



# WHEN WE WERE SOLDIERS

Personal Stories of Our Vietnam Veterans

September 20-November 9

**LARRY HARP**

## The Things I Missed

I had dropped out of high school and was doing electrical work when I got drafted. It was January 1968. My day to go was April 22, 1968. I was 19 years old. But then my stepfather, who had been in World War II at Normandy, talked me into enlisting and signing up for communications. I trained as a radio operator and got tied in with a combat aviation unit. We sent helicopters for support of different units. All activities from our units would come into a central hub, a building about half the size of this gallery, fortified with sand bags, steel decking, steel door. That was the communications center. You needed top clearance to get into the communications center, which I periodically got. I became an E5, an acting sergeant.

Most of us were only there for one year. Because I enlisted, my service time was four years, and I spent 6 months in training (Basic and Radio School) and a little over a year in Germany. I only spent the last year in Vietnam, actually 11 months. (The Nixon administration was pulling troops out – but sending over more at the same time – it was politics – so I got out 30 days early.) I spent 7 months at Na Trang in the southeastern part of South Vietnam near the coast. The 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces were with us. It was Air Force and Army personnel at Na Trang, a PX, maybe 300-400 troops, and some South Vietnamese units. There was an airfield where they'd bring in jets – F4s. Then we moved up to the central Highlands – to Pleiku – and I was there just for two months. With two months to go, I moved up to Tuy Hoa Air Base, another Air Force base, it was east and up the coast, further north but not up to the DMZ (demilitarized zone.)

You could tell a new guy by his fatigues. In a platoon, if you had a new officer or lieutenant, the guys would tell you to listen to the sergeant who's been here for 7 months. If a lieutenant was smart, he'd rely on that sergeant.

A lot of us didn't get close to everybody. You knew at some point that there was a good possibility you'd never see someone again. People were always coming in and going out. You're there, then you're not there, unless you wanted to re-enlist and stay. It wasn't like Korea or WWII where you were over there more than a year. One sergeant told me, "You know what Vietnam is? It's six months of coming in, and six months going out." You're trying to figure it all out, then it's over and you have to try to forget it all.

At Na Trang, out east from city was the beach line, the South China Sea, but then there was mountains all around the outside. Lots of times, that's where mortar rounds or rockets came from. We used to get mortared a lot. At Na Trang, on a hilltop there, they had 20 mm or 40 mm cannons, and you'd hear those things most of the night, sending out to another mountain or hilltop. Periodically, we'd get incoming. They tried to get the communications building. There were marks where shrapnel went up the building.

Most of