on the moon. Technology involved perils, though: high over the Spanish coast an American B-52 bomber and its tanker collided, dropping four H-bombs onto sea and land. In Japan, meanwhile, an elder statesman took a hard look at his nation and predicted that "within the next five years, my country will become the third greatest industrial power in the world." And in California, a seemingly unlikely candidate for the governorship, motion picture actor Ronald Reagan, soundly

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defeated incumbent Edmund Brown.<sup>3</sup>

As the sexual revolution raged, a cartoon appeared in the *London Daily Mail* showing a bearded chap in bed with a woman saying, "Let's get married and start a new trend!" The miniskirt, popularized by spaghetti-thin British model Twiggy, exhibited the new liberality, as did the publication of *Human Sexual Response* by William Masters and Virginia Johnson, and the first movie "suggested for mature audiences": *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*<sup>4</sup>

The hottest toys of the year were Batman items, based on the new television series that was so popular it aired twice a week. And *Star Trek* launched its first episode with Captain James T. Kirk in command and the unflappable Mr. Spock at his side. *Hit Parade* songs as diverse as Frank Sinatra's "Strangers in the Night" and his daughter Nancy's "These Boots Are Made For Walking," along with the enormously popular *The Sound of Music* soundtrack, were signs that America straddled two eras. But Army Sgt. Barry Sadler's cryptic "The Ballad of the Green Berets" stirred the martial spirit of America's sons and finished first on the charts.<sup>5</sup>

The year was barely a week old when 8,000 American soldiers mounted the largest offensive to date in the Vietnam conflict. In February, Johnson met in Honolulu with South Vietnamese leaders and declared the war winnable. On March 31, 25,000 disagreeing anti-war protesters marched down New York City's Fifth Avenue. There counter-demonstrators pelted them with eggs, a signal of the war's divisive effect on American society.<sup>6</sup>

For the fifty-four seniors in Fairfield Rural High School's Class of '66, the year began on August 30, 1965, when they came together for



the first day of their last year at the consolidated school a mile north of Langdon, in southwest Reno County, Kansas. While there were the usual first-day-back-at-school hijinks--popping classmates on the butt or head with erasers, or snaring unwary freshmen in "noogie" or "swirly" patrols--there was also the realization for many that this was the beginning of the end of high school for them. As the *Falcon '66* yearbook noted, "This important date was met with mixed feelings of elation and sorrow."<sup>7</sup>

The class elected officers on September 3. Among them were James Harris and Stanley Millington as Student Council representatives. Harris was later elected StuCo and Hi-Y president, he played in the band, was a member of the Forensics and Thespians societies, and was on the football, basketball, and track teams. Millington was on the *Falcon '66* staff, in Thespians, and on the football and track teams.<sup>8</sup>

The Falcon football season opened in September and, with twelve seniors on the team, Fairfield racked up six wins, one tie, and two losses. In the game against arch-rival Haven High School, Edward Rush's nose was broken when he was kicked in the face while blocking a punt, James Brown dropped a last-second pass near the end zone, and Stephen Shanline rued the 20-18 loss but took solace that there was only a two-point difference in what had been predicted to be a blowout on the Wildcats' sloppy home field. Rush finished the season and later ran the 100-, 220-, and 440-yard distances to help the track team to a winning season, all the while breathing through his mouth. Brown was on the track team, too, and the *Falcon '66* staff, and he and Shanline were both in Thespians.<sup>9</sup>

Halloween wasn't an organized Fairfield event, but many of the

seniors observed it enthusiastically, including John Montford. He and some friends loaded a wheat truck half-full with watermelons and were roaming the streets of Turon looking for something to do with them. One of the melons was quite mushy, so Montford cut a hole in it and dropped in a cherry bomb, then left it in the middle of the main drag. A recent Fairfield graduate was in Turon, too, driving a new Mustang. He stopped beside the melon and opened his door as if he were going to pick it up. The cherry bomb went off and splattered the melon on both the exterior and interior of his car. He chased Montford and his friends, but they lost him. He found them again, though, and, after a short chase, one of Montford's cohorts engaged the lift on the truck and dumped half the melons on the street, ending the pursuit altogether. Montford did participate in approved school activities, too, though, such as gymnastics, in which the team won four of six competitions, and in track.<sup>10</sup>

The first senior class party was November 6 on the elevated deck of the gym. Various delicacies were served, such as smoked pizza, cheese chips and the old standby, pop. The evening's activities included dancing, ping-pong, volleyball, basketball, and scooter riding. A major topic of conversation was the senior class play, *West Side Story*, scheduled for November 18 and 19. The play was such a success that a third night's performance was added, and the gate take averaged \$225 per night. The play was a particular success for Duane Westfahl, a quiet student who had joined the class that year after his family moved to Turon from Newton. Westfahl functioned only as a stagehand and cast extra, but he was happy just to finally be a part of the crowd.<sup>11</sup>

After losing the first two games convincingly, the Falcons basketball team came alive and managed to finish the season with eleven wins and nine losses. The players knew they had a tough game ahead as they traveled twenty-five miles southwest on a frigid January night to take on the big Cunningham Wildcats. The Falcons had five seniors who stood 6' or 6'1"; the 'Cats had players who stood 6'7", 6'5", and 6'3". Some of the Falcons came prepared, though. David Welch was carrying a quart of Mogen David "Mad Dog 20/20" wine in his gym bag and, on the bus ride to Cunningham, he, Kipp Cooper, and two other players passed it around. The flush on the four Falcons' faces went unnoticed in the stuffy confines of the cramped 'Cats gym, and they played over their heads against their towering opponents--except when Cooper seemed to trip over the half-court line once when bringing the ball down and all four started laughing. The wine, though, was not enough to overcome the 'Cats big men, and the Falcons lost 49-42.<sup>12</sup>

But to anyone who tried to blame the loss on the wine, Welch and Cooper pointed out that four weeks later, on the Falcons' home court and with every player stone-cold sober, the 'Cats stomped Fairfield 77-48. And while the two took many opportunities to imbibe during the schoolyear, neither drank during other school activities, Cooper as a football player and member of Boys Glee Club, or Welch as a member of the football and track teams and as a *Falcon '66* staff member.<sup>13</sup>

Tennis was a new sport for Fairfield in the spring of '66, and it drew much attention from the student body. Gerald Webster was one student who showed interest and developed sufficiently to be named the number two seed for the men's singles team and to play on the number one men's doubles team, where he helped the Falcons finish their first

season with five wins and one loss. Webster was just as adept at other sports, too, playing on the varsity basketball and football teams.<sup>14</sup>

May was a swirl of activity for the Falcon seniors. Besides the sports and other activities, the Class of '66 was wrapping up its time at Fairfield. The second class party was the twelfth at Zongker's sandpit. The menu consisted of barbequed steak, baked beans, baked potatoes, garlic or plain bread, and iced tea. Recreation included tape-recorded music, badminton, volleyball, and a bonfire. Senior Sneak Day was the sixteenth. The class met at Fairfield at 6 a.m., boarded buses, and rode to Wichita International Airport for breakfast. After educational tours through the Institute of Logopedics and Fourth National Bank, they ate lunch at Brown's Cafeteria. Some time was spent at Joyland Amusement Park, then swimming at the Holiday Inn, or shopping at Eastgate Mall. For dinner, the class went to the Stockyards Restaurant, then capped the day off by going to the movies to see *Battle of the Bulge*. For the most part, it was an enjoyable and informative trip.<sup>15</sup>

Baccalaureate was the twenty-second, and Jon Sward, a ministerial student from Sterling College, presided. Class night was the twenty-third, and the class history, will, and prophecy were read before the athletic and activities awards were presented.<sup>16</sup>

Graduation on the twenty-fourth proved to a most exciting evening. The speakers included the principal, the class valedictorian and salutatorian, and Wes Santee, a former national title holder in the mile run. They all talked of fears and inspirations, failure and success. The diplomas were presented by the president of the school board.<sup>17</sup>

Much of the talk before and after the ceremony was about the future. Everyone had plans for the summer and fall, all the future that mattered then. Cooper and Millington would go custom cutting, then to Hutchinson Junior College and Kansas State Teachers College, respectively. Westfahl would go custom cutting, too, then take a job in an auto-body repair shop in Pratt. Harris and Shanline would work on their family farms, then go to Kansas State University and Fort Hays State College, respectively. Rush, Brown, and Welch would work on local farms, then go to Hutch Juco. Webster would work on a local farm, then get a job at a paper-products plant in Hutch. Montford would join the Air Force one week after graduation, the first of sixteen in his class to serve on active military duty and one of ten--including the nine named above--to pull tours of duty in Vietnam.

None of those ten had any idea that in the not-too-distant future they would be caught up in world events that would send them 10,000 miles from home, from days as open and free as the Kansas wheatfields to days as close and confining as tropical monsoons and triple-canopy jungles, from evenings on the main drag or in the local pool hall to nights on ambush patrols or guard duty in sandbag bunkers, from family and friends into harm's way, from the Home of the Falcon to the Land of the Dragon. None of them realized just how far they would journey physically, emotionally, and spiritually, or how those travels would bring them to a singular point in place, time, and self, to an instant where confusion and doubt were stripped away and they beheld a moment of truth.

## NOTES

1. Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties, Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), passim.; Joseph Gustaitis, "Twenty-five Years," *American History Illustrated* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Cowles Magazines, March/April 1991, volume 26, number 1), p. 33.
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8. Ibid., passim.
9. Ibid.; personal interview with Edward Rush, Abbyville, Kansas, March 13, 1990; personal interview with James Brown, Boone, North Carolina, April 14, 1990; personal interview with Stephen Shanline, Yanbu, Saudi Arabia, April 4, 1990.
10. Personal interview with John Montford, Placitas, New Mexico, April 14, 1990; FRHS Communications Class, p. 27.
11. Ibid., p. 18; personal interview with Duane Westfahl, Sylvia, Kansas, March 15, 1990.
12. FRHS Communications Class, p. 20; personal interview with David Welch, Emporia, Kansas, March 15, 1990; personal interview with Kipp Cooper, Salina, Kansas, March 12, 1990.
13. Ibid.; Welch interview; FRHS Communications Class, p. 20.
14. Ibid.; personal interview with Gerald Webster, Hutchinson, Kansas, March 14, 1990.
15. FRHS Communications Class, passim.
16. Ibid., passim.
17. Ibid.
18. Cooper interview; personal interview with Stanley Millington, Turon, Kansas, March 14, 1990; Westfahl interview; personal interview with James Harris, Langdon, Kansas, March 18, 1990;

Shanline interview; Rush interview; Brown interview; Welch interview; Webster interview; Montford interview.

## 2. SO MUCH WASTE

An artillery fire mission started with a call on the radio. Picking up the receiver, the battery executive officer heard the words that never failed to excite a true "redleg": "Fire mission, battery adjust," and then a set of firing coordinates. The exec repeated the order to ensure he heard it correctly and then telephoned it to each gun in the battery. His call prompted the gun crews to start a sequence of carefully rehearsed moves. The big guns rested on a pedestal with a welded ball-and-joint mechanism. Four men lifted the rear trail arms until they came to rest in premeasured slots corresponding to the ordered firing direction. The crew jacked the gun off the pedestal onto a firing stand while the section chief confirmed the firing data.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, the exec ran to the aiming circle, a device like a surveyor's transit equipped with a scope capable of both day and night viewing. The exec used the aiming circle to "survey in" each gun. Each gunner pointed a telescope at the aiming circle, making sure his gun was pointed in the right direction. When all the gunners finished, the battery was properly laid for direction. By this time, the fire direction center had calculated bearing and elevation, using two coordinate charts. Soldiers known as "computers" made simultaneous calculations, one set to be used by the guns, the other to double-check the first. If the two sets of calculations were within 2 or 3 mils (a 1-mil difference at 10,000 yards made a difference of about 10 yards on the ground), the data was approved by the FDC officer. If the calculations weren't within 3 mils of each other, the computers



repeated the math until they were. The computers then used a cross-reference index to determine how large a powder charge was needed to propel the artillery shell to the target. All this data was then relayed to the battery exec, and from him to each gun crew.<sup>2</sup>

Seated to the left of the gun tube, the gunner turned a large crank to precisely set the bearing, using aiming stakes located in front of each gun. Next, the assistant gunner adjusted the tube's elevation, then inserted a primer into the firing lock in the breech. Meanwhile, the loader went to the ammunition bunker and got the correct shell and fuse while the powder man carried the specified number of charges to the gun. The assistant gunner and loader rammed the shell into the tube and the powder man inserted the charges in the breech.<sup>3</sup>

At the command "Close!" the assistant gunner positioned to the right of the tube closed the breech, secured the firing lock and held the lanyard. Everyone else moved away. The exec shouted "Battery!" and each section chief shouted the number of his gun, indicating it was ready to fire. When the exec shouted "Fire!" the assistant gunners pulled the lanyards and shells weighing as much as 95 pounds hurtled toward unseen and often unknown targets anywhere from a few hundred yards to several miles away. This routine was repeated thousands of times at hundreds of artillery fire support bases throughout Vietnam. By the end of the war, more than 10 million artillery rounds would be fired.<sup>4</sup>

When Specialist 4 Kipp Cooper arrived in country in October, 1967, two million of those rounds had already been fired. By the time he left Vietnam in September, 1968, two million more rounds had been expended, and the nineteen-year-old rural Arlington man had played a

part in that. Cooper spent a semester at Hutchinson Junior College in the fall of 1966 and a couple of months in early 1967 working in a machine shop that made presswheels for wheat drills before going into the Army. He believed he would be drafted anyway, and this at least gave him a choice of military jobs. The Army seemed an agreeable choice for him, since he wasn't sure he was mature enough to make all his own decisions, and the Army would certainly be glad to tell him what to do for the next three years. And, after two months of basic training at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, and another two months of training as an artillery surveyor at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, the Army told Cooper to go to Vietnam, but it didn't tell him what he would find there: "I remember the real intense heat and the vastness of the airstrip and the airport there at Cam Ranh Bay when I came in country. I really didn't know what to expect. I was steppin' off the plane an' I didn't know what the hell I was gettin' into or what the hell was goin' on. It was a real foreign experience." Cooper had his first inkling that perhaps not even the U.S. Army always knew the best way to go about things.<sup>5</sup>

After two days of processing in country, Cooper was sent to the 8th Target Acquisition Battalion, 26th Artillery Regiment, at Qui Nhon, a city of 500,000 on the central coast. There he was assigned to a survey information center in the 8th's Headquarters Battery. A group of about twenty artillery surveyors worked out of the SIC, and, after working in the field for a few days, they brought all the new data in and submitted it to the SIC office personnel. Those included the captain who oversaw SIC operations, a warrant officer who Cooper remembers had a difficult time finding enough work to keep himself

busy, a staff sergeant who worked directly with the human "computers," Cooper and two other enlisted men. These human computers took the raw survey data, ran it through a mechanical computer to check it, then organized the finished survey information so it could be published in a booklet used by the field artillery units to determine coordinates for firing missions.<sup>6</sup>

Cooper did not always think of himself as being in a war. The SIC was a large Quonset hut with a concrete floor and air conditioning to keep the sensitive computer equipment from overheating. On the walls were huge maps of Vietnam with all the artillery survey points marked on them. It was part of Cooper's job to keep the maps updated, but he never translated the points he marked on them as places in the real world where artillery units could rain death and destruction with pinpoint accuracy, thanks to his work: "I never went to a fire support base, I was never around any of the artillery when it was firing. Every once in awhile some of us would go out on a reconnaissance where they would put us in a chopper and fly us over certain points. I don't really remember what they were for. I only went on one and I threw up, so they didn't take me along after that." Cooper and his workmates did work long hours, but almost always got Sundays off to do whatever they wanted. That included venturing into the local Vietnamese communities, as long as they were back on base by the time its gates were shut to everything but emergency traffic for the night.<sup>7</sup>

Even during the single largest enemy offensive of the war, Tet 1968, when every American installation of any importance came under attack, Cooper felt somewhat removed:

"I think they had prior knowledge about it, so we had

gotten warnings about it before it happened. They put us on alert, but we just went about our daily business, but they made sure we knew everything about it, what to expect. That night we went ahead and went to bed, but then we heard the sirens and shells and everything goin' off, so we roused up, in the dark of course. We put on our flak jackets and helmets and everything, which we had made sure we had ready. They just sent us to a bunker, an' we just ended up stayin' in the same sandbag bunker just about all night. It was in the compound, in the camp, not on the perimeter. Mostly, all we heard was mortars. I don't believe it did much damage, just blew a few holes in the airstrip, maybe. But we were notified that this kinda stuff was goin' on all over, everywhere. So to me it really wasn't that big of a deal. It was different than what we were used to, but I really wasn't that concerned about it. I wasn't fearful for my life or anything."<sup>8</sup>

When Cooper's unit was transferred to An Khe, a city of 50,000 located 50 miles to the west of Qui Nhon in the Central Highlands, his situation changed, though: "You could feel a little more tension. There was a little more action, more possibility of encounters with the enemy. When we were down there in Qui Nhon, we just had a more secure feeling. In An Khe, though, there was a little bit of concern throughout the whole group of us." And when a man in his unit was killed by a mine, that concern became even deeper: "That was right after Tet, so there was some tension. An Khe wasn't as big a city as Qui Nhon, and it was a lot rougher. Then that Spec 4 hit that mine. We were a lot more careful there. Our weapons were locked up in a central locker, but we could go get them anytime, and a lot of us kept 'em with us, even in our living quarters there." But Cooper never fired his weapon at the enemy, and almost anyone who saw him would assume that, since he carried the wooden-stocked 7.62-millimeter M-14 while the grunts, the combat troops, carried the shorter, lighter, black, plastic-stocked 6.56-millimeter M-16.<sup>9</sup>

Despite Cooper's distance from the war's violence, he developed

very strong feelings about its effects and costs. His first such reactions were to the Vietnamese people themselves:

"When you're young and have lived out on a farm most of your life, you're kinda naive about things. I didn't really know what all people would do to get money. I didn't understand it, the lengths to which people would go to get money, to get your money. Most of the city people seemed to be greedy and out for all the money they could get from Americans, stealing it or otherwise. You always had to be careful with your wallet or your watch. You always had to be on the lookout. One of them was always tryin' to get some money off ya, an' that pissed me off right from the start."

