



WHEN WE WERE SOLDIERS

Personal Stories of Our Vietnam Veterans

September 20-November 9

BARRY AMOLE

An Awakening

I dropped out of high school and within six months I enlisted in the Army. It was 1963 and I was 17. I don't want to be morbid, but I was in the service four days when my dad dropped dead of a heart attack. At the time, my mom was dying of cancer and she died three weeks later. Both on a Friday. I was doing basic training at Ft. Dix and had an uncle stationed there, a career soldier, and we rode up to the funerals together.

I ended up at Fort Rucker, Alabama for aviation school to learn how to be a crew chief. My actual job was aircraft mechanic. My specialty was the De Havilland Caribou, which was a short take-off and landing twin-engine supply plane. Supposedly it could take off in a hundred yards, the length of a football field, and that's what the generals told Congress it could do, and once we had to prove it.

Four senators showed up at Fort Rucker to see for themselves. We didn't really think it could do it, but we were told, "Empty that thing out." The lighter it was, the better chance it might be able to actually take off in a hundred yards.

We took out the folding seats and drained most of the fuel. There was no co-pilot and no crew. It was gonna take off from a local airfield, go about five blocks, and then land in a local football field. After the pilot landed it, we were going to tow it by the reviewing stand. We hopped in a jeep to get to the landing area. After discussion among the dignitaries, the pilot put it at full throttle, and we kind of held our breaths. Then it broke upward and just cleared the goal posts; it had high landing gear, which helped. Afterward we heard that the senators had asked, "Why didn't it taxi back past us?" The generals said they didn't want to blow fumes on the senators.

I was at Atlanta Army Depot until July 1965 when I was sent to Vietnam. All of our aircraft was taken over by ship, then they flew us by commercial airline from Atlanta to Los Angeles. As we were going through the airport in Los Angeles, everyone was pointing at us as saying, "They're going to Watts." They thought we were going to help control the riots. Years later, when I had gone back to school, an instructor said that Watts happened in 1966, and I said, "No, it was 1965." We made a little wager, and the next class he asked if I'd brought any proof. I said, "I don't need proof," and I told him the story.

In Los Angeles they loaded us onto buses and then onto a World War II troop ship. All the way over, I kept thinking of all the movies I'd seen where soldiers go over the side of the ship down to the landing craft, and I said to myself, "This is gonna be neat. I'm gonna do something I always wanted to do."

Then we got over there—we landed at Cam Ranh Bay, which in '65 was nothing—and I saw strafing fire overnight. They were shooting just to keep everyone honest; we were just standing on the ship watching. You're 18, and suddenly you're thinking, "This is not fun. This is not TV." I grew up fast.



WHEN WE WERE SOLDIERS

Personal Stories of Our Vietnam Veterans

September 20-November 9

BARRY AMOLE

From there I went on to Nha Trang and then Qui Nhon, which was my base of operations the rest of the time. Everything at Qui Nhon was on flight status. Crews switched back and forth to help each other out. We got mortared occasionally. There was a hillside nearby where the VC would shoot 'em off, but they were too far and very few hit our compound. It was always short bursts and then they were gone, more harassment than anything else. You just learned to hop in a hole and wait.

We were a maintenance outfit. Whenever an aircraft was down, you went to get it. Our outfit would go out with a Chinook and a Huey and bring it back. When we went out, to hook it up, each of us had to take our turn on duty, getting out of the chopper to hook up the cable to the downed aircraft. It was about a half-hour that you're on the ground, and you don't have a weapon because you can't hold it; you gotta hook up the cables. We'd have two infantry platoons around the aircraft spraying rounds. Once a bullet went through the windshield which was under my feet and I'm thinking, "Holy shit. Let's get out of here."

It was November 1965 and we were someplace outside of Pleiku. We were in a Huey with our tool boxes, M-14s and a .45, but that's useless. We had no machine guns. Then we heard on the radio, "Anybody in the area who can get wounded, get here." And then we heard, "Wrap up, we're going."

We flew to the Ia Drang Valley, the first major battle between the Army regulars and the People's Army of Vietnam or North Vietnam Army (PAVN/NVA) and the subject of the movie *We Were Soldiers*. All aircraft in the area were called in. We were told to get there and load the wounded. It was Custer's outfit – the 7th Cavalry. There were helicopters everywhere and wounded everywhere. It was a whole battalion – 1,000 men in this conflict. *(There were 234 men killed and more than 250 wounded from November 14-17 in two adjacent clearings called LZ X-ray and LZ Albany, about 35 miles southwest of Pleiku.)*

We loaded up with ambulatory wounded; we weren't equipped for stretchers. We were told to take 'em to the hospital and drop 'em off.

My ETS was up in February 1966 (Expiration of Term of Service.) They wanted me to re-enlist, but I didn't. I didn't hate the place. It was more I pitied the people. If you flew into Saigon, it was a modern city, but thirty miles from there, you were in a village. If they were any GIs there, there might be a generator with some lights strung up, but that was it. They told us we were giving the South Vietnamese democracy, but they were more concerned with where their next meal was coming from. I spent more time in villages. To me it was an awakening. Sometimes I chastise my kids when they say something about someone who is having difficulties: "Don't go there unless you have to walk in their shoes." I had more pity for the people. They didn't have a choice. I probably did more growing up there than anything else.



WHEN WE WERE SOLDIERS

Personal Stories of Our Vietnam Veterans

September 20-November 9

BARRY AMOLE

I volunteer at Coatesville and at the Veterans' Center in Spring City. I see what some of those guys went through. At least I have all my digits. Once you see the wounded, you realize how lucky you were.

I finished high school under the GI Bill and then kept taking classes while I was working as a service manager at Baker Equipment for 20-some years. After my first wife died of cancer, my second wife said at some point, "What are all these credits?" She encouraged me to finish and, at the age of 59, I got my bachelor's degree.