



WHEN WE WERE SOLDIERS

Personal Stories of Our Vietnam Veterans

September 20-November 9

HOWARD KALIS

An Entirely Different War

If I cry, don't worry. I get very emotional. I have frequent dreams and feelings of guilt. It has not only been hard on me but, perhaps, harder still for my family. It has been 46 years since I left Vietnam. I was raised in a Christian home, but we took the lives of soldiers and non-combatants alike. We were not trying—nor did we see the non-combatants at the time but...

I am a history buff and a flag-waving Patriot. When I received my orders to report to the Army, I went. When I received my orders to go to Vietnam, I went. I went because I signed an agreement to serve (although many others in my same situation secured releases) and also because the men in my family, in times of war, had always served. Vietnam was an entirely different war. In the 1960s-70s, the American government asked its military to do things it had never before asked its military to do. In fact, I don't think our government, in other times, would have sanctioned some of the assignments given to us. I was there early on and just prior to the big "build up" in 1966-67. I was one of the first replacements in a division that went as a complete unit in 1965. Many things bothered me about the war, after I arrived in-country, but one of the first signs for me that this was not your "typical war" (WWII, Korea) was that the Allied forces treated this war as though it was, to some extent, a game. My best example from personal experience: as we approached the Holiday Season of 1966, I received orders telling me that there would be a 72-hour ceasefire over the holiday. At Christmas, the ceasefire started at 1600 hours December 23rd. During that time we could not engage the enemy unless the enemy made a direct attempt to breach our perimeter. Our camp received heavy mortar fire every night since I got there. We spent most nights in bunkers. Now we were being asked to trust the enemy and feel free to walk around our camp at night. We could see the VC moving mortars around. We knew they were re-supplying their positions. Then, 72 hours after the ceasefire started, on the dot, all hell broke loose. Flares, rockets, bugles, blaring music – every imaginable noise – was thrown at us by the enemy. As expected, the enemy renewed its mortar attack and also started hurling every type of artillery it had at us.

It seemed to us like the "million dollar minute" we experienced during basic training when the artillery fired all of its weapons at the same time. (It was said that this demonstration cost \$1 million).

There should not be any timeouts if you are engaged in a war. If what we were ordered to do (in Vietnam) was right, why not continue to press the enemy? Why give the VC a break? We, that are the individual soldiers, felt as if we were being used as pawns in a great big game of chess. It may have been a high stakes game to Washington, but not for me!

How did I get to Vietnam? After graduating from Pottstown High School, I attended Dickinson College. Coming from modest means, I needed to fund my education through working and financial aid. I received an ROTC scholarship which covered a portion of my tuition. The ROTC



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contract required two years of active military service upon graduation. That scholarship charted an unexpected course in my life.

When I was graduated from Dickinson College, I notified the Army that I had been accepted to study law at the Dickinson School of Law. I was informed that as long as I was a full-time student. I could continue in law school with my military obligation being “deferred” until I graduated or left school for any reason. Within six months of no longer being a full-time student, I would need to begin my active military service. When I signed my original contract with the ROTC, I was a single eighteen-year-old. By the time I was graduated from law school, I was twenty-six, married, and had a six-month-old son. Under those circumstances, I would never have been drafted, as in 1965 married men, not to mention married men with children, were not being called into the service. As I had signed an ROTC contract, however, I chose to fulfill my obligation.

I did my initial infantry training at Ft. Meade, MD, Ft. Benning, GA, and Ft. Houston, TX. I volunteered for Airborne training and received my jump wings from Ft. Benning. Because my entry into the military was tied to my graduation from college (the four year ROTC contract), my date of rank was 1962, so on my second day of active duty I was promoted from 2nd Lieutenant to 1st Lieutenant with three years of service—the three years of law school were counted as three years of duty. About three months after I arrived in Vietnam, I was promoted to the rank of Captain as, at that time, I was carrying out the duties normally assigned to a captain.