But even more than the seemingly unbridled greed of the Vietnamese, one particular incident early in Cooper's tour of duty colored his thinking on the worth of the American effort:

"I'd been in Vietnam for two or three months and really hadn't seen much, not too many bad things, no action. I remember bein' in the Qui Nhon airport and saw a medivac chopper comin' in. There was a guy on a stretcher and I remember he was pretty good size. He was wounded pretty bad, he was shot up. I don't know if it was schrapnel or what, but he was bandaged up and there was a lot of blood. He was screamin' and carryin' on, and that left a strong impression in my mind."<sup>10</sup>

The combined effects of those experiences changed Cooper's attitudes about the American effort in the war:

"When I received orders for Vietnam I had a sense of pride and trust that this was the right thing to do. I felt like we were supposed to be there, that we were doin' the right thing. But after bein' there and seein' so much goin' on, like the black market, the prostitution, the drugs an' the poverty, I don't know, there was just so much waste. To me, I felt like the whole damned country just wasn't worth the lives, the sufferin' that guys were goin' through. I just couldn't see why the place was so important for us to be losin' young men's lives like that. It just wasn't worth all that to stop a small country falling to communism."

Cooper continued to do the best job he could at the SIC, and his efforts earned him a promotion to specialist 5 and an Army Commendation Medal for Meritorious Service.<sup>11</sup>

## NOTES

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### 3. THE COLOR OF FRIENDSHIP

The 1960s witnessed a great upheaval in the American black community. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led the march on Washington in August, 1963, and many blacks yearned for equality and a rightful place in the great "American dream." Blacks in the military also wanted to be placed on an equal footing with their white peers. In the early years of the Vietnam War, blacks, who made up 13.5 percent of the U.S. population, comprised more than 20 percent of the casualties incurred. Realizing this, both the Army and the Marine Corps transferred blacks to rear-echelon units in an attempt to alleviate the problem. By 1967, with the war in full swing, the casualty percentage dropped to 13 percent.<sup>1</sup>

The altruism found in the beginning of the war between blacks and whites began to erode, though. President Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" programs had taken a back seat to the growing demands of the war in Southeast Asia--money slated for education, housing, and other domestic programs was instead funneled into the government's expanding war effort. By the late '60s, with the assassinations of King and Robert Kennedy and rioting in cities across the United States, black Americans became disillusioned and questioned their role in a "white man's war." The relationships between white and black soldiers became strained, with more racial incidents taking place. With the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces in 1973, black servicemen accounted for 5,711 killed in action, 12.1 percent of battlefield deaths in Vietnam.<sup>2</sup>

Duane Westfahl put 15,000 miles on his 2½-ton truck in and around Chu Lai, an area with its few paved thoroughfares pock-marked by bombs

and mines, and a six-month-long monsoon season that turned its graded roads of red dirt and sand into quagmires. The twenty-year-old rural Turon man hit the seat of his Army "duece-and-a-half" in October, 1967, and kept it rolling twelve, fourteen, even sixteen hours a day for the Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 52nd Infantry Regiment, 198th Light Infantry Brigade of the Americal Division operating along the Vietnam coast south of Da Nang. The private first class did the same when he was transferred to the 198th's Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 4th Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment in June, 1968, where he was promoted to specialist 4 for his efforts to keep the brigade infantry troops well-supplied in the field.<sup>3</sup>

After being drafted in January, 1967, Westfahl received basic training and light vehicle driver training at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. He was then assigned to Company E, 15th Armored Brigade, 1st Armored Division at Fort Hood, Texas, then to the 52nd Infantry as part of the newly formed 198th, destined for Vietnam:

"We spent twenty-one days on the *U.S.S. Gordon* getting from Fort Ord, California, to the Philippines where we refueled, then to Chu Lai. I'd never been on a ship before, but I didn't get sick. Dad told me to eat all the ice cream I could, that it would keep my stomach settled. Some of the other guys did get unsettled, though. One guy out of Company A jumped overboard. We saw him come up once and we threw out a life preserver, but we didn't see him come up again. We searched for three days and never did see no sign of him. The guys in his unit said he was scared to death of going to Vietnam, but that seemed like a hell of a way to get out of it."<sup>4</sup>

Not all shipboard incidents were as disturbing, though. In fact, Westfahl found amusement even in the midst of some heavy weather:

"It was like a roller coaster, only on water. I was serving on the chow line and about the time you'd go to put potatoes on someone's plate, the ship would roll, they would slide away, and you'd put the potatoes right back in the serving



pan. And you didn't sit down to eat. There were tall tables you put your tray on and the trays were sliding all over the place. You had to hang onto the table with with one hand to stay standing and you had your fork in the other hand. I saw one guy go to stab a piece of meat on his tray, the ship shifted, and he stabbed the meat on somebody else's tray that was sliding by."<sup>5</sup>

Once in Chu Lai, many of Westfahl's driving assignments took him to Landing Zone Baldy, sixty miles to the north. A round trip took eight hours, though, because of the poor condition of the roads. Westfahl hauled anything and everything, but by far the most precious cargo he transported was water. In a region where hellish heat regularly pushed the thermometer to 100, 110, even 120 degrees, and where the nearest stream was also the nearest cesspool, potable water was a very valuable commodity. Westfahl often spent his long days careening from water point to company compound, fire base, or LZ to feed the never-ending thirst of the troops. It was after one such run that Westfahl logged his most tension-filled miles:

"We was comin' back from LZ Baldy. I got a late start an' it was gettin' dark fast. Two miles north of Chu Lai there was a little ville. We come through there an' the shootin' started. Ol' Journigan, he disappeared just like that. He was supposed to be ridin' shotgun. I felt around and couldn't feel anything, like I'd been hit. I flew back into base camp at Chu Lai an' a MP was sittin' there, had his Jeep blockin' the road. But there was just enough room for me to squeeze through, so I kept goin'. The MP was right behind me when I slid around the corner in front of Captain Bowen's office. Captain Bowen came out an' said, 'What the hell! Jesus Christ! You got hit!' There was a row of bullet holes along the driver's side. Captain Bowen said, 'Where's Journigan at?' I said, 'I don't know. When that first shot went off, he just disappeared.' I got the flashlight and looked over at the passenger's seat. All ya could see was two white eyes and white teeth underneath that seat. We had to take it apart to get him outta the truck."<sup>6</sup>

Most of Westfahl's trips were much less adventurous, though:

"A lot of drivers didn't start up until 8 a.m. and they'd

quit at 4 p.m. But I would be up at 6 a.m. haulin' buffaloes, water tanks, to the water point, fillin' them, and haulin' them to the LZs so they'd be there when the choppers started comin' in at 7:45. Then when the other guys would park their trucks, I'd start haulin' buffaloes again, gettin' ready for the next mornin'. Sometimes I'd run until 12 or 12:30 at night."

After several months, that hectic pace caught up with Westfahl:

"One night I got done an' walked in an' sat down on my bunk an' more or less passed out. I turned white an' they rushed me over to the hospital. I was there four days an' they ran tests an' everything. I'd been goin' the past three months from 6 in the mornin' to around midnight, an' they said I was just totally exhausted from runnin' so many hours in the heat an' not gettin' any rest."<sup>7</sup>

Under doctor's orders to cut back on work, Westfahl found other things to occupy some of his time. In December, 1967, he managed to attend one of the immensely popular Bob Hope USO shows. Held in Chu Lai, the show featured Raquel Welch and several other voluptuous young starlets. Westfahl's was a busman's holiday, though, since he drove one of the trucks transporting troops to and from the event. Much more satisfying to him, though, was his success in getting to talk to family members on the Military/Amatuer Radio Service Network:

"I got through the first time, which was unusual. I knew guys who tried six or seven times an' never made it. I was on the MARS Net an' my brother-in-law in Newton was an amatuer radio operator an' he got my call. All this was bein' relayed by other amatuer operators, so I wasn't talkin' to him, I didn't know it was him. My sister was dialin' the destination number an' when she got to the last digit she said, 'Gosh. that's my Mom and Dad's number.' When the folks answered the phone, they put me on the line an' we all got to talk to each other. My brother-in-law an' sister didn't know it was me until that moment. An' my Mom and Dad had just pulled in the drive when the phone rang, so I got lucky twice on that one call."<sup>8</sup>

Another significant and satisfying experience Westfahl had in Vietnam was his friendships. Personal relationships outside of his own

family had been transient affairs, as transient, in fact, as his own family. Westfahl attended seven elementary schools, one junior high school and two high schools due to his family's frequent moves, and what friendships he struck up got left behind, too. While his friendships in Vietnam were just as likely to be short-lived, they took on a special significance due to the uncertain circumstances in which Westfahl found himself. He and Larry Peyton hit it off when they first met in basic training. Part of that was because Peyton was a fellow Kansan, from Wichita, and, even though he was from a big city, much like Westfahl in attitudes and interests. Their friendship continued when both were assigned to the same driver training company and later to the same companies at Fort Hood and in Vietnam. Another friendship Westfahl carried from Fort Hood to Vietnam was that of his commanding officer, Captain Ken Bowen. While at Fort Hood, Westfahl requested a three-day pass to attend his parents' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, but was told his company was restricted to the post. Bowen escorted Westfahl off the post and drove him to the airport to catch a flight to Wichita, telling him, "Make damned sure you're back here before Monday morning formation, or both our butts will be in a sling." In Vietnam, Bowen continued to look out for Westfahl and his other men, so much so that they took to calling him "Dad."<sup>9</sup>

The most significant friendship Westfahl made in the military, though, was with William C. Walker, a black soldier from West Virginia who was forty-two years old and had been in the Army for eighteen years. Westfahl had little experience with blacks, and the age difference itself would normally have been prohibitive to any meaningful relationship, but somehow the two got along, perhaps out of the simple

actions of common decency:

"Willie had lost his folks an' a sister in a car wreck in 1965, an' he didn't know where his other brothers an' sisters lived anymore, he'd been in the Army so long an' they had all moved away from home. I always shared the stuff I got in packages from home, an' he really appreciated that. I wrote to the folks about him because on my birthday he was talkin' to me about how nice it was to have someone who cared an' sent cards. So for Christmas, the folks made up two boxes of cookies, banana bread, books an' stuff an' sent me one and Willie one. When he opened the box, he just sat down an' cried."

It was then that Westfahl saw beyond the color of his friend's skin and learned a lesson about humanity that has always stayed with him: "I tell ya, I looked a lot different toward colored people. I realized that some were just as nice an' stuff as other people was. Just like whites, you got bad people an' you got good people, too."<sup>10</sup>

## NOTES

1. Martin Binkin, *Blacks in the Military* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute, 1982), pp. 69-71; Dave Dubose, "Combat Knows No Color," *Vietnam* (Leesburg, Va.: Empire Press, December, 1990, volume 3, number 4), pp. 18-24; Shelby L. Stanton, *The Rise and Fall of an American Army: U.S. Ground Forces in Vietnam, 1965-1973* (New York: Dell Books, 1985), pp. 270-80.
2. *Ibid.*; Binkin, pp. 69-71; Dubose, pp. 18-24.
3. Personal interview with Duane Westfahl, Sylvia. Kansas, March 15, 1990.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*

#### 4. BOTH SIDES AGAINST THE MIDDLE

The indispensable lifeline in the North Vietnamese supply operation to their forces fighting in South Vietnam was known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. That maze of tangled routes threaded westward out of three North Vietnamese passes through the mountains in Laos, then south and east through that country, Cambodia, and into South Vietnam. It became one of the most important objectives of the United States in Indochina. For a time, most of the American air power in Southeast Asia was concentrated on it. By choking off North Vietnamese supplies and troops moving southward along the trail, the United States hoped to severely reduce Hanoi's capabilities for waging war.<sup>1</sup>

A series of paths, dirt roads, and river crossings stretching at least thirty miles wide and covering a 6,000-mile network made up the trail. It was so complex that trucks sometimes seemed to just disappear off of it. An Air Force officer described it as "a spider web and another spider web lying on top of it and another and another. The North Vietnamese are like broken-field runners moving in any direction they can to escape air attack and get supplies to their forces."<sup>2</sup>

There were as many as 1,700 truck parks and storage areas on the trail, and a fleet of about 5,000 trucks, mostly Soviet-made, traveled it. A single truck rarely ever made the full run; rather, the run was a system of transfers from point to point, using trucks, oxcarts, and humans. There were as many as 75,000 people working on the trail, including a coolie force of Laotian tribesmen and villagers. Some supplies were put in barges and barrels and floated downstream. "As many as twenty transfers may take place," said one officer familiar

with the workings of the network. "Following a box of ammunition through the Mu Gia Pass (between North Vietnam and Laos), it moves on a truck at night. The truck moves about eight miles, then pulls into a park covered by the thick jungle canopy. He unloads. During the next day, the ammunition is loaded onto another truck. He moves sixteen miles, then unloads, and so on." The shuttle system also allowed the drivers to become more proficient and familiar with the section of the trail assigned to them.<sup>3</sup>

During the height of the American interdiction efforts, as many as 400 Air Force, Navy, and Marine combat aircraft were in action on the trail every day. About half of them attacked targets; the other half served as support, providing command-and-control planes, reconnaissance, refueling, and storage. Still, the supplies got through. "It is essentially a jungle, a lot of mountains, a lot of places to hide, in caves and ravines," one officer said. "There are an inordinate amount of roads and alternate roads. And trying to hit a barrel in the water is not the easiest thing in the world."<sup>4</sup>

Joining the Air Force five days after high-school graduation didn't seem to be a hasty action to John Montford. In fact, joining the Marines didn't seem rash, either, but his mother, who already had one son in Vietnam and whose written permission Montford needed, balked at that, so the seventeen-year-old rural Plevna native had to settle for the Air Force. Montford's adventurous nature wasn't the sole product of an active adolescent imagination, either. Even though he was small for his age, Montford wasn't one to stand by and watch. At six, he was operating the simpler farm equipment, and by 10 he was performing all the usual farm chores, including bucking bales weighing as much as he.<sup>5</sup>

At age six, too, Montford had the first of many unexpected adventures that didn't involve farm implements when the family home burned. A 1,000-bushel metal grain bin was the only waterproof structure on the farm, so Montford's family moved into it and stayed through the summer months while his father recovered from the extensive third-degree burns he had suffered while fighting the fire and the family cleaned up and rebuilt. Nine years and two days later, the family home burned again. This time, the Montfords moved into the barn, but were there only three weeks. Instead of rebuilding, they bought a two-story house and moved it onto their farm.<sup>6</sup>

One family incident ended in tragedy, though, when in 1968 Montford's youngest brother, Danny, was killed in a motorcycle-truck wreck at a blind intersection not far from the family farm. The man driving the truck owned two of the corner quarters at the intersection, and both were overgrown with trees and weeds, even though township officials had asked him several times to clear them. The corners got cleared, though, two days after the fatal accident, Montford recalled: "Well, it seems the place caught on fire, and about 200 acres of trees burned up. The county sheriff came out to the farm and said, 'Nothing like this had better happen again,' and I said I didn't think it would, so he just drove off."<sup>7</sup>

Despite his mother's efforts to the contrary, Montford's adventures continued, becoming more frequent and more hazardous, in the Air Force. After basic training at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, he spent the next two years training on aircraft weapons systems at Lowery AFB, Colorado; attending jump school while at Shaw AFB, South Carolina; and growing from 5'9" and 160 pounds to 6'3" and 245 pounds. Then, in



April, 1968, the airman third class arrived at the U.S. installation at Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, to begin his first tour of duty in Southeast Asia. A month after he got there, Montford volunteered for duty with JUST-MAG, the Joint U.S.-Thailand Military Advisory Group, an Air Force Special Forces unit that flew interdiction missions along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia:

"The aircraft would fly the trail and try to stop traffic, screw up the road, anything to slow them down, anything to cause them problems. Sometimes we'd run in there in Hueys, the regular choppers, and sometimes we'd use the HH-23s, the original Jolly Green Giants. We flew the trail a minimum of every other day, probably 100 times the first time I was there. A lot of times we'd fly fire suppression, where we shot at anybody who shot at us. And if there wasn't any, we'd just fly around looking for a target. We'd almost always draw small-arms fire, AK-47s, and a lot of times we'd get 23-millimeter or 37-millimeter antiaircraft fire. We always patched a few holes when we got back."<sup>8</sup>

JUST-MAG also provided support for ground units operating along trail, too: "We'd fly into friendly camps to bring them weapons or ammo and stay a week at a time. Generally it was Laotians. Some of those guys were still using muzzleloaders. We'd give them M-14s and they'd just go nuts." It was during one such visit to a friendly camp that Montford had one of his more memorable--and painful--adventures:

"We had a CAP, a civil action patrol, that went out and bought bows from the Montagnards, the native tribesmen, and sold them to people leaving country as souvenirs. We'd take the money and put it back into the Montagnard community, to help them out. We'd take beer with us on the CAP because the 'Yards loved beer. So they would drink some beer and we'd drink some of their rice wine, then we talked business. One night we decided we were going to roast a pig, which we did, but we drank a little too much rice wine and it got dark on us. You didn't travel the road back to town in the dark, so we radioed in and said we were going to spend the night with the 'Yards. There hadn't been any problems in that area for about three months, but that night the gooks decided they were going to blow up the 'Yard village. An incoming

mortar round blew up one hootch and a piece of wood came flying off it and, naturally, I had to trip over it, and I landed in a fire face-first."

The burn was superficial and healed quickly, but even now whenever Montford gets "knee-walkin' drunk," that part of his face that was singed in 1968 takes on a much more ruddy glow than the rest.

Montford completed his six-month tour in September and was reassigned to Grissom AFB, Indiana, and to duty on the B-58s carrying nuclear weaponry. A month later, though, he found himself on the levy to return to Southeast Asia, this time to Vietnam. After psychological-warfare and jungle training--"arctic" training, Montford remembered, since it took place in December--at Fairchild AFB, Washington; more weapons training at England AFB, Louisiana; and "snake school"--where for the last three days trainees are dropped into the jungle and hunted by native troops--in the Philippines; Montford arrived at the 4th Special Operations Squadron at Pleiku in February, 1969.

Here in Vietnam's Central Highlands, he manned the weaponry on *Puff* and *Spooky*, the two aircraft that gained fame for--and spread fear with--their three miniguns that could pump out up to 18,000 rounds of 7.62-millimeter ammunition per minute. To beleaguered friendly forces, the lumbering cargo planes converted to flying fortresses with unmatched firepower were saviors in the sky. But for the enemy, they were winged demons that rained death and destruction.

The 4th SOS flew support missions almost nightly for the 4th Infantry Division, which was also based in Pleiku and operated throughout the Central Highlands. It was on one of those night missions that Montford found out just how deadly *Spooky* could be. The crew

had been given a free-fire zone and had dropped some flares to shoot at for practice, but on a return pass they saw people trying to extinguish the flares:

"So real quick we got on the radio and got verification there were no friendlies in the area. Then we commenced to shoot the hell out of them. We had managed to stumble onto a concentration of the enemy that was moving. A couple of days later a guy from the 4th Infantry called up and said, 'You son of a bitches, you make more work for us! We had to go out there and count all them bodies.' We wound up with about 480 kills that night. Apparently they were just getting ready to move or had just finished moving, so they were all together. And we swept that whole box they gave us."<sup>12</sup>

Not too long after that incident, though, Montford's aircraft was the victim of enemy fire:

"We'd been picking up ground fire here and there, just like always, but for some reason this night it hit the right spots. They knocked out the right engine, so we were going to get a different airplane. But before we got off target, they hit the number two engine and it had no oil pressure, and just like a car without oil, it was going to stop. We unloaded everything we could but we were too far out to make it back, we were way over the fence north and west of Pleiku, into Laos. The situation was deteriorating badly, but they had the rescue choppers in the air long before we had to get out. The pilot and myself, as lead gunner, stayed on board while the other five jumped as close together as they could. We made a 360-degree turn and ten seconds before where the others jumped, we set thermite grenades with ten-second delay fuses on the control console, the navigator's station, one each on the three guns and one in the flare box. Thermite, that stuff will burn through 3-inch boilerplate in about fifteen seconds, so by the time it crashed that plane was almost totally burned up. Then we went to the back and jumped. We were on the ground less than two hours before the Army choppers picked us up."<sup>13</sup>

While such incidents illustrated that he and his crewmates were committed to doing the best job they could, Montford began to have doubts about how worthy Vietnam was of such efforts:

"They told us we was over there to help those people,

but we were over there because the politicians knew somebody that was either building planes or guns or ammunition. It started out as a fulfillment of the SEATO agreements, but it just developed into a political war. I started thinking that way about two months after I was in country, because those people didn't care, they'd been at war for hundreds of years already. They didn't know anything but war, and they weren't going out on a limb for anybody or anything. In fact, in my experience, 70 percent of the people played both side against the middle. They worked for the Americans during the day, then they carried rockets for the VC at night."

And Montford witnessed incidents that reinforced his opinions, such as the one in September at Fire Support Base Susan, near the Cambodian border:

"It was an artillery fire base about a half-mile from the border. ARVN Rangers were supposed to be guarding it, but there was a lot of enemy movement in the area and they had sneaked off. All hell broke loose down there. We came on target, there was another *Spooky* on target and there must have been fifty or sixty choppers floating around. We went through 800,000 rounds that night. We fired out of our regular load of 140,000 rounds, then went to the nearest air base twice and reloaded with more than 300,000 rounds and came back. We literally melted down two of our guns. We repaired one with parts we were carrying. The Army wound up having to blow the artillery guns and evacuate those people one or two at a time with the Hueys. Twenty-two of them got out. Later we heard that there had been at least an enemy battalion attacking them."<sup>14</sup>

For their extraordinary efforts that night, Montford and his fellow crewmen were awarded Distinguished Flying Crosses. They were also awarded Crosses of Gallantry with Valor by the Vietnamese military but Montford had a difficult time not telling the Vietnamese general presenting the awards what he thought of the ARVN soldiers who had not only run rather than fight, but didn't warn the American artillerymen of the impending attack. By the time Montford left Vietnam in February, 1970, he had also been awarded the Air Force Achievement

Medal, been promoted to airman fourth class, and had qualified for fourteen Air Medals with is 2,000-plus hours of flight time on *Puff*, *Spooky*, and helicopters. And he estimates that he and his crewmates fired more than 3 million rounds of ammunition in what he had come to believe was a lost cause.<sup>15</sup>

## NOTES

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## 5. OUT OF A TOUGH SPOT

Perhaps the most novel tactical innovation of the Vietnam War was the air assault. In these attacks, the familiar green and blue expanses of earth and sky would tilt dizzily as helicopters sharply banked into their final approaches toward an often blazing, smoking landing zone. Huddled four to a side on the edge of doorless cargo compartments, legs dangling into space, young American infantrymen sucked in the charred jungle air as they flipped their M-16 rifles off safe onto full-automatic fire.<sup>1</sup>

Eruptions of artillery could often be seen exploding down one side of the assault corridor while last-minute air strikes ripped up the other side with fragmentation bombs and intense 20-millimeter cannon fire. Armed choppers lazily suspended in the sky concentrated rocket and machine-gun fire into the far and rear approaches. The blurred tropical landscape flashed by eyes singed by burning gunpowder. The roar of whirling rotor blades and detonations pounded ears. Flak-vested door gunners hammered the blazing tree lines with a steady stream of tracer-laced M-60 machine-gun fire.<sup>2</sup>

The aircrews secretly prayed that nervous grunts wouldn't accidentally fire their weapons or drop a grenade. Many choppers had been lost due to careless rifle discharges through cabin roofs or unsecured grenades rolling across the metal floors and exploding. As the helicopters slowed and descended, some soldiers lowered themselves to stand on the outboard skids while still clinging to the aircraft sides. Then they leaped off and the choppers swiftly left the corridors by executing roundabout turns and taking off downwind in the

same direction they had come.<sup>3</sup>

The sudden availability of rugged, dependable helicopters in mass quantity allowed these craft to dominate the battlefield. They became the basis of a new doctrine--airmobility--a potentially devastating means of battlefield technology. Ground commanders were being offered massive vertical-assault capabilities, extra aerial firepower, and a degree of mobility never before experienced in warfare. Airmobility meant being able to attack from any direction, striking targets in otherwise impossible terrain, flying over barriers, bypassing enemy positions, and achieving tactical surprise.<sup>4</sup>

Airmobile tactics were perfected quickly, and soe throngs of green-clad warriors laden with bandoliers of ammunition were departing their bases on waves of choppers. Airmobility was most effective when used as the horse-mounted cavalry it had replaced. It reigned supreme in exploitation and pursuit after an enemy force had been broken or surrounded. Its purpose then became to destroy the enemy's ability to organize an effective defense.<sup>5</sup>

The helicopter served many other purposes, too. When troops were isolated by difficult terrain or enemy concentrations, the chopper was was their lifeline, delivering ammunition, clothes, replacements, and food--sometimes even hot food--to them. When soldiers had been wounded and every second counted, specially manned and equipped choppers would swoop in under the heaviest enemy fire and carry them off to safety and immediate medical care. And when soldiers died, the helicopter would lift them up to begin their journey home.<sup>6</sup>

At least 1,000 men counted on Stanley Millington to deliver them as safely as possible to the war, and at least 1,000 more counted on



him to deliver them safely from it. As the crew chief on a Huey, the troop-carrying helicopter that was the U.S. military's workhorse in Vietnam, the twenty-year-old rural Turon native logged more than 1,100 hours of flight time, beginning in June, 1968, while with Company B, 227th Aviation Battalion, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). After an unenthusiastic year of study at Kansas State Teachers College in Emporia and several weeks on his family's farm contemplating his future, Millington decided to join the Army. After basic training at Fort Bliss, Texas, and crew chief school at Fort Eustis, Virginia, he graduated with a promotion to specialist 4 and orders for Vietnam.<sup>7</sup>

After six days of jungle training at Binh Khe, Millington arrived at the 227th's base camp at Camp Evans, twenty miles north of Hue in June, 1968. The 1st Cav had been moved north in early April to break the Marine siege at Khe Sanh, then stationed at Camp Evans to assist the Marines in combatting the heavy concentrations of North Vietnamese troops still lurking in the lush, rugged terrain along the Demilitarized Zone after the battle for Hue during the '68 Tet Offensive. During his first month at Evans, Millington stayed on the ground, working in the 227th's maintenance section as many as sixteen hours a day, seven days a week.<sup>8</sup>

In late July, though, the company commander, a major from Hutchinson, near Millington's home, told him he would soon be getting his own ship, and on August 1, he took charge of one of the 227th's "slicks," soon dubbed *Kansas Pants* in honor of its new crew chief. As crew chief, Millington's duties were to make sure that his chopper was airworthy as much as possible, not an easy job considering that helicopters tended to tear themselves apart with the tremendous amounts

of torque and vibration they generated. So Millington had to perform minute daily inspections of his craft, repairing what he could himself and supervising any work done by others. Such inspections were performed the first thing in the morning and often in the dark, since 5:30 a.m. "cranks" were not uncommon. And while any crew chief was outranked by the two officers on board--the aircraft commander and his understudy, the "peter pilot"--he had the final say on whether the chopper flew that day: "The first thing the AC always asked me was 'Are you going up with us today, Chief?' If I said yes, he went ahead and got in the cockpit. If I said no, nobody got on board."<sup>9</sup>

While maintaining his ship was an absolutely essential part of Millington's job, flying in *Kansas Pants* was his reason for doing it. His first few days in the air over the northern reaches of Vietnam, as described in his letters home, were exhilarating: "The view from the air is just great. We see herds of water buffalo, they look like Brown Swiss except they have long horns. Almost every square mile you can see graveyards with about twenty or thirty tombstones. Of course, we see the gooks working in rice paddies and in their sampans... Have been real busy flying, almost thirty hours since the first. Been flying some troops in and out of the A Chau Valley and it's just beautiful. Almost like Colorado."<sup>10</sup>

Within two weeks, though, after long days of carrying 1st Cav troops and Marines into and out of "hot" LZs in that scenic but rugged terrain, Millington had changed his mind: "I really don't care to see anymore mountains... That's the only time I worry is when we fly north into the mountains. I really appreciate level ground now." By the end of his first month on *Kansas Pants*, Millington had easily qualified for

for his first Air Medal by flying at least twenty-five hours of combat-assault missions. By the time he left Vietnam eleven months later, he would qualify for thirty-seven more and be promoted to specialist 5.<sup>11</sup>

Millington's work didn't cease with ship maintenance. Once *Kansas Pants* lifted off, its crew chief became a door gunner, strapping himself into a seat behind one of the two M-60 machine guns on either side of the open cargo bay and spraying the area around the LZ with bullets as the slick approached, touched down, then departed. And Millington wasn't just trying to scare the enemy off with the loud, rapid fire:

"I had two officer-confirmed kills. I'm sure there were more, but a lot of times you'd just see somebody fall and you didn't stop to see if he was dead. On the LZs, they was shootin' at you, too, and off the LZs you were flyin' at 150 miles per hour. My helicopter took lots of hits. The peter pilot took a hit one time and the AC took schrapnel from a rocket once, and there was lots of small-arms hits. One time we got shot up pretty bad and I could smell the JV-4 fuel. We got back and maintenance pulled the fuel cell out and they pulled this AK-47 armor-piercin' round out of it. I sent it home to Mother and she made a paperweight out of it for her desk."<sup>12</sup>

*Kansas Pants* did crash once, but not as the result of enemy fire:

"We was flyin' CAs and we were trying to set down in a dry rice paddie. There was so much dust flyin' you couldn't see. One skid hit a dike an' kicked the ass-end of the chopper up, then the blades hit the ground out in front an' just blew us right over. It was a hot LZ an' there were two more ships comin' in right behind us. The "packs" just fell out, but the other door gunner, the AC, the peter pilot an' me was hangin' upside down because we were strapped in. I about bit my tongue in two, but the peter pilot didn't make it, a piece of the blade got him in the head. The ships that came in behind us took us to the hospital an' they sewed me up, then we went back to our unit."

*Kansas Pants* was retrieved, repaired, and back in the air within days.<sup>13</sup>

Flying CAs was often a nerve-racking experience, but it was almost always a rewarding one for Millington:

"We could haul up to six GIs with packs, more if they weren't loaded down. The GIs, I know they went through hell. Goddamn, we'd take them out--I've seen 'em so dirty and' stinkin' an' tired--an' by god we'd turn right around and put 'em back in. Every goddamn time we extracted some guys we felt good, 'cause we knew we were gettin' 'em out of a tough spot. That was very important to me. You're goddamn right, it was important."<sup>14</sup>

Millington did not get the same sense of accomplishment when transporting Vietnamese troops, though:

"ARVN's, we could haul eleven or twelve, they were a lot smaller an' those assholes wouldn't carry anything because they wouldn't stay out overnight, they was such poor soldiers. You put 'em out in the mornin' an' you had to pick 'em up before dark. Our guys were almost always packed for four or five days. One time we flew in to pick up some ARVN's an' we got hit. We landed in a hot LZ, the NVA were dug in right under us an' they just shot the shit out of us. The ARVN's, them jackasses, they just sat around in the trees. They had to know the NVA was there."