In 1966 commercial airlines flew the military replacements in and out of Vietnam. There were about twenty officers on my flight over, with three hundred plus enlisted personnel. When the plane landed in Bien Hoa I could see, out the window, a long line of men, still in their “jungles” waiting to board for the flight home. When the front cabin door was opened and we stood with our duffel bags waiting to exit, we were hit with the incredible heat and the distinctive odor that for us would always be an instant flashback of Vietnam.

I was assigned to the 1st Infantry Division – the Big Red One – historically one of the most respected units in the Army. Our patch is olive green with a big red “1” in the center. This unit traces its origin to pre-revolutionary times and has always been the first Army unit into a war. When the Vietnam Command issued orders directing all ground units to change their unit patches from whatever colors it had been using to olive drab with black numbers/lettering, “Big Red” was the only unit that continued using bright red for its “1.” Orders be damned, the Big Red “1” would always be a bright red “1.”

My first assignment as a 1st Lieutenant was to set up security for the medics and such other support units as accompanied the troops into the field. In this capacity I would, on an almost daily basis, be required to pass through our perimeter, wherever we might happen to be, and create a “new” perimeter for the night, or for however long we might be ordered to stay. It was



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not uncommon for us to leave one “camp” after only one night to create a new/advanced position from which new patrols would be sent to find the enemy. These “operations” were commonly called “search and destroy missions” and would be conducted by units as small as one or two squads (squad = 11men) to as large as multiple divisions. The larger missions were called “Operations,” however, the missions for both the larger and smaller units were the same—to search for and destroy the enemy. In short, that was the bottom line of all our actions during my tour in Vietnam, as simple as that.

I lived in the open, or in a tent, my entire tour—never in a barracks. Towards the middle of 1966, canvas-covered buildings were being constructed at the larger base camps, however, the conditions for troops in the field were quite primitive. As if the almost-constant mortar attacks were not bad enough, simple “living conditions” in the rain forests of Vietnam were almost unbearable. The high humidity, temperatures in excess of 100 degrees, insects of all shapes and sizes, not to mention the blood-sucking leeches that attached themselves to your body at the most sensitive places, and with “growths” of various shapes, size, and color sprouting up and over your entire body—all this made just surviving a full-time assignment.

The division’s “base camp” (headquarters) was in a village known as Di An (pronounced Zion), which, as Bob Hope told us on Christmas morning 1966, was still “...a four-letter word...” Located northeast of Saigon, when I first arrived it could only be reached by helicopter or a fully reinforced infantry unit. While Di An was my base (where my bunk was placed), I spent very little time there. Most of the time, I spent my days and nights on patrol in the jungle.

Our division’s primary area of operations was in or about a large area known as “The Iron Triangle.” The Triangle was an area of very thick and mature jungle which bordered Laos and Cambodia. Even at noon the foliage was so thick you could not see the sun or the sky; you would think it was night. In addition to providing great cover for the enemy’s men and movements, the area also contained a terrain that provided numerous natural paths or trails, running from North Vietnam all the way south to Saigon. An important element of our search and destroy mission was to interrupt and destroy the supply lines of our enemy, who relied on these trails to re-supply its troops with food, ammo, medicine, and even fresh troops and equipment. To make our mission more effective, and to allow us to more quickly respond to reports of troop and supply movements, the division created a number of supplemental/smaller base camps in the heart of the jungle and near some of the larger, natural north-south trails. Our most active advanced camps included Laike (a rubber plantation operated by the French), Bear Cat (our only outpost south of Saigon, in the Mekong River area), and Quan Loc (the area in which I was awarded the Purple Heart.)

Our typical outpost was manned by a re-enforced rifle company as well as a full air unit, containing several small, non-combat planes but with as many choppers as would be needed to transport at least one full-strength infantry platoon with their flight crews. Our largest outpost held a full brigade with its air support.