Millington held his distaste for ARVN's in check, though, and his overall performance was exceptional enough that *Kansas Pants* was designated "Yellow One" in early October. That meant that Millington's slick would then be the lead ship on CAs, a particular honor for a crew chief, especially for one who had been in country only four months.<sup>15</sup>

In early November, the 227th was transferred to Quan Loi, 500 miles to the southwest of Camp Evans. As *Kansas Pants* and the other slicks made their way out of the rugged mountains near the DMZ, over the sandy expanses of the South China Sea coastline, then westward into the jungles along the Cambodian border, Millington littered the landscape with 25,000 "Chieu Hoi" pamphlets, which urged the VC and NVA to change sides.<sup>16</sup>

During his time in Quan Loi and, after March, 1969, Tan Son Nhut, fifteen miles northwest of Saigon, Millington's duties became more varied. *Kansas Pants* still flew a lot of CAs, but it also flew many

missions for logistical support, medical evacuation, and command control. "Charlie-charlie"--command control--involved taking commanding officers, usually colonels and generals, up and hovering over a ground combat operation: "I never did like it because you just hover up there, an' you know the gooks would love to knock down the big brass. In a helicopter, you don't have no speed an' somethin' happens, even somethin' little, you're goin' to fall out of the sky." Flying "log" meant delivering supplies such as ammunition, clothing, food, and water to troops operating in the field. It was usually easy duty since the AC flew high on the way to the LZ to avoid enemy fire and the troops were more than willing to assist in unloading the ship.<sup>17</sup>

On occasions when all designated "medivacs" were busy, *Kansas* *Pants* would be called upon to assist. That occurred twenty or thirty times, which was twenty or thirty times too often for Millington. But the worst duty Millington faced was flying "KIA": "I flew KIA for three months, just takin' the guys killed in action out. Some was in body bags, some was just thrown in ponchos. We hauled a lot of ARVNs, too. I had to handle them, to get them on an' off, 200 or 300 anyway. The floor was so red that we'd take five or ten gallons of water to wash the blood off. I hated that. CAs was a lot more dangerous, but I would rather fly those any day. At least I could do 'em some good then."<sup>18</sup>

## NOTES

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7. Personal interview with Stanley Millington, Turon, Kansas, March 14, 1990.
8. Ibid.  
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## 6. A SHORT LIFE

In the first quarter of 1965, 71 Americans were killed in Vietnam; in the last quarter, 920; and by 1966, an average of 400 U.S. soldiers per month lost their lives as they sought out the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong from the swamps of the Mekong Delta to the mountainous jungles along the Demilitarized Zone far to the north. The war they fought was not one of full-blown conventional battle. Rather, it consisted of small, vicious encounters, usually inconclusive, always bloody. This was a war of attrition, fought without front lines and without strategic objectives, against an enemy as difficult to find as he was to kill.<sup>1</sup>

As 1965 began, the communists were steadily expanding their control over the countryside, and their switch to larger-scale operations against South Vietnamese forces had produced victory after victory. However, with the South Vietnamese on the brink of defeat, the United States stepped in to thwart the communist offensive. Faced with such overwhelming logistical and firepower superiority, the communist leaders were forced to rethink their strategy. While maintaining their forces in large units, they decided upon a return to guerrilla tactics, adopting a waiting-game strategy. At the end of 1966, the North Vietnamese leadership drew up a list of their goals for the following year. Heading the list was the number of U.S. casualties--dead and wounded--they wished to inflict: 50,000. Now, as the guerrilla teams deployed around the country, they would lie in wait not to liberate or secure strategic locations, but to kill Americans.<sup>2</sup>

One of the problems facing the U.S. forces throughout the entire



war was their inability to initiate contact with the enemy. They continued to fight the war on the Viet Cong's terms. The static, defensive nature of the U.S. involvement during these years contributed greatly to the problem. Lacking either adequate troops or effective intelligence to actively seek out the enemy, U.S. troops were forced to wait for them to make contact.<sup>3</sup>

Initially, the VC had been unable to offset the tremendous edge in mobility and support which the United States enjoyed through its helicopters. Although U.S. troops had to wait for the VC to attack, they were able to call in reinforcements quickly enough to turn the tide in many engagements. The guerrillas, however, quickly developed several methods of countering the U.S. advantage. One tactic they employed was to attack a single U.S. unit and then wait to ambush the inevitable helicopter support. As 1967 ended, American resolve to continue the war remained firm. Still, the end was not in sight, and no one could say for certain when it would be over. What was certain, however, was that more Americans were on their way to Vietnam, and many of them would die there.<sup>4</sup>

"We took them out of body bags. We washed the body bags. Arms and legs. People blown in half. It was a terrible smell. And they were so full, lined up outside, flies all around 'em. Then the morticians, they was somethin' else, too. They could be workin' on this guy blown to pieces with one hand and eatin' a sandwich with the other hand. I couldn't eat for three days. We were just cherries. Later, you got used to it. But the first time, that hit you all at once."

Gerald Webster spent three of his first days in Vietnam at the Da Nang military mortuary in June 1968. The twenty-year-old Langdon native had completed basic training and infantry training at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, earlier in 1968, then received his orders for Vietnam. His

departure was especially poignant since he was leaving behind his high-school sweetheart and wife of just a few months, Joyce. But it was comforting for Webster to know that Joyce was waiting for his return: "She was pretty important to me. She kept me from doin' a lot of stupid things. I tried harder to stay alive and come back." And during their brief reunion during his R&R in Hawaii, Joyce became pregnant, so Webster had the prospect of fatherhood to motivate him, too.<sup>5</sup>

After the mortuary duty, the private first class was assigned to the 57th Transportation Company at Utah Beach, twenty miles south of Quang Tri, as an M-60 machine gunner on a 2½-ton gun truck. He had seven confirmed kills, all coming in defense of the supply and troop convoys his gun truck escorted along the dangerous routes near Phu Bai, Quang Tri, the A Shau Valley, and the DMZ in the northern reaches of South Vietnam.<sup>6</sup>

While at Utah Beach, the 57th operated in support of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), which was assisting the Marines in fighting large numbers of NVA troops in the region. In November, the 1st Cav relocated northwest of Saigon and the 57th moved into Quang Tri to support the 101st Airborne Division, which was battling the NVA and VC forces trying to control the A Shau Valley 100 miles to the west.<sup>7</sup>

The 57th hauled everything from C rations to ammunition, anything the troops in the field needed, to the remote landing zones and base camps in the region. Depending on the size of the convoy, there could be as many as three gun trucks on escort duty. Each was equipped with two M-60s and with anything else the gunners found useful: hand grenades, M-79 grenade launchers, captured AK-47 rifles, even rockets.<sup>8</sup>

After a few months in country, Webster became a gun truck leader and was responsible for radio checks at preset points along the convoy route. If these checkpoint communications were interrupted, his superiors would begin a search at the last confirmed checkpoint. With the radio, too, Webster could call in air support if a convoy stalled during an attack:

"We got hit a lot of times. There was a lot of rockets, mortars, and mines, and a lot of small-arms fire, too. You had to keep movin' or you were dead. One time a mortar knocked off the fender and hood of my truck, but we kept right on goin'. Another time, a mortar round hit my truck and I fell over the side. It knocked me out and I broke a bone in my foot, I think. I never went to the doctor, I just hobbled around."

For his actions in ten such engagements, Webster was awarded the Army Achievement Medal and promoted to specialist 4.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the danger that lurked there, Webster enjoyed being out in the Vietnamese countryside:

"I liked the climate myself. It was miserable sometimes during the monsoons, hot other times, but really I thought it was my kind of place. It was pretty, the rice paddies and all. If you wasn't fightin' a war, a guy could think it was nice. The people were friendly, too, a lot friendlier than we deserved considering some of the things we did to them. The kids were great, the women were great, the men I thought took a lot off of us, because we were bigger and stronger. Some of our guys would throw C-ration cans at people in villages when we went by. I've seen them hit them in the head and cut their head open. I wouldn't allow it myself or anybody around me, but sometimes you couldn't prevent it. It went on all the time over there."<sup>10</sup>

Having suffered through duty at the military morgue and after seeing the abuse some of his fellow soldiers meted out to civilians, Webster thought he had seen the worst the war could throw at him, but it was not to be the last. Billy Dodson, Webster's nephew from Kansas City, Missouri, was the same age and had often spent his childhood

summers with the Webster family: "Billy came and stayed with me almost every summer when school was out. When we was smaller, he stayed almost all year sometimes. We didn't do anything other than normal kids stuff, and when we were older we both worked for the same farmer for several years." The big-city kid and the small-town boy had formed a lifelong friendship, but Dodson's life was to be a short one.<sup>11</sup>

As boys, Dodson and Webster were enthralled by deeds of military derring-do and both were sure they would one day be Marines. Webster later changed his mind, opting for the draft and a two-year obligation rather than the three-year enlistment for Marines. Dodson, though, did join the Marines in 1967. He soon discovered that there was much more grit than glory in the military life and went AWOL. He returned on his own, though, after two months and was punished. Then he was sent to Vietnam where he was a radio operator in a combat unit. Sending Dodson to Vietnam was not part of the punishment for going AWOL. Marines were supposed to want to go into combat.<sup>12</sup>

Webster knew his nephew was already in country when he arrived, and he knew that he was stationed near Da Nang, not too far from Utah Beach. He found out exactly where he was, though, on July 4:

"I was out on patrol and when I got back they said the captain wanted to see me. I went in an' he told me Billy had got killed. He was killed by a hand grenade, but I really don't know how. They didn't give too specific of events. The Marines, the Red Cross, and Billy's mother and his wife were wanting me to escort the body back, but the Army didn't much want me to go."

After the Marines and the Red Cross made formal requests for Webster to accompany his nephew's body home for burial, though, the Army acquiesced. Dodson's body had already been sent to Treasure Island, California, for preparation, so Webster flew there and waited the

three days the process took. He then accompanied the casket to Kansas City, supervising the loading and unloading of it each time it was handled.<sup>13</sup>

A week after Dodson died in Vietnam, he was buried in his hometown: "They had a Marine honor guard to fire their rifles and stuff, and they had a bunch of us relation, like me and my other nephew who had also went to 'Nam, and some others in the Navy and Air Force; we was all in uniform and we were the pallbearers." After a few more days in Kansas City, then three days at his family home in Langdon, Webster faced a situation as trying as the death of his nephew: "I had been with my family and now I had to leave them all again. I realized then that I could die in 'Nam, too, and so did my family. They didn't want to see me go even more this time."<sup>14</sup>

Webster did go, though, but his thoughts were troubled by what had happened and what could happen: "I found out about Billy on July 4. A week later I brought him home to his family. Then I had to go back to 'Nam. I was on a commercial airline all the way, but it was one they had chartered to carry troops over there, so I was there with a bunch of guys that didn't know what they were gettin' into yet, an' I had just buried my nephew."<sup>15</sup>

## NOTES

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## 7. WOUNDS THAT NEVER HEAL

One of the most unusual American units to serve in combat during the Vietnam War was the Mobile Riverine Force, an Army infantry brigade and Navy flotilla that operated in the Mekong Delta. Organized to wage a specialized type of warfare, it followed doctrine that the Americans had not used since the southern river battles of the Seminole and Civil wars. For equipment, it relied upon old World War II ships, and it operated with no clearly defined command-and-control arrangements. Yet it was one of the most successful units of the entire war.<sup>1</sup>

The Delta has long been known as the "rice bowl of Southeast Asia." It was rice that first drew the French to the region in the mid-nineteenth century. And when the Japanese took over the French colony during World War II, their eyes were on the export of rice.

Still it was the riverine nature of the region that dominated its economic development. To carry rice and other goods to markets, the Vietnamese started a highly developed system of river and canal transportation. By the twentieth century, they had built more than 5,000 miles of navigable waterways. Peasants settled in small hamlets and villages along these maritime lanes, and larger towns and cities grew up where canals and rivers converged.<sup>2</sup>

Economic exploitation of the region by the French and Japanese had much to do with the rise of an anti-colonial insurgent movement in 1940 and the establishment of the National Liberation Front--later known as the Viet Cong--in the lush Delta province of Kien Hoa. By the early 1960s, guerrilla strength was sufficient to launch a limited offensive on isolated government outposts and a terrorist campaign against local

officials. By 1968, the VC in the Delta numbered 80,000 and were organized into twenty-eight battalions with three regimental headquarters, and North Vietnamese regular forces were beginning to infiltrate from Cambodia via the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The VC strategy of selected offensive and calculated intimidation was proving successful. They first gained control of the countryside and the waterways, and while they never took over any of the major towns, they did finally come to control the major roads, and rice shipments to Saigon were cut off. The Vietnamese government for the first time was forced to import rice to feed its own population.<sup>3</sup>

Breaking the VC stranglehold on the Delta required seeking out and destroying the enemy forces, and that became the task of the Riverine Force, composed of River Assault Flotilla 1 from Coronado, California, and a brigade from the 9th Infantry Division from Fort Riley, Kansas, based at Dong Tam on the Son My Tho River, forty miles south of Saigon. Dong Tam was both a land and a riverine base. The land base was created when Army engineers pumped enough sand from the river into adjacent rice paddies to create a one-square-mile tract that stood nine feet above river level. The riverine base was composed of several support vessels--barracks, hospital, maintenance, and supply ships--anchored mid-river. From here, Army infantry troops were carried into battle by Navy armored troop carriers, which were modified World War II landing craft mounted with 81-millimeter mortars, 40- and 20-millimeter automatic cannons, twin .50-caliber machine guns, and 40-millimeter automatic grenade launchers.<sup>4</sup>

Initial riverine operations were successful beyond anyone's expectations. The enemy had chosen to stand and fight, but the



Riverine Force's firepower and mobility were overwhelming and it inflicted heavy losses while its own confidence grew. The VC stranglehold was soon broken, but the war in the Delta was far from over. The enemy merely changed its strategy from one of large, set-piece battles to one of increasing small-unit fighting and deadly ambushes.<sup>5</sup>

That was the situation James Brown found himself in when he arrived at the Navy's 92 Division of River Assault Squadron 9 in December, 1968. The twenty-one-year-old rural Plevna native had joined the Navy Reserves in 1967 and was called to active duty in early 1968. He knew when he said goodbye to Kathy, the high-school sweetheart he had married, that he was ultimately destined for Vietnam.<sup>6</sup>

After boot camp at Great Lakes Naval Station, Illinois, Brown went to weapons training at Vallejo, California, where he learned to operate the 20-millimeter automatic cannon. From there, the boatswain's mate 2 went to Vietnam and was assigned to Dong Tam. His boat, M-92-1, was a command-and-communications vessel, and the officer on board--often a commodore--was in charge of the operations that day. Because of the command-and-communications functions, M-92-1 personnel had to have a security clearance. That included the boatswain's mate who operated the boat and the five gunners on board. The "C and C" was accompanied by the "Tango boats," the ATCs which could carry as many as fifty troops and whose numbers varied according to the size of the operation.<sup>7</sup>

During an operation, the ATC crews were at general quarters from the time they left the riverine base until they returned. The ATCs would take the Army troops to a designated debarkation point, drop them

off, and pick up any troops being replaced, return them to their land base, then go back to the riverine base. While the troops were occasionally picked up at the Dong Tam land base, most often they were transported by helicopter to the riverine base and loaded there. Brown and his fellow ATC crew members never left their boats during an operation; they performed purely as support for the Army ground troops. The heavy weaponry on the ATCs was used to "prep" the beach before the infantry went aground, firing hundreds of rounds into the lush vegetation that crowded the Delta waterways--and often hid the enemy. If any resistance was met, the ATCs stayed in the fight until the landing area was secure. Such operations were performed a minimum of three times per week, and, when "Charlie" was particularly active, every day.<sup>8</sup>

Being in the aft of the ATC, Brown had to settle for seeing where the boat had been, not where it was going, a particularly ticklish situation since that meant the enemy almost always saw him before he saw them. And while Brown estimated that his ATC encountered enemy fire on 80 percent of its missions, he noted that the craft's heavy weaponry kept the VC and NVA from being too bold. Brown's cannon could fire 400 rounds per minute, although the recoil was so heavy that his knees would start to buckle after twenty rapid-fire shots. It had been used as an anti-aircraft weapon on ships during World War II and had a harness of two-inch steel pipe padded with foam rubber. It also had a one-inch-thick steel body shield, but Brown had to keep his head exposed above it to see where he was firing. With 4,000 rounds of high-explosive ammunition on board, the 20-millimeter was by itself a significant deterrent to the enemy, no matter who saw who whom first.<sup>9</sup>

Because of the heavy cover along the waterways he traveled and the volatility of his weapon, Brown was unsure how many of the enemy fell before him: "We'd go in an' prep a beach area an' the Army would come back an' say 'You guys had twenty-eight kills,' or somethin' like that. The gun I shot, it had high-explosive rounds. There usually wasn't nothin' left of 'em if I hit 'em. You'd find arms an' legs, that's about it. If I hit 'em, it would be like puttin' a stick of dynamite in their chest and lightin' it."<sup>10</sup>

Brown's unit operated in the same general areas all the time, and his crew became very familiar with the streams and villages there. Most of the operations were day-long, beginning early in the morning so the ATCs would have plenty of time to transport the troops the fifteen or twenty miles required, drop the off, and get back to the "Big Blue," the clear-water stretch of the Son My Tho where the riverine base was anchored, before nightfall. Occasionally, the ATCs would be involved in two- or three-day operations that would take them up the Son My Tho into the Mekong River and all the way to the Cambodian border, a 200-mile round trip. Those longer operations were in the large rivers, where it was often a half-mile or more between the banks. Such actions were pleasure cruises to Brown and his crewmates compared to those in the myriad of small streams where the enemy thrived. Most of Brown's time in Vietnam was on such missions, taking the Army troops back up into the remote areas of the Delta. Often he found his ten-foot-wide ATC negotiating a twenty-foot-wide waterway. There was no place to go but right up the middle. If the enemy attacked, they would fight, because there was no escape.<sup>11</sup>

One thing the ATC crews never did, though, was go into a stream

so narrow that they couldn't turn the craft around because the boatswain's mate driving the boat couldn't see to back it out. But the ATCs could negotiate many narrow streams since, by throttling forward on one of the craft's twin engines and back on the other, the boat could almost spin on its axis.<sup>12</sup>

On May 28, 1969, Brown went through his most harrowing experience of the war:

"We was in a firefight down from what they called the Crossroads out of Dong Tam. It was one of the days we took B-40s (rockets). My gun had jammed an' I'd quit firin' to clear it, an' I'd no more 'n got it cleared an' somethin' blew up. What had happened, apparently, either the brass off the B-40 or another round came in an' exploded one of my rounds in the gun while I was clearin' it. That's what hit me was the brass off my shell casing. It got me in the face, left arm and side, an' my legs just above my knees. I had a lot of small puncture wounds. An' I flash-burned my eyes. Like welder burn only worse. I blacked out for two or three seconds, but I walked off under my own power."

The commodore was not on board Brown's ATC that day, but he was in a helicopter above the battle. When he heard the radio traffic about a wounded man, he landed his chopper nearby, loaded Brown onto it, and flew him to the hospital ship anchored at the riverine base, where Brown was treated:

"They had to scrape my eyes. They went in an' cut the first layer off, it was burned so bad. I could see, but it wasn't clear. I had to be awake while they operated. They froze my eyeballs, but there was no anesthetic. I watched 'em come at me with that little silver knife. I was in sick bay for about two weeks. They wouldn't let me back out into the air until most of the scabs had healed pretty good. They was afraid if I got out there and got to sweatin' they'd get infected."<sup>13</sup>

The doctors removed many of the fragments from the exploding shells, but they didn't get them all:

"I'm still carryin' some of the brass. They said the little stuff would keep workin' to the surface, an' it did for like two years after I got back. I was shavin' once an' I hit somethin' in my face an' it was a piece of that brass that had worked to the surface. An' I took brass out of my arm for a long time. I have to wear sunglasses all the time now. I can't walk from shade to sunlight without my glasses because my eyes won't change fast enough now."

For his wounds, Brown received the Purple Heart, and for his part in the Navy's river-assault operations, he was promoted to boatswain's mate 3, and given the Navy Achievement Medal for Combat Valor.<sup>14</sup>

Brown's time in Vietnam was not over, though. He was reassigned as an adviser to Vietnamese forces taking over the highly successful river-assault operations, part of President Richard Nixon's "Vietnamization" effort. He likes to point out that, as a result of his adviser status, he served with the largest navy in the world, the U.S. Navy, and the tenth largest navy, Vietnam's. The Vietnamese officer Brown worked with was a navy lieutenant who had an engineering degree. While the officer was officially in command, he was expected to heed Brown's advice during the training period. They became friends and Brown spent time with the officer's family in Saigon. Brown and his crewmates also got to know the villagers along the waterways they traveled, but at a discreet distance: the crewmen never went into the villages and they never let the villagers onto the boats.<sup>15</sup>

In November, 1969, Brown left Vietnam and returned to his wife and the 1965 Ford Galaxie 500 convertible she had waiting for him as a welcome-home present. He remembers having no real difficulties then, although he and his wife had to get reacquainted after a year apart, and he refused to go hunting for four years for fear of harming someone. He was, he remembers, ready to get on with the rest of his life.<sup>16</sup>

The anti-war demonstrations in the United States bothered him, though, particularly the movement's portrayal of the soldiers in Vietnam as oppressors and lackies of corrupt politicians. And he was appalled by the anti-American and rabid anti-military sentiments that erupted as actress Jane Fonda and other radicals made pilgrimages to Hanoi and announced their solidarity with the leaders of an army locked in deadly combat with American troops:

"The only thing I hate about the war is that Jane Fonda, Hanoi Jane, and those people like her. There was a bad public image for Vietnam veterans and they were leadin' it. I think what they did encouraged the North Vietnamese, and I think it killed a lot of American soldiers that wouldn't have died otherwise. No matter how much they disagreed with U.S. foreign policy then, there's no excuse for what they did. I can never forgive them for that."

Brown's war wounds have healed the best they could over the years. Shell fragments no longer work their way out of his arm or face, and the sunglasses he routinely wears are just a fact of life now. But his anti-war wounds, wounds inflicted by those he believes turned on their own, are the kind that never heal.<sup>17</sup>

## NOTES

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2. Ibid.; Cochran, p. 10; Fulton, pp. 56-60.
3. Cochran, pp. 62-3; House, pp. 41-2.
4. Ibid.; Cochran, pp. 62-3.
5. Cochran, pp. 64-6; House, pp. 43-4.
6. Personal interview with James Brown, Boone, North Carolina, April 14, 1990.
7. Ibid.
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10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
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15. Ibid.
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17. Ibid.; Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), p. 419.

## 8. A MOMENT OF MERCY

At the beginning of the Vietnam War, American convoys offered lucrative targets with minimal risk to the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces, and their ambush expertise soon threatened most overland lines of support. The U.S. Military Assistance Command considered military traffic and road security critical, since most inland bases depended on convoy supply, and their disruption hampered ongoing field operations. Truck movement provided most of the support for more than 1 million American and South Vietnamese troops dispersed over 66,000 square miles.<sup>1</sup>

Convoy protection had to be improvised, as the military police that the Army assigned were too few in number to give adequate security. Early efforts were marked by a variety of transportation safety measures, including attempts to make convoys too costly to attack and reliance on mobile reaction forces, which were geared to the red, amber, and green road classifications. Red lanes required infantry and engineer support to open them; amber lanes were frequently attacked by NVA or VC forces and demanded high security; and green lanes could be used by vehicles during daylight hours with less caution.<sup>2</sup>

The VC and NVA used ambush tactics against the Americans that had been perfected during the French-Indochina War. Initial fire was concentrated on several vehicles within the convoy in order to destroy them and block further traffic. Trucks in the center were the preferred targets, and once the convoy had been brought to a standstill, mortar and rocket fire were directed against individual vehicles. Ditches and adjacent brush were often mined to cause losses among



dismounting troops trying to gain better defensive positions.

Sometimes ground attacks were staged to overrun the trapped sections of the convoy. Drivers were told to keep moving at all costs and to contact security forces at the first sign of trouble.<sup>3</sup>

Highways 14 and 19 were both amber when David Welch began patrolling them in January, 1969. The roads were like giant snakes winding their way through the red soil of the Central Highlands around Pleiku, headquarters of the 4th Infantry Division to which Welch was attached as a member of Battery E, 41st Artillery Battalion. Built during the French regime, Colonial Routes 14, which stretched north from Tay Ninh to Dak To, and 19, which ran west from Qui Nhon through Pleiku and on into Cambodia, had seen many historic battles in their twenty years. Early in the Vietnam War, though, the roads took on a much different look than that the French had seen. Engineers used Rome plows to clear jungle for 100 yards on either side and, in less than a year, the two-lane dirt roads had been paved. Both of these improvements contributed to the well-being of the cargo and troops destined for combat throughout the Highlands, and the truckers who delivered them there. Such measures could not guarantee their absolute safety, though, especially when the enemy stepped up the incidence of one of its favorite tactics, the highway ambush.<sup>4</sup>

Such ambushes would soon become a fact of life for Welch. After basic training at Fort Polk, Louisiana, known as "Tigerland" because of its mission to train troops for combat in climate and terrain much like those in Vietnam, the twenty-year-old rural Langdon man was surprised to find that he was not scheduled for infantry training as were most of his fellow trainees. Instead, he was sent to

Headquarters and Headquarters Battery, 4th Battalion, 62nd Air Defense Brigade at Fort Bliss, Texas, and assigned as a clerk in its missile maintenance section. His work in straightening out the section's shoddy maintenance records for the battalion's Nike-Hercules missiles earned him quick promotions, exemptions from extra duty, and a security clearance. When, in November, 1968, the section passed its first inspection in three years, Welch was surprised to be promoted to specialist 5 and awarded an Army Commendation Medal for Meritorious Service. He was even more surprised, and unpleasantly so, when less than a month later he received orders for Vietnam. After a short leave to visit his family, Welch left the frigid Kansas winter and traveled into the midsummer swelter of the Central Highlands.<sup>5</sup>

Gun Truck 9 was better known along the roads it traveled as the *Louisville Slugger*. Its crew members were all baseball fans, their hootch was dubbed "the dugout," they proudly referred to themselves as the "damned Yankees," and the gun truck leader when Welch arrived was a Kentucky native. The *Slugger* was indeed a heavy hitter with its M-55 "Quad 50s" heavy machine gun system. The four .50-caliber guns in the power turret could spew out a maximum of 3,200 rounds per minute to an effective range of 1,000 yards. The effective rate of fire was lower, but even at 1,000 or 1,500 rounds per minute, the *Slugger* in action was a fearsome sight. For defenses, the 2½-ton truck on which the weapon was mounted had armor plating on the front, sides, and cab and cargo floors, and several layers of sandbags wherever they could be stacked.<sup>6</sup>

Welch was soon riding the *Slugger* on frequent convoy escort duty, but he first learned just how effective a weapon it was during a night assault on Pleiku in early February. American forces countrywide had

been on alert for weeks in case the VC and NVA attempted a repeat of the '68 Tet Offensive. For the *Slugger* crew, that meant stepped-up convoy duty and perimeter defense every night at the sprawling American facility in Pleiku. Welch had quickly qualified to operate the Quad 50s and, because of his rank, was designated second gunner. The first gunner and gun truck leader was scheduled to leave the country in mid-February and Welch would take his place and be given sergeant stripes. Welch was asleep on the *Slugger* when the first mortar and rocket rounds hit at 1 a.m., then the whole perimeter came alive with incoming small-arms and machine-gun fire. As the American troops began returning fire, floodlights and flares illuminated the perimeter fences and the cleared free-fire zone beyond, and numerous shapes--seemingly hundreds--could be seen advancing.<sup>7</sup>

The first gunner had already opened up with the Quad 50s, and Welch soon had his hands full spotting for him, handling ammunition, and taking his turn in the turret. The attack lasted for two hours, although it seemed to be over in just minutes, but the *Slugger* crew opened up throughout the night at movements and sounds real or imagined. At first light, infantry units moved out to sweep the perimeter and the *Slugger* crew moved to the fences, where they counted twenty-three enemy dead on the ground or hanging in the wire. Fifteen of them had the mutilating wounds inflicted by .50-caliber fire, so the *Slugger* gunners got credit for those kills, the first gunner getting eight and Welch getting seven, and each crew member was awarded an Army Commendation Medal for Combat Valor. Welch would be credited with twelve more enemy kills and another Army Commendation Medal before he left Vietnam in March, 1970.<sup>8</sup>

The "damned Yankees" did not function with impunity, though, as Welch found out in early April:

"It was on Highway 19 just west of An Khe. The convoy we were escorting hit an ambush. I was on the Quads when I saw out of the corner of my eye that a B-40 rocket was coming at me. It looked way low, so I kept firing. The rocket hit something, elephant grass I think, but it didn't detonate. Instead, it skipped and kept coming, but I couldn't see it anymore. It hit short again, but this time it detonated and it was close enough to splatter the truck with fragments, and a chunk hit me above my right eye. The second gunner jerked me out of the turret and jumped in and suppressed the ambush pretty quick. Once the convoy was secure, we highballed it into the field hospital at Pleiku. A medic there wiped some of the blood off, wiggled the fragment stuck in my head a little bit, then just jerked it out. I went right back on the truck, but for a week after that, every time I moved my head very fast I felt like I'd been beamed. They gave me a Purple Heart for that wound, but it didn't make my head feel any better."<sup>9</sup>

In May, there were several company-size enemy probes along the Laotian border northwest of Pleiku, and farther to the north U.S. forces were engaged in fierce fighting with whole divisions of NVA regulars. As a result the 4th Infantry stepped up its patrols along the roads north of Pleiku and deployed all available combat-support units, including the *Slugger* and its crew. Things were tense, and American troops were unsympathetic to anyone even suspected of assisting the enemy. In mid-May, Welch was manning the Quads as the *Slugger* escorted a platoon-size patrol through a series of villages northwest of Dak To:

"The grunts were tense and sticking pretty close to the gun truck. They would fan out to search a ville only after I signaled that it looked clear. I was up higher and could see better than they could. They had already roughed up a couple of papa-sans and threatened to burn their hootches. When we pulled into the third ville, I didn't see anyone at first, then a man jumped up from behind a well and ran into a hootch. I was surprised

one of the grunts didn't waste him right then, but maybe they felt a little safer since we were along and we had a lot of firepower. Every weapon, including the Quad 50s, were pointed at that hootch and we could see some movement inside. Then the man came out very slowly, and he was carrying a dark object in his hands, holding it out in front of himself. He started toward the truck and he was looking right at me. I stood up in the turret, so no one would start shooting. He and I are still looking at each other, and I can sense that he's not a threat to us, that he's a lot more afraid of us than we are of him. When he got up to the truck, he held out the thing in his hands, and he was nodding his head, almost like a bow, with a kind of painful smile on his face. I think he knew he was lucky to still be alive after running like that. I reached down with my right hand--my left hand was still on the Quad's trigger--and took the object. It was a wooden Buddha figurine, painted black. I looked at it for a few seconds, then I raised it up so everyone could see it and smiled. Then the grunts started laughing and some came up and slapped him on the back. Then they searched the hootches and we went on down the road to the next ville."<sup>10</sup>

Since that day in 1969, Welch has come to believe that that one incident held particular significance in his life; that while it was just one in hundreds of memorable events he experienced in Vietnam, it will always be the one most memorable. And to capture what he could of it, he committed it to verse:

#### BUDDHA

*Once,  
it was  
the desperate  
gift of gratitude  
from a toothless  
old man  
for a fierce  
young warrior's  
moment of mercy.*

*Now,  
it is  
the ex-soldier's  
slight symbol  
of self-salvation.<sup>11</sup>*

## NOTES

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3. Little, pp. 21-2; Stanton, pp. 274-8.
4. *Ibid.*; Little, pp. 23-4; personal interview with David Welch, Emporia, Kansas, March 16, 1990.
5. *Ibid.*
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7. Welch interview.
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9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*

## 9. NOTHING WOULD EVER MATTER AS MUCH

The 7th Cavalry is perhaps the most well-known Army unit in American history. It was the one that went down at Montana's Little Bighorn River in 1876 in what is known as Custer's Last Stand, where it dared a reckless attack against an enemy of unknown strength during the Plains Indian wars. Eighty-nine years later, on November 9, 1965, the brash 7th, mounted on helicopters instead of horses, ventured once again into hostile territory, the Ia Drang Valley of western Vietnam, and once again confronted a foe of unknown strength, the North Vietnamese Army.<sup>1</sup>

Late in the morning, the 7th touched down at Landing Zone X-Ray under the forbidding Chu Pong Massif on the western rim of the valley. After securing the LZ, the 7th moved north and west up a heavily jungled ridge, spotted some NVA soldiers on a well-traveled trail, and decided to pursue. As the lead platoon crossed a dry creek bed, a volley of automatic-weapons fire ripped into it. Several soldiers were spun around by the impact of multiple bullet wounds and thrown to the ground. All attempts by Company B to force its way across the creek and link up with the pinned platoon were repulsed with heavy losses.<sup>2</sup>

As Companies A, C, and D joined the fray, mortars started shelling the area and rocket-propelled grenades slammed into the cavalry lines, and the NVA infantry assaulted across the tall grass on the valley floor. Air strikes and massed artillery missions were frantically called in, almost up to the 7th's own positions. The horrendous series of close-packed explosions shattered the NVA assault. Late in the afternoon, the 7th began digging in, forming a tight, circular defense

around the LZ. Parachute flares floated gently through the night sky, casting eerie, moving shadows on the ground, but illuminating the area well enough to make even the aggressive NVA troops balk at attacking.<sup>3</sup>

At first light, though, the LZ was raked by heavy automatic-rifle fire and then stormed by the North Vietnamese. Even the air strikes and artillery bombardments failed to stop them this time, and the cavalymen found themselves in hand-to-hand combat with the enemy, wielding their bayonets and even their entrenching tools as weapons. American dead and wounded lay sprawled across the dirty, blood-stained khaki of NVA bodies. By 9 a.m., the NVA attack had been broken, and by 1 p.m. a relief column from the 5th Cavalry arrived. Shortly after that, the NVA broke contact altogether. The 7th Cavalry had won the battle of LZ X-Ray, killing 1,500 NVA soldiers, but losing 287 men of its own, 11 more than at the Little Bighorn.<sup>4</sup>

James Harris came under enemy fire seven of the first eight days he was with Delta Company, 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry Squadron of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). In fact, the twenty-year-old rural Langdon native was fired on just minutes after arriving in country when VC snipers opened up on the bus transporting him from Bien Hoa Airport to the 90th Replacement Battalion at Long Binh in February, 1969. Harris had no weapon with which to defend himself in that incident, but he got his M-16 when he processed through the 1st Cav headquarters at An Khe and was assigned to D-5-7th at Quan Loi, 60 miles northwest of Saigon. And while he didn't face any combat as intensive as the battle at LZ X-Ray, Harris did encounter deadly situations regularly: "It wasn't uncommon for our unit to be in contact with the enemy. Once in awhile when I was in the field there would be articles in *Stars and*



*Stripes* about lulls in the combat action, and our units were still out there killing gooks right and left. We weren't in any lull, because they would move us to where it was hot." Harris had done everything he could to prepare himself for combat, too. After basic training at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, he was sent to Fort Lewis, Washington, for infantry training during December, 1968, and January, 1969: "I worked hard in AIT to train right. I paid attention, even though I had a bad case of near-pneumonia or something and should have been going on sick call. If I was going to be a soldier, I was going to be a good one."<sup>5</sup>

But Harris soon discovered that in a real war, training wasn't everything:

"One day we were in combat from 9:30 in the morning to 6:30 that night, and while I couldn't see the gooks shooting at me, I could hear bullets whizzing all around. I realized it wasn't a fair contest. The poorest, lousiest soldier on the other side could kill you, because all he's got to do is just happen to point his gun in the right direction and he shoots you. All that effort I put into being a good soldier wouldn't change that. I was mad that I could be the best soldier on our side, or at least a good one, and the worst soldier on the other side could kill me. He could win and I could lose, and that wasn't fair at all."<sup>6</sup>

Being in a war zone wasn't all combat, though. Once it was being on patrol and turning around to find that some Montagnard tribesmen had silently come up behind you with their herd of water buffalo and even a few Jersey cows. It was having diarrhea much of the first two weeks in the field, finally feeling well enough to drink a quart of cold milk, then puking it up. It was washing and shaving in a helmet of water. It was leaning over as quickly as possible while holding your breath to untie your boots because your own crotch smelled so bad.

It was being concerned because you were down to your last packets of Kool-Aid and Fizzies. It was the glorious sensation of chugging two cans of cold Coke delivered to the bush by chopper. It was spending the day you turned twenty-one hacking a trail through the jungle then, that night, in the rain, in an isolated observation post. It was getting clean clothes after five days in the field. And it was feeling good about having ham and lima beans and white bread for supper.<sup>7</sup>

Combat did frequently punctuate Harris' time in the bush, and while it was always too close for comfort, sometimes it got even closer. On March 1, he was slightly wounded on the hip: "I thought at least I'll get to go to the rear and I'll be able to get something cold to drink. But the medic came along and just put a patch on it and I stayed in the field."<sup>8</sup>

Harris got his trip to the rear, though, on April 4. His unit had been in contact most of that day, and the area was layered in the green smoke being used by the troops to mark their locations so the Cobra helicopter gunships wouldn't hit them with the multitude of rockets they were firing in close support. The battle was so intense that trees up to six inches in diameter were being felled by rifle fire. Late in the afternoon, Harris' company began to dig in for the night and he and a fellow soldier were sent out on a short reconnaissance patrol to make sure Charlie wasn't nearby:

"We were going to go out about fifty or seventy-five yards, not very far at all. When we got out about thirty yards there was a big old anthill, about four feet tall, and AK-47 fire started coming from behind it, just within ten or fifteen yards from us. The other fella was in front of me, and I shot half my magazine and this guy ran in front of me. He told them later that he knew that if the gooks didn't get him I was going to because he was crossing in front

of me. But he went across my field of fire in between rips of the magazine, so I didn't shoot him. My gun was empty then and they were shooting B-40 rockets at us and throwing grenades as well as the AK-47 fire. So when he started back I thought that was a pretty good idea, too, because it was going to take me like a second or two to change magazines and, you know, it was time to do something."

Harris decided to follow the other soldier back down the trail, but as he turned to go, his foot caught on a vine and he tripped and fell:

"As I was going down, boy, KA-WHOOM, something went up. At first I thought they blew a claymore (mine) on me, but they maybe just threw a hand grenade out there. But it was so close that I got powder burns on my legs from it. I reached back to get my weapon and KA-BOOM, I got schrapnel in my left leg and it blew out my left eardrum, and I got a little bit of schrapnel in the side of my face. I was mad because I tripped on the vine, but it probably saved my life because if I'd been standing up all that schrapnel would have just come up and got me."

The concussions from the double blasts knocked Harris unconscious for a short time:

"The whole world just went orange, my world anyway, and I figured I was dead. I felt bad for a few seconds because I would have liked to tell my parents goodbye, I would have liked to have a chance to say goodbye. Then a second or two later, I could see green leaves and stuff, so I knew I was still here, and I knew I had better get the heck out of there. I had hold of my weapon by that time and I don't think I ever got to my feet, I just low-crawled out, and I was moving right along. I got back to the company and the first sergeant asked 'Well, Kansas, what's it like out there?' I don't think he even knew my name, I was just Kansas to him."

The company was getting fire, so it pulled back to where it had dug in the previous night. Although Harris was bleeding badly, his wounds were not life-threatening, so no chopper was called in for fear of revealing the company's position.<sup>9</sup>

The next morning, a medivac chopper picked Harris up and took him to the medical aid station at Quan Loi. From there, he was transferred

to an Army hospital at Long Binh, then to another at Cam Ranh Bay:

"I just wanted something cold to drink when I first got there. I hadn't had a haircut for ten weeks, I hadn't had a bath for a month, I hadn't changed clothes in about three weeks, I hadn't shaved for probably ten days, I didn't know they had hot water in Vietnam, and I didn't know there was anyplace air conditioned. I got a shower, a shave and a haircut, a bath, and a hot meal and I was half-cured and they hadn't done anything medically to me yet."<sup>10</sup>

While Harris was recuperating, he was visited by Red Cross girls and entertained by USO performers. He watched *Bonanza*, *Gunsmoke*, and *Laugh-In* on television. He played chess, completed two paint-by-the-numbers horse pictures, and competed in slot-track races. He went to the post library and read *Newsweek* and *U.S. News and World Report*. He went to the post boxing matches and movies. He became friendly with Papa-san, one of the hospital's civilian employees, and a cute Vietnamese nurse named Paula, two of few Vietnamese he would get to know very well at all.<sup>11</sup>

On May 2, Harris received the Purple Heart for his wounds. He had already been awarded the Air Medal and Combat Infantry Badge and promoted to specialist 4. Before he left Vietnam, he would be promoted to sergeant and awarded a Bronze Star for Meritorious Service. Harris makes no claims for enemy kills, even though he was certainly in harm's way and had prepared himself to be an effective soldier. That, he has come to believe, is something to neither be boasted of nor apologized for. Rather, he says, that will remain between him and his God.<sup>12</sup>

On May 16, Harris' doctor told him that although his ear had not healed yet, he was being sent back to the field, but to a job in the rear until his ear did heal. Harris began his journey back to D-5-7 on May 19, Ho Chi Minh's 79th birthday. That in itself was cause for

concern, since both the VC and NVA tended to step up hostilities on what were to them auspicious dates. And while Harris was apprehensive at the time, he was not unsettled. In fact, he had been able to maintain his composure throughout all his trials in Vietnam because of an incident that occurred in early 1968, months before he had even joined the Army.<sup>13</sup>

When Ethel Harris gave birth to her only son at her sister's house in Turon on March 30, 1948, she was nineteen and her husband, James, was fifty-three. Their boy was named James, too, and that was the beginning of a special relationship between father and son:

"I felt, well, the real term would be love for my father. He was a good deal older than most people's fathers. I saw it as a net gain. He didn't go out and play ball with me, but the wisdom and the way he got along with people was special to me. One of the reasons I thought so much of my Dad was that he had a place for me when I came along. He loved me, he wanted me. If there is a place for you when you get here, if you're cared for then you care about them. My parents would include me in family conferences by the time I was in high school, even earlier. They would ask my opinion and value that opinion. Not necessarily go by it, but take it into consideration. I wasn't totally independent, but I was treated as an individual."<sup>14</sup>

So when the elder Harris died on April 30, 1968, his son had some difficult days ahead. The younger Harris, then a sophomore at Kansas State University, returned to the family farm to be with his mother and three sisters. And while his sorrow was immediate, it wasn't until after his father was buried in the small, plain community cemetery a mile east of Langdon that, according to his journal entry for that day, he felt the full impact of his death: "I stayed for a short while, knowing it was the last. Then I told him goodbye for ever and ever and ever. Then I knew that my greatest fear in life, of my father

dying, was over and now I could face anything because nothing would ever matter as much." So Harris was able less than a year later to pass through a time and place where death lurked behind every tree and in every shadow. Even after being wounded, then being sent to a new unit, the 1st Cav's Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry Squadron, to work in supply while waiting for his ear to heal so he could be reassigned to combat duty, Harris was able to keep negative events from weighing on himself too heavily, even the prospect of his own mortality: "I wasn't particularly afraid of dying in Vietnam. I didn't want to die, because it's not a happy feeling for your relatives and friends. Not that I wasn't concerned or didn't care, because I did very much, but I wasn't totally afraid, either."<sup>15</sup>

## NOTES

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5. Personal interview with James Harris, Langdon, Kansas, March 18, 1990.
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7. Ibid.; personal journal entries by James Harris, dated February 25 and 28; March 4, 10, 24, 30, and 31, 1969.
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9. Harris interview; journal entry dated April 5, 1969.
10. Harris interview.
11. Ibid.; journal entries dated April 7-26, 1969.
12. Harris interview; journal entries dated May 2-15, 1969.
13. Harris interview; journal entries dated May 16, 18, and 19, 1969.
14. Harris interview of March 18, 1990; personal interview with James Harris, Langdon, Kansas, April 12, 1991.
15. Ibid.; Harris interview of March 18, 1990.

## 10. THE ONLY GOOD GOOK...

The term "Vietnamization" was coined by Defense Secretary Melvin Laird in 1968, and the program was designed to turn the war over to the South Vietnamese, to train them, equip them, and finally leave them to fight the communists while the United States trooped back home.

President Richard Nixon's plan was divided into three stages: in the first, U.S. forces would turn over combat responsibility to the South Vietnamese while continuing to provide air and logistical support; second, the United States would help the South Vietnamese develop their own support capabilities through military aid and training; third, the United States would restrict itself to a solely advisory effort. And throughout all three phases, U.S. forces in Vietnam would gradually be reduced. To implement the new policy, Nixon turned to the new commander of the U.S. Military Assistance Command-Vietnam, General Creighton W. Abrahms, who had replaced General William Westmoreland. The strategy Abrahms adopted shunned the large-scale search-and-destroy operations favored by Westmoreland for smaller, company- and platoon-sized operations. The larger, more offensive operations he left to the South Vietnamese.<sup>1</sup>

As the United States moved toward accomplishing the first stage of Vietnamization, it also began to prepare the South Vietnamese to support their own operations. Millions of dollars were poured into training programs. By the end of 1969, the South Vietnamese armed forces had doubled in size topping more than a million soldiers. At the same time, the United States turned over a huge arsenal of weapons and vehicles, including 700,000 M-16 rifles, 600 pieces of artillery,



30,000 grenade launchers, 10,000 machine guns, and thousands of vehicles including trucks, tanks, armored personnel carriers, helicopters, planes, and jets. Probably the most rapid progress was made by the U.S. Navy forces that patrolled the vast, intricate network of waterways that crisscrossed the Mekong Delta. The brown-water navy turned over 242 river craft worth \$68 million and two major riverine bases.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the impressive statistical achievements racked up by the Vietnamization program in the first year, many critics doubted it would succeed. They argued that the United States was making an army "graven in our image," requiring funding, equipment, and resources far beyond Vietnam's capabilities. "We live with the military assistance of the United States," said one South Vietnamese general. "Without that aid, our army would die." Regarding attempts to train a South Vietnamese air force, a U.S. instructor noted that "there is no such thing as a helicopter repair manual in Vietnamese," adding, "I couldn't imagine myself going over there to learn Vietnamese and fly." One military adviser summed up the plight of the entire Vietnamization effort: "We were taking people who had probably never been more than one mile from the place that they were born and were still taking water out of the kind of vats Christ changed water into wine from 2,000 years ago, and trying to bring them into the twentieth century overnight." During 1969, the first full year of Vietnamization, 11,500 Americans died in Vietnam, another 70,000 were wounded, and 107,000 ARVN soldiers deserted.<sup>3</sup>

Edward Rush wanted to fight in Vietnam, so in January, 1968, he joined the Marines since the Marines were the ones doing the fighting.

The twenty-year-old Abbyville native delayed his active duty, though, until mid-May so he could finish the track season at Hutchinson Junior College, where he ran the 100-yard dash in 9.5 seconds and the quarter-mile in 48.6 seconds. He also wanted to attend one more Abbyville Rodeo, a big social event in southwest Reno County each year in early May.<sup>4</sup>

After boot camp and infantry training at San Diego, California, Rush was not surprised to learn orders had been cut sending him to Southeast Asia, and, after a 10-day leave, he returned to San Diego for overseas processing, or so he thought: "When I got back, we was all in formation and they were callin' our names to get on the plane headin' to Okinawa then Vietnam, but I'm left standing there. This colonel comes up and says, 'I bet you're wonderin' why you're still here. Well, you're goin' to the 5th Marines, 5th Special Services. Our quarterback broke his leg, so that's where you're goin' and, marine, we don't play to lose.'" Rush's only duties for the next three months were practicing two hours five days a week and playing games the other two days. After football season, Rush played on the basketball team, too, but had been making requests for duty in Vietnam and, in early 1969, got his second set of orders for Southeast Asia. He left the United States on Friday, February 13, and would return a year later on another Friday the thirteenth.<sup>5</sup>

When his plane reached Da Nang, Rush was put on a truck that took him to Golf Company, 2nd Battalion, 1st Brigade, 1st Marine Division, his home for the next year. He was sent on patrol his second night in country, and that first weekend Golf Company recorded 14 enemy kills while suffering two of their own wounded. Within three weeks, Rush

was named Alpha Squad leader, and his unit operated in concert with the other squads in Golf Company's area of operations, a twenty-eight-square-mile area just south of Da Nang along the South China Sea coastline.<sup>6</sup>

Rush's squad pulled frequent patrol duty and at first, according to his letters home, he was intrigued by the exotic landscape in which he found himself: "There is a variety of terrain here. Last night we had a patrol that started out in the desert, then through rice paddies, then jungle, rice paddies, a village, jungle and finally desert and back to where we started. It was an all-night patrol and it kicked my ass." Rush quickly learned, though, that the interesting landscape concealed real dangers: snipers, booby traps, and enemy concentrations.<sup>7</sup>

Even in the deadly serious atmosphere of the war, though, Rush and his squad found time for recreation. When stationed on the coast, they had beach parties where half the squad would romp in the surf while the other half stood guard. Then there were the frequent mail calls: "I got a lot of mail an' my Mom and sisters sent me at least one package a week with cookies, brownies, cigars, all sorts of stuff. My sisters used to disguise themselves when they'd mail stuff to me. It was illegal to send booze in the mail, but they'd go all over to different towns, different post offices, in different disguises mailing Old Charter to me."<sup>8</sup>

Marine infantry squads were supposed to have twelve men, but Rush's usually operated with only eight or nine, and he looked for a certain kind of man:

"Whenever we got choppers in with replacements, I picked the hillbillies an' the farm kids. They was the ones who would keep us alive. Jerry Barwick from Pond Creek,

Oklahoma; Bob Guthers from Smithton, Illinois; Harce Gibbs from Rising Star, Texas; Thomas 'Pappy' Lane from Pine Bluff, Arkansas; an' Darrell Golay from Ponca City, Oklahoma. Darrell, he walked point for me part of the time. When I wasn't walkin' point, he was. He an' I kept track in our minds of the number of steps we took so we'd know our location all the time. One wrong step over there could kill ya. Anybody else put their junior man out there so when he got blowed away on a booby trap they'd just replace him. I used Darrell an' I, an' we never hit a booby trap the whole time we was there. That was the one big accomplishment I had, I never had a man medivaced. I was there eleven months and twenty-two days and I was in charge of patrols eleven months and twenty days. I was a tough son of a bitch, but like I said, I never lost a man or had a man medivaced. An' I'm damned proud of that."

A tough son of a bitch is just what Rush was when one of his men went to sleep a second time on guard duty:

"I beat that poor son of a bitch to a pulp, but he stuck around, he stayed with me, an' before I left Vietnam I promoted him to corporal. He was a good man, it was just a learning process he had to go through. You could either help a man learn or he'd get ya killed, one of the two, there wasn't no in-between."<sup>9</sup>

Rush's black-and-white outlook, of no in-betweens, came to bear on the Vietnamese people, too. During his first weeks in country, he became aware of their abject poverty and meager lifestyles, but he also noted they were quite industrious and religious. In fact, by the end of his first month in country, Rush wrote that, except for a few minor details, he liked being in Vietnam. But his attitude soon started to change, especially when it came to the ARVN soldiers: "If there's anything lower than whale shit in the ocean it's the ARVN military. When the enemy would come down, the damned local troops would hide because they were afraid to fight." Soon, Rush's negative attitude included the Vietnamese civilians, too: "They would feed the enemy an' screw them at night and supposedly be for the Americans in

the daytime. They was just usin' us to get whatever they could from us. They used us an' supported them."<sup>10</sup>

Frustrated by the dangerously ambiguous situation he found himself in, Rush came up with his own solution, a black-and-white one, with no in-betweens: "The only good gook is a dead gook." And Rush's letters indicated that he was more than willing to put the enemy on the road to good gookdom: "I got me another gook Friday night, that made four in a week. They won't bother us anymore." "I probably wrote a few weeks ago about getting some gooks..." "I got another gook yesterday." "I got two more gooks yesterday." The killings became so frequent that Rush stopped counting: "I quit keeping track. I had lots of confirmed kills. For awhile I kept track of numbers, then I'd write home an' just say, you know, 'Got another gook,' or somethin' like that. But as far as direct kills, oh, about forty that I knew I was the one that got them."<sup>11</sup>

Rush may not recall the exact number of his kills, but he does have a souvenir of some of them: a ring made out of the gold taken from their teeth. And his enthusiasm and efficiency in combatting the enemy earned him official recognition, too, in the form of meritorious promotions to lance corporal, then to corporal while in Vietnam.<sup>12</sup>

In mid-1969, Alpha Squad participated in Operation Pipestone Canyon, which would take two months to execute, claim light friendly casualties but heavy enemy losses, and provoke Rush into carrying his good-gook policy to extremes. After a steak fry and beer party the previous day, Rush's unit moved out at 4 a.m. on May 31. In a letter dated May 30, he wrote about the operation:

"There are eight artillery batteries, air support and

the *U.S.S. St. Paul* all in support. It will be in ten-foot-high elephant grass. Last year during an operation in the same place it got up to 157 degrees, kinda warm. They estimate there will be 500 friendly medivacs. It is gonna be an ass-kicker. I'll get mail but might not be able to write. So if you don't hear from me don't worry."