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When going out on a mission, I would take my men to our “airfield” (a cleared-out area in the jungle) to meet the choppers. My seat was next to the open door on the right hand side of the chopper and opposite the machine gun operator, an always present and vital part of the crew. We would be flown to a pre-determined, cleared area (the “LZ”), where we would be “dropped.” For the most part, the choppers never landed but hovered just above the ground. Landed helicopters were easy targets and could be destroyed by a single enemy rifleman. On the pilot’s signal, we would jump from the copter with each man carrying, at least, his own pack, weighing 60-75 pounds, on his back. Even at such low heights, a jump with this heavy a load resulted in a significant jolt to the spine, hips, and knees. Upon leaving our chopper, we ran in a zig-zag pattern to some pre-determined cover or into the fringe of the jungle. As soon as possible, the first off would begin to lay down a protective field of fire for the remaining men and choppers. As the choppers completed their “drops” and left the area, we would organize ourselves into a combat “search” line, in single file, and with as much space between men so as to keep minimal eye contact with the person in front of you. Searching or patrolling in this fashion was very stressful and physically and mentally exhausting. I would not dare to attempt to put into words the way each man dealt with his thoughts as we walked through this oven-like jungle. The moisture was so thick in the air, every breath for me felt as if it could be my last. All of us looked as if we had just walked out of a steam bath fully dressed in our combat gear and carrying all of our individual weapons.

While the man in front of me might only have been several yards away, I could not see him clearly. It was more like I sensed his presence. Add to this the fact that we did not know where the enemy might be—he was harder to see than our men—one’s nerves were always on edge. This kind of stress leads to numerous incidents of “quick fire,” where men would fire at strange noises in the jungle.

It is hard to explain, but only time—that is, time actually patrolling in the jungle—creates a frame of reference as to what might be a “normal” sound, or not. On more than one occasion we learned that the enemy was only a short distance away.

While stress and apprehension, in my opinion, are always present with everyone, when in a patrolling situation, I was particularly sensitive to the enlisted man designated to “walk the point.” The “point” or “point person” was the first person in the searching line. As such he was the eyes and ears of the unit as to what lay ahead. Also, that point was the first person to encounter the enemy and, more often than not, was the one fired upon or bombed by the enemy. Every man in the unit knew the risks of walking point. The unit commander normally selected the point. As a young officer, I, as well as other young company grade officers, was given a great deal of responsibility at a young age over men and military equipment, much more responsibility than I would have had in civilian life. While I am proud of my life’s work as a whole, I have never had the same feeling of accomplishment as I had with the men in Vietnam. The ability to work with, rather than command, men in combat is an honor. I felt an added



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burden or weight on my shoulders when selecting the point, particularly after I had been in-country for a time and had my own memory bank of prior events. Once, to prove myself, I walked the point. It was unsettling, to say the least. All of the sounds and shadows seemed more intense as we pushed and hacked through the dense jungle. On my return to our camp, I got hell from my superiors. While my commander said he understood my reasoning, he made it clear that I had a larger obligation to my unit as a whole. I was also reminded that the VC had a standing bounty on officers' heads. I was still glad that I did it and felt my men had a new respect for me.

The shortest time I was on a mission was five days. One time we were out for over two weeks, which is really stretching it. While the division was really good about having us re-supplied in the field, including having choppers bring us a meal almost every day, not to mention a steady stream of C-rations, when you can't get more sleep than short cat naps all night, one gets to be exhausted, and the most routine chores became difficult.

During my tour, the Army tried an experiment, for Vietnam, and planned a series of multi-division battles over large parts of the country. The first was Operation Attleboro in November 1966. That was followed in January 1967 by Cedar Falls, then again in February through April 1967 with Junction City 1 and 2. After Attleboro I discovered an orphanage that was run by an order of Catholic nuns for about 75-100 deaf and mute children about five miles outside our perimeter at Di An. I would enlist some medics—dentists and doctors—and some other officers and men to visit and assist in any way possible. All of us became very attached to these children and marveled at their spirit. With Christmas near, I decided to organize a party for these children as well as the staff. Before I left Pottstown for Vietnam I had been a member of the local Jaycees with my wife being a member of the Junior Service League. I wrote to these organizations and requested that they send whatever they could—toys, dolls, games, whatever. Packages from home arrived and on December 24th a group of about 15—including a deputy brigade commander who played Santa—went over and had a great party for the kids. The sad thing was, not even a month later, the VC mortared the orphanage, killing a large number of children and staff. The orphanage was destroyed and never re-opened. Those kids had done nothing wrong. To this day I think: Did I draw attention to those kids and nuns, causing the VC to take such an action? Was I to blame?