The temperature never reached 157 degrees, but 130-degree days were not uncommon, and the two-hour rains almost every evening only made the situation more uncomfortable as the Marines struggled through the elephant grass and bamboo thickets. So dense was the vegetation in some spots that they would string detonation cord through it, then explode it to create an opening. By June 9, Golf Company had killed sixteen enemy and captured three, but had also suffered twenty-one casualties itself, most from booby traps the enemy set as they withdrew in front of the advancing Americans rather than standing and fighting.<sup>13</sup>

Rush recalled the frustration of pursuing an enemy who would fire a few rifle shots, then run: "That's when we swept through and took Dodge City, one of those villages probably eighteen or twenty miles south of Da Nang. It was pretty hotly contested at that time, that's why we called it Dodge City. We'd hit sporadic resistance as we came through. They'd hit, then set booby traps an' run in front of us."<sup>14</sup>

[In late July, the Marines' luck seemed to improve when the captured a Viet Cong who claimed to know where a major NVA installation was and seemed willing to take them there:

"This VC was supposedly leadin' us to where this underground hospital was, but we kept hittin' booby traps, six, maybe eight of 'em. After the second day I got tired of that an' I took him into a bunker. I was interrogatin' him an' he let us know that he really didn't know what we was lookin' for, he didn't have any useful information. So I wrapped some det

cord around his neck an' set it off. It just did away with is head. Then we just blew the bunker in with plastic explosive an' went on with the operation."

On August 4, Operation Pipestone Canyon ended and the 200 men of Golf Company returned to their posts south of Da Nang. The Marines, including Rush and his squad, began a three-day in-country R&R with 275 cases of beer a day provided, compliments of the Corps.<sup>15</sup>

## NOTES

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2. Ibid.; Esper, pp. 116-8; Hemingway, pp. 34-40.
3. Ibid.; Stanton, pp. 288-92; Esper, pp. 116-8.
4. Personal interview with Edward Rush, Abbyville, Kansas, March 13, 1990.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.; Letters from Edward Rush to Helen Havercroft dated March 3 and 30, April 2, and May 7, 1969.
8. Rush interview.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.; Rush letters to Havercroft dated March 5 and 10, May 10, and November 30, 1969.
11. Rush interview; Rush letters to Havercroft dated April 27, May 18, and June 9 and 28, 1969.
12. Rush interview.
13. Ibid.; Rush letters to Havercroft dated May 30, June 9 and 20, and August 5, 1969.
14. Rush interview.
15. Ibid.



## 11. NOT LIKE I IMAGINED

On October 26, with the 1972 presidential elections in the United States only a week and a half away, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger declared, "Peace is at hand" in Vietnam. A final agreement, he said, could be reached in one or more negotiating sessions lasting not more than three or four days. In anticipation of the agreement, the United States restricted its air strikes to areas south of the twentieth parallel, well below the Hanoi-Haiphong heartland of North Vietnam. However, South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu balked at the agreement. The proposal contained no provisions for the withdrawal of 145,000 NVA troops from the south, nor did it specify the exact role of the proposed National Council of Reconciliation and Concord that would include representatives of the Saigon government, the Viet Cong, and neutralists. Such an agreement, Thieu argued, would mean "a surrender of the South Vietnamese people to the communists." He pledged to fight on alone if necessary.<sup>1</sup>

Fresh from a landslide election victory, President Richard Nixon on December 18 ordered massive air strikes against North Vietnam in an effort to pressure Hanoi into reaching an agreement. B-52 bombers, each carrying forty tons of bombs, flew through heavy North Vietnamese missile defenses to strike targets in the Hanoi-Haiphong region for the first time in the war. The biggest aerial blitz of the war, named Linebacker II, lasted almost two weeks. Wide areas of the north's industrial complex were left in flames and rubble. Reports from Hanoi said as many as 2,000 people were killed and another 2,000 wounded in what became known as Nixon's Christmas bombing campaign. A group of

Americans who had just ended a visit to Hanoi said on their arrival in Hong Kong that the U.S. raids had caused widespread damage to civilian areas and inflicted many civilian casualties. Folk singer Joan Baez, actress Jane Fonda, and others in the group said the Bach Mai hospital and residential areas they had visited had been "completely destroyed" by bombs. Another member of the group, Telford Taylor, of Columbia University, said, "Loss of life perhaps was not as high as might be expected considering the damage, but it has been very high in absolute terms, and the destruction has been terrible."<sup>2</sup>

On December 30, Nixon announced a halt to the bombing and the resumption of the Paris peace talks. At 12:30 p.m. on January 27, 1973, the United States and North Vietnam signed the Paris peace pact that ended direct American military involvement in Vietnam. Nixon hailed the agreement as "peace with honor in Vietnam." At the historic moment of the signing in the former Majestic Hotel in Paris, the ballroom crackled with hostility between Saigon's foreign minister, Tran Van Lam, and the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong delegations. Secretary of State William P. Rogers signed his name sixty-two times to the various documents and protocols on behalf of the United States.<sup>3</sup>

On January 29, the North Vietnamese released 562 U.S. prisoners of war, approximately a fifth of the U.S. servicemen believed to be held. The last 23,000 American troops left Vietnam in February and March. The U.S. mission in Vietnam, which once had included more than 500,000 troops and several thousand civilians, now consisted of 50 military attaches and 1,200 civilians at the Defense Attache Office at the Pentagon East at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, and 150 Marines at the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. America's longest war had ended.<sup>4</sup>

As the Paris peace accords were being signed, Stephen Shanline was in the middle of a six-month Navy cruise in the South China Sea. The twenty-three-year-old Turon native was serving as damage-control officer on the anti-submarine destroyer *U.S.S. O'Callahan* during its time in coastal waters north of Da Nang beginning in October, 1972. He remembered in particular the time shortly before the cease-fire took effect: "We happened to be over there on the gunline when everybody was supposed to stop shooting. For the last couple of hours before midnight, it looked like a Fourth of July celebration. Everybody was getting rid of their ammunition so they wouldn't have to carry it back to the U.S., I guess." Despite the agreement to a cease-fire, Shanline wasn't confident that peace was indeed at hand: "I was reasonably well aware of the political situation at the time. It didn't seem like anybody really knew what was going on or had an organized plan for the whole deal. It was like they were just acting things out."<sup>5</sup>

The uncertainty of the politics of the war was reflected in Shanline's entry into military service. After a year at Fort Hays State College and three at Kansas State University, Shanline graduated in 1970 with a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering. When the Reno County Selective Service Board informed him that he would soon be drafted, Shanline decided to join the Navy so he would have some say in what type of service he would perform and because he felt it was the safest military branch to be in at the time. Despite those actions, the war and Shanline's part in it exacted a toll on his fledgling family. Shanline had married his high-school sweetheart, Argie, while he was in college, and their son, Eric, was one year old when his father joined the Navy. Like many young Americans at the time, Shanline's

wife opposed most establishment ideas: "She was anti-war, but mostly for the purpose of making her own statement, not because she had any deep personal understanding of it." But while the war itself didn't affect the couple, the time Shanline spent away from his family while on the *O'Callahan* did play a part in their separation shortly after he returned from Vietnam, his taking custody of their son, and their eventual divorce in 1975.<sup>6</sup>

As the *O'Callahan* damage-control officer, Shanline supervised R Division, the section responsible for making repairs on the ship. Among the forty men in the division were the hole technicians, auxilliary enginemen, shipboard electricians, and instrument technicians. During battle stations, Shanline managed the ship's damage-control center, overseeing emergency repairs and doing whatever it took to keep the *O'Callahan* afloat. But the ship was rarely in danger of being attacked, so most of Shanline's time was spent overseeing routine maintenance and repair duties. The most menacing element for the ship's crew was boredom: "We'd have card games, things like that. But it wasn't a really stressful life other than you were out at sea for several months at a time. I was with the same 140 enlisted men and 25 officers. It was a very close-knit group, and you got to know everybody fairly well. You had a pretty good understanding of what their family situation was, whether they had a wife or sweetheart at home, things like that."<sup>7</sup>

While the *O'Callahan* was rarely in danger of attack, it did play an active part in the land war:

"They had naval gunfire support stations up and down the coast. Each station was an operational area of about 2,000 yards up and down the coast and maybe as far as

three miles out. We kept moving around so they wouldn't know exactly where we were all the time, and we sat out there and waited for missions to be called out to us, then it would be our turn to lob some shells in."

Although the *O'Callahan* was an anti-submarine vessel, it carried two 5-inch automatic guns that could fire ninety-pound projectiles every five seconds. When on a firing mission, the ship moved closer to the shore:

"The closest we'd ever get was about 1,000 yards. Occasionally we could see something moving up and down the beach, or occasionally there would be a small boat come out of the mouth of a river and run up the coast. You couldn't tell exactly what it was at that distance, but you could see it. There were times when there would be fishing boats come out and sail fairly close to us, maybe within a hundred yards, so we could see the people on them. But I never saw enemy troops and never saw anyone killed."<sup>8</sup>

The enemy did see the *O'Callahan*, though:

"We got slightly hit one time, a very minor hit. I happened to be on bridge watch that night, and I saw the rounds hitting. One was short and the next one went over us. They got lucky on the third one and hit the ship, so we turned it sideways to them so they'd have less of a chance of hitting us again. They didn't have actual radar where they could get any cross-bearings on us, where they'd know how far out we were. What they would do is start firing in your general direction and they'd space their shots maybe fifty yards apart. They were just damned lucky to hit us."

For their actions while under enemy fire, Shanline and his shipmates were awarded the Combat Action Medal.<sup>9</sup>

Another time the men of the *O'Callahan* were sure the enemy's eyes were on them was when they sailed into the Gulf of Tonkin:

"Several ships went up there, a cruiser with a lot of anti-aircraft capabilities, and three or four smaller ships. We got within ten miles of the North Vietnamese coastline, south of Hanoi, then came back down. We were a little bit nervous given our lack of anti-aircraft capabilities on the *O'Callahan*. All we had were these little Redeye surface-to-air missiles. They were just

little hand-held, shoulder-fired things. If that cruiser hadn't been with us, we would have definitely been tense."<sup>10</sup>

Back on gun stations near Da Nang, the *O'Callahan* resumed its role in the land war, a role that Shanline could only visualize since the ship's gunfire ranged as much as seven miles inland, well out the crew's sight and hearing:

"One time they had some suspected enemy movement in the area and our spotter called us in. I was on bridge watch, conning the ship. We had ground spotters and air spotters, mostly Army. Normally, we'd fire one spotting round, then they would call in an adjustment. But we happened to be right on target with the first one, so we started going just as fast as our automatic guns could go and we dropped thirty or forty rounds in there. The spotter was saying, 'Keep 'em comin'! Keep 'em comin'! You're blowin' 'em up! You're tearin' 'em up!' That kind of stuff. It was hard to imagine what it was really like, or what you were doing because you couldn't see it. But we knew we were doing some damage because of the spotter. And I sure hoped that he knew what he was doing when he put us on that target."<sup>11</sup>

That kind of secondhand experience of the war gave Shanline a unique perspective on the issue:

"It wasn't like I imagined combat to be, or like I think most people imagine combat to be, people shooting at you and you shooting back at them and being able to actually see what you're doing. It wasn't like that, it was more like what war would be like today, where these modern fighter jocks never see the other plane that they're shooting at. Radar, electronics, radio communications, things like that, that's more like what my experience was. I suppose that's why it wasn't that memorable. I don't have that many underlying feelings about the whole experience that a lot of guys that were in the actual country do. But I still feel like I was part of a war effort."<sup>12</sup>

## NOTES

1. George Esper, *The Eyewitness History of the Vietnam War, 1961-1975* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1983), pp. 105-9; Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), pp. 623-8; William E. LeGro, "Tragic Postlude to 'Peace'," *Vietnam* (Leesburg, Va.: Empire Press, June 1991, volume 4, number 1), pp. 42-4.
2. *Ibid.*; Esper, pp. 105-9; Karnow, pp. 623-8.
3. *Ibid.*; LeGro, pp. 45-7; Esper, pp. 105-9.
4. *Ibid.*; Karnow, pp. 623-8; LeGro, pp. 48-9.
5. Personal interview with Stephen Shanline, Yanbu, Saudi Arabia, April 14, 1990.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*

## 12. MOMENTS OF TRUTH

Contrary to popular stereotypes, most Vietnam veterans have made the adjustment to peace. granted, many continue to suffer, but the vast majority are not hooked on drugs, not unemployed, are not suicidal, are not beating up wives and children, are not robbing banks, are not knee-deep in grief or self-pity or despair. Like their fathers, they came home from war to pursue careers and loves and cars and houses and dollars and vacations, all the pleasures of peace. Peace was the purpose. Peace with honor and dignity. They sacrificed years of their lives. On the battlefield, their daydreams were lush with images of peace. And here at home, the shrinks and scriptwriters and politicians told them, at least by implication, that they ought to be seeking social and psychological readjustment. Heal the wounds, pick up the pieces. By and large, they have succeeded. Yet they remember. Not in a crippling, debilitating way, but rather as a form of affirmation: yes, war is hell. The cliché is true. Everyone knows it is true, in an abstract way, the way they know the moon is a lonely place. But soldiers, having been there, have witnessed the particulars which give validity and meaning to the abstract.<sup>1</sup>

To a remarkable degree, the Vietnam War was time and space dependent, and so were the truths found there. The truth for a riverine gunner in the Mekong Delta in 1969 was not the truth for a damage-control officer on board a destroyer off the coast near Da Nang in 1972. And neither of these truths were that of an infantryman trudging through the jungles northwest of Saigon, nor of the weapons specialist riding *Spooky* into the treacherous darkness of a Central



Highlands night. There are literally millions of such truths about the Vietnam War, for more than 3 million American soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, and Coast Guardsmen served in the Southeast Asia theater from 1961 to 1975--2.6 million within Vietnam itself. Each of these truths forms a peice of the Vietnam puzzle, which remains unsolved and, indeed, may never be solved.<sup>2</sup>

Such truths could come suddenly or slowly; as sharp, as brilliant, as excruciating as a sniper's shot; as gradual, as unavoidable, as enervating as the monsoon. For Kipp Cooper and John Montford, it was as inexorable as the corruption and apathy that finally brought down the government of South Vietnam and severely wounded their own. For James Harris and Gerald Webster, it was as sudden as a death in the family. For Stanley Millington and Stephen Shanline, it was as inevitable as their own beliefs in honor, duty, and country, which carried them both through times of doubt. For Edward Rush, it was as quick as pulling the trigger on one of his many kills, while for David Welch it was just as quick in not pulling the trigger on yet another human being. For Duane Westfahl, it was as consistent as his own sense of decency; and for James Brown, it was as insidious as the American public's growing discontent with the war itself.<sup>3</sup>

And such truths could affirm or transform; they could be as validating, as rejuvenating as the sight of the Stars and Stripes rippling in the wind; or they could be as fiery, as transfixing as war itself. For Brown, Cooper, and Montford, it was realizing that despite their efforts for honor, duty, and country, not every cause turned out to be a good one. For Millington, Rush, and Shanline, it was taking comfort in the fact that, in spite of what turned out to be a lost

cause, they could be proud of having served for honor, duty, and country. For Webster, it was learning not to be unnerved by the tragedy around him only to be transfixed by his own nephew's death, which revealed his own mortality. For Welch and Westfahl, it was sustaining their own humanity in the midst of inhumane conditions. And for Harris, it was facing his greatest fear, his father's death, then carrying to Vietnam the knowledge that he could never feel such pain again, even when his own existence was in peril.<sup>4</sup>

Many of those who served in Vietnam may not have known even the simple things: a sense of victory, or satisfaction, or sacrifice. Many had no sense of order or momentum, no front, no rear, no trenches. Many did not have targets, many did not have a cause. Many did not know if it was a war of ideology or economics or hegemony or spite. On a given day, many did not even know where they were. Many did not know strategies. Many did not know the terms of war, the rules of fair play. Many did not know how to feel. Many did not know good from evil. But at one point in their lives--and forever after--they knew one thing. It may have come to them suddenly or inexorably, it may have affirmed their beliefs or transformed them, but in that singular point in place, time, and self, when confusion and doubt were stripped away, they each faced their moment of truth.<sup>5</sup>

## NOTES

1. Thomas D. Boettcher, *Vietnam: The Valor and the Sorrow* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1985), passim.; Arthur Egendorf, *Healing From the War* (New York: Bantam Books, 1985), passim.; A.D. Horne, *The Wounded Generation: America After Vietnam* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1981), passim.; John Wheeler, *Touched with Fire* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1984), passim.
2. Ibid.; Boettcher, passim.; Egendorf, passim.; Horne, passim.
3. Ibid. Wheeler, passim.; Boettcher, passim.; Egendorf, passim.
4. Ibid.; Horne, passim.; Wheeler, passim.; Boettcher, passim.
5. Ibid.; Egendorf, passim.; Horne, passim.; Wheeler, passim.

### 13. THE TIME HAS PASSED

Comparison and contrast is a useful way to understand not only the military dimensions of war, but the political and social as well. The Middle East crisis, when it arose in August, 1990, was an object lesson in how to mobilize a nation for war, while the Vietnam conflict was just as effective an object lesson in how not to. In Vietnam, it was not the military that failed, but rather the failure of President Lyndon Johnson to politically and psychologically prepare the country. President George Bush, on the other hand, was quick to precisely define American objectives concerning Iraq: to protect Saudi Arabia from attack and to restore Kuwait's sovereignty. His public statements, as well as the rising price of gasoline, made it obvious that vital U.S. interests were involved.<sup>1</sup>

In Vietnam, the American objectives were never made clear, either to the American people or to the military. More than 70 percent of the generals who ran the war were uncertain of what they were supposed to accomplish, and American economic interests in Southeast Asia were virtually nonexistent. The result was that the cost of the conflict, both in money and in lives, soon exceeded any perceived value. From a psychological point of view, it was relatively easy to arouse public sentiment against Saddam Hussein, who looked and acted like the devil incarnate. Ho Chi Minh, although equally as murderous, appeared kindly and avuncular. Instead of the black hat of a villain, Ho's hat was at best gray, and for many Americans it was a dazzling white.<sup>2</sup>

How the American public has viewed each conflict can be seen in the way it has responded to troops returning from the battlefields.

Desert Storm troops have been generally well received, with marching bands, parades, waving flags, and yellow ribbons. Some Vietnam veterans were warmly received as well. Others, though, were spit on and called vile names. Most returned to silence and turned heads, even within their own families. It was as though everyone knew the Vietnam veteran had done something significant, but it was so distasteful that no one wanted to talk about it. So Vietnam veterans remained silent and turned their heads, too.<sup>3</sup>

The often boisterous support of the Desert Storm troops has sent a ripple of reaction through Vietnam veterans, though. Many have enthusiastically joined in the celebrations, trying to make sure Desert Storm veterans get what they didn't. But many have been disturbed by the Desert Storm welcome-home, too. The two Vietnam Vets Centers serving Kansas, one in Wichita, the other in Kansas City, Missouri, have seen as much as a 10 percent increase in inquiries about counseling services during and since Desert Storm. And while none have sought such treatment, the ten Vietnam veterans from Fairfield Rural High School's Class of '66 have experienced many of the same feelings as their fellow veterans.<sup>4</sup>

All ten veterans expressed unqualified support for the Desert Storm troops, agreeing that service to their country is always laudable, but beyond that there were differing opinions. Kipp Cooper, Edward Rush, and Stephen Shanline gave unreserved approval of the reception Desert Storm troops received. "I had a good attitude, a good feeling about that," Cooper said. "I thought it was the right action for the American people to take. Maybe they learned from the mistakes during the Vietnam War." Shanline concurred: "I took pride

in it as well. The strongest reaction I had was the second or third night of the ground war when General (Norman) Schwarzkopf came on CNN and gave a fairly well-detailed description of it. It really brought tears to my eyes for a job well done." Shanline had a closer view of the battle since he was working at a petroleum refinery in Yanbu, Saudi Arabia, at the time. In fact, he supervised changes in the refinery operation so it could begin producing military jet fuel to be used in U.S. aircraft in the Middle East. A much more personal tie to the war was that his son, Eric, was aboard the aircraft carrier *U.S.S. America* in the Persian Gulf. As an operations specialist, the younger Shanline worked on the plotters and radar systems that kept track of the air and surface traffic around the ship. Rush, like Cooper, believes Desert Storm troops are benefiting from lessons learned during the Vietnam era, too: "Maybe that was the only good thing that came out of us being over yonder, is the way people's attitudes are about the troops coming home now. And I'm not a bit resentful about it. I think those that are got a chip on their shoulder."<sup>5</sup>

There are those who did feel some resentment, though, such as James Brown, Gerald Webster, David Welch, and Duane Westfahl. "I did feel some resentment about the show of support for them and not for us," Brown said. "It was nothing bitter, but it was there, I could feel it. Like one of the guys at work said, 'That's great, but where was ours?'" Webster was bothered by his ambivalent feelings: "I felt good for them, but I felt a little cheated for myself and the other Vietnam vets. I wasn't angry, but at times I thought, 'Look at all they're doin' for the Desert Storm troops and they didn't do a thing

for us except call us names and stuff. But I was glad to see that somebody was gettin' treated right." Westfahl reacted in much the same way: "I felt slighted. Maybe I shouldn't feel that way, but I figure we did just as much in Vietnam as they did over there, although they went in and got it over quicker. But they went in with both hands free instead of one tied behind their back, they gave them the clearance to do what they had to do. And it kinda upset me that the government played it up for the Desert Storm troops. They sure didn't do that for us."<sup>6</sup>

Of the ten, Stanley Millington, John Montford, and James Harris gave qualified approval of the public reaction. "I think it's all right," Millington said. "We sure didn't get it, but we just got to let it go. We've had a bunch of bum deals and that's just one of them. I just accept it now. I'm not resentful. I go along with the program. I think it's great they're getting all this attention."<sup>7</sup>

Montford was in a unique situation, since he is both a Vietnam and Desert Storm veteran. After working in aircraft weapons maintenance in the Gulf war, he found his reception especially interesting when he re-entered the United States: "We came back from Saudi Arabia through Bangor, Maine, and the VFW there had got a lot of people out to welcome us. I was talking to some of them and mentioned that this was a lot different than when I came back from Vietnam. A sixteen-year-old girl asked me what I meant and the group suddenly dispersed. Nobody wanted to talk about that." Montford's experiences also illustrated that the military wanted to make effective use of the public's favorable reception to Desert Storm troops: "Our C.O. told us to be sure to wear our uniforms all the way home. He said the

American people wanted to honor us, to make up. He didn't say what they wanted to make up for, but it was pretty obvious."<sup>8</sup>

With his perspective as both a Vietnam and Desert Storm veteran, Montford was a bit critical of the zealous public reaction: "I think they overdid it. Considering that most of the war was fought by aircraft and not by soldiers, and that just 100 or so died over there, I think the public carried on a bit too much. I appreciate what they were trying to do for me as a Desert Storm veteran, but as a Vietnam vet it doesn't make me feel any better."<sup>9</sup>

Harris, too, was critical of the public outpouring:

"I think that a lot of the troops coming back would feel kind of empty about it. A lot of them were prepared to do well over there, but I don't think most of them were called upon to do that. And I think people are making a little too much fuss over it. We're so tickled to death about our victory that we don't realize that it's a little bit hollow, I think. This is a whole other generation, and this is their time, I guess, but it wasn't like a lot of people made big sacrifices. I think the ones that served in Vietnam were by and large called upon to make sacrifices and did the work, but didn't get the praise when they came back. And now the country feels guilty about that to a degree. So now they're giving all this praise they think is due to people who maybe didn't quite earn it."

And Harris, like the others, doesn't believe the Desert Storm celebration will assuage Vietnam veterans: "To me, that was quite some time ago, they're not really connected. I've given up on expecting to get anything now. The time has passed. The time is wrong."<sup>10</sup>



## NOTES

1. Harry G. Summers, "Understanding the Dynamics of War: The Middle East Crisis Helps Put the Vietnam War in Context," *Vietnam* (Leesburg, Va.: Empire Press, December, 1990, volume 3, number 4) p. 6.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Personal interview with Leon Haverkamp, Wichita, Kansas, April 25, 1991; personal interview with Bob Waechter, Kansas City, Missouri, April 25, 1991.
5. Personal interview with Kipp Cooper, Salina, Kansas, April 10, 1991; personal interview with Edward Rush, Abbyville, Kansas, April 13, 1991; personal interview with Stephen Shanline, Yanbu, Saudi Arabia, April 30, 1991.
6. Personal interview with James Brown, Boone, North Carolina, April 10, 1991; personal interview with Gerald Webster, Hutchinson, Kansas, April 13, 1991; personal interview with David Welch, Emporia, Kansas, April 13, 1991; personal interview with Duane Westfahl, Sylvania, Kansas, April 14, 1991.
7. Personal interview with Stanley Millington, Turon, Kansas, April 12, 1991.
8. Personal interview with John Montford, Placitas, New Mexico, April 22, 1991.
9. Ibid.
10. Personal interview with James Harris, Langdon, Kansas, April 12, 1991.

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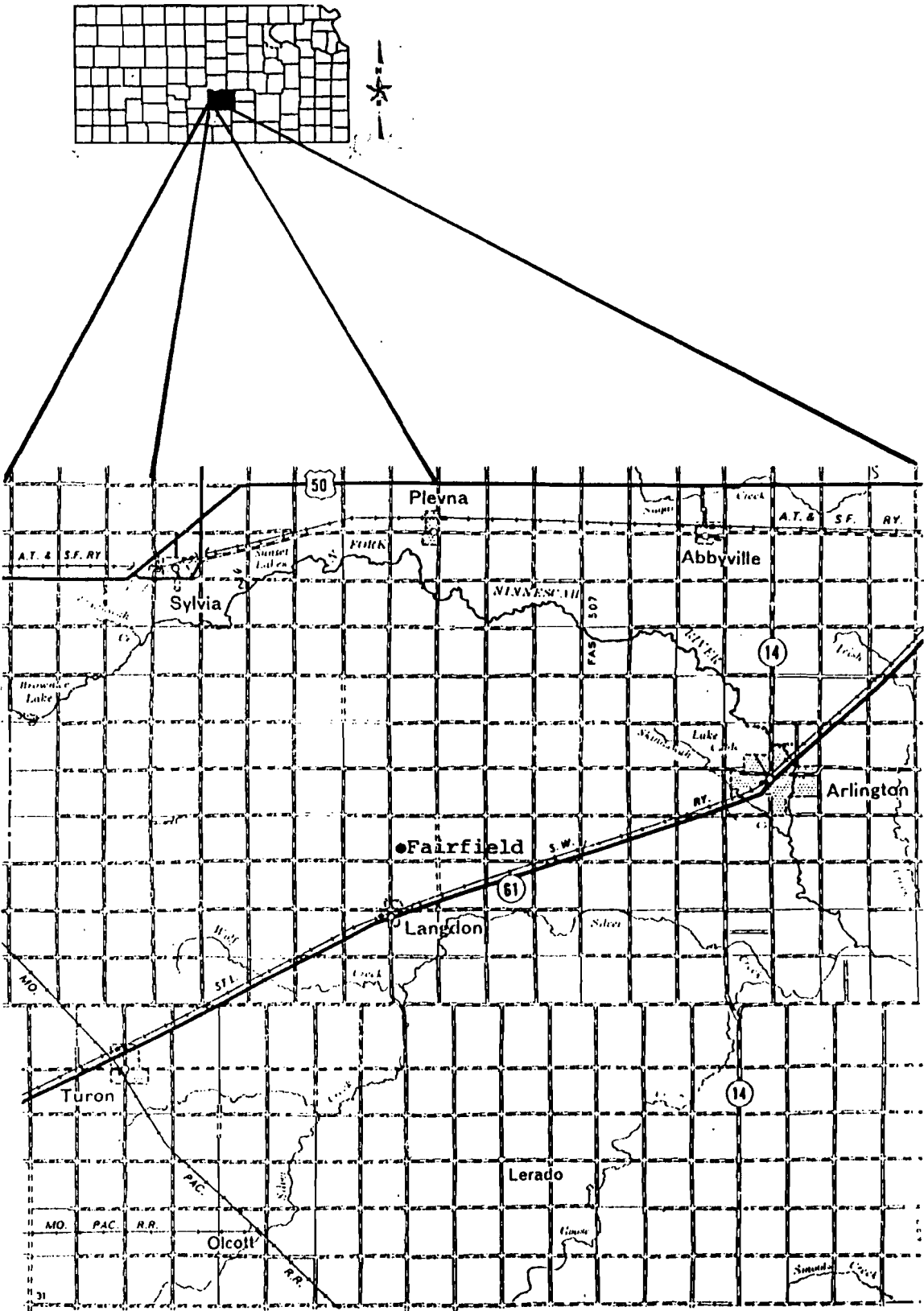
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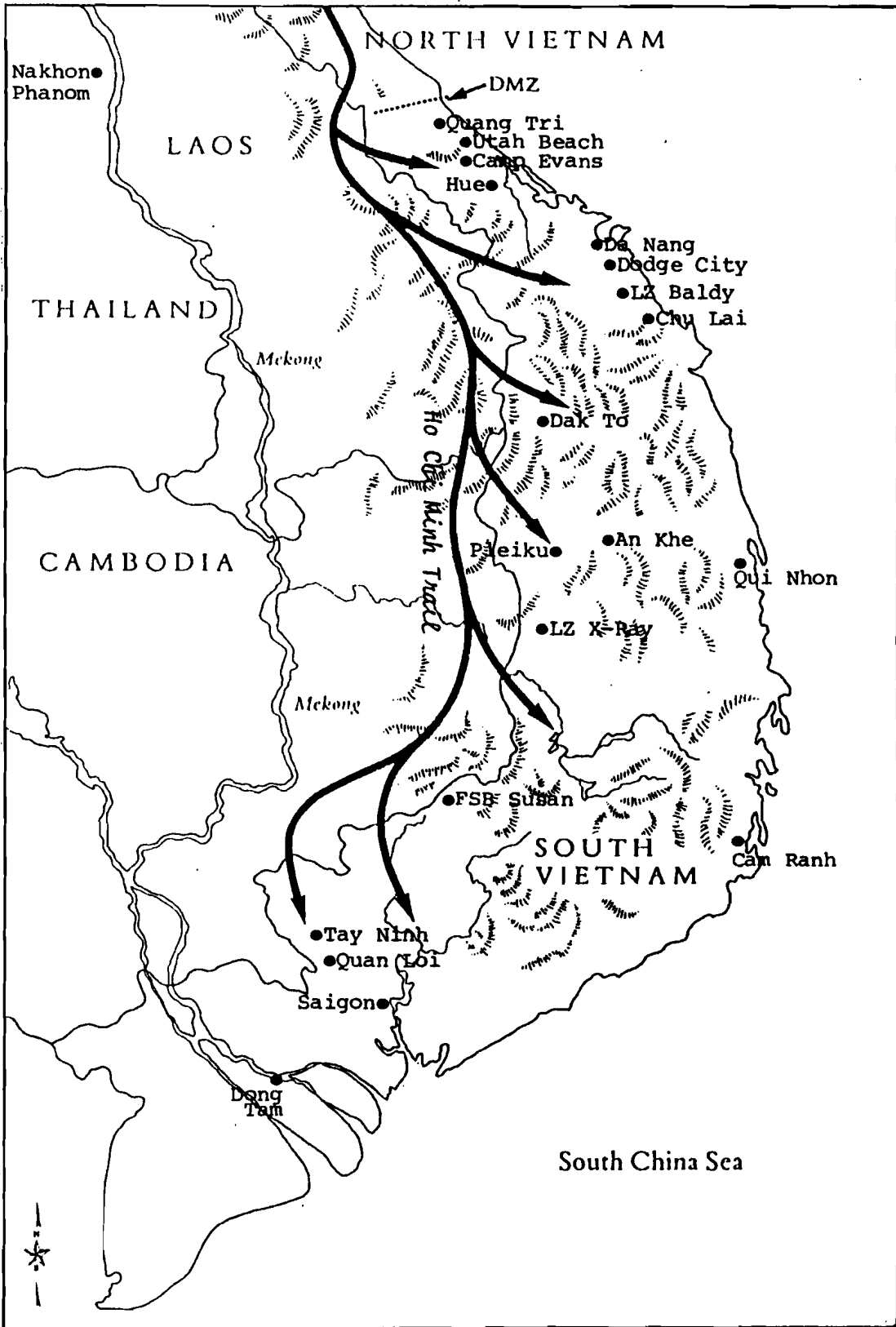
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# HOME OF THE FALCON



Southwest Reno County, Kansas

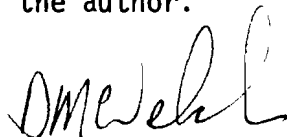
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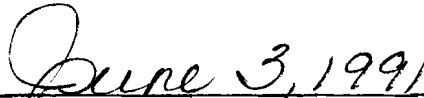
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