My time in Vietnam made me mature in many ways. I was never one to question our government; I was taught that the government does the right thing for its people, so we should do what we were asked. With this mindset I never questioned my commitment to serve for two years, nor did I question the commitment of our government to pursue a course of conduct in Vietnam that would lead to anything other than a successful conclusion. I was proud to be an officer in our military and was honored to be able to lead men in combat. There was, however, a plan of action which we were directed to follow that, to this day, is a cause of significant distress.



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Over a period of several months we were ordered to “take” an elevation on three separate occasions and to then simply leave it, knowing full well the enemy was almost certain to reclaim the area without having to fight. It wasn’t even a hill—it was a damn elevation. It was deemed to be of crucial value. We had to have it at all costs, and every time we lost men. Okay, you can take it the first time and it is no big deal. We weren’t there for even a week when orders came down telling us to vacate. I was told not to leave any force there. About three to four weeks later, I am called into a meeting to receive new orders and to review new maps. We were told to take the area highlighted on the new map. I say, “It looks like the area we just left.” I am told, “It’s important. Take your men this afternoon and do it.” Several hours later, we take the elevation and one of my men says, “This is where I dug my hole before.” We all knew we had been there before. We take it and again take more casualties. Next day, we are told to leave and two weeks later, we go through it all again.

Three times we lost people taking the same elevation. For what? I don’t know. As a lieutenant, I don’t get that information, but how do we keep our men’s morale high? We flattened the area. We leveled it to clear a field of fire. Then we leave. I feel used and foolish. Absolutely foolish! In my platoon I had about 50 men under me. The first time, we probably had 15 casualties with 3 or 4 KIA (killed in action.) I had at least 2-3 men killed every time we took that elevation.

About the non-combatants... we’d get to a clearing in the jungle and there would be a few hooches with old men and women and children. You knew that the others were a few feet away or just inside the jungle’s edge. They would fire at us. We yelled for them to stop, but they continued to fire. We were trained to fire our automatic rifles in bursts of three, but in the heat of a fire fight you soon found yourself just spraying the area with your bullets. In the middle of a fire fight and with automatic weapons being fired at you, it is difficult at best to hold your fire until you get only clear shots. The big thing on the evening news back in the World was the body counts. Walter Cronkite would begin the CBS Evening News—every single night of the war—with a chart showing the latest body counts for both sides. When a fire fight was over, we’d pull bodies out to a clearing for burial or transport to a rear area. As you’d pull these bodies out, you would come across non-combatants. Non-combatants regularly bombed us and fired point-blank at us as we walked through their villages or from hiding places and the jungle fringe. Along the road, children would hold out their hands for candy and then throw a grenade in the back of your Jeep. For my service in Vietnam my government saw fit to award me numerous medals and decorations, including two Bronze Stars with “V,” a Purple Heart, and a Combat Medic Badge, and on military bases, I am shown respect for that.

What’s sad for me is looking at these young men and women coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan and knowing, if they were in combat, what they will have to live with if they had to take a life. I do not think you can kill somebody, under any circumstances, and live your whole life without feeling remorse.



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After returning home I did not talk to anyone, other than my wife, about my experience, and I only shared general things with her at the beginning. About twenty years ago, give or take some years, I started unloading to her the balance of my story. I do not want to dwell on this aspect of my experiences, however, to this day, there are some people who do not want to hear about our military actions in Vietnam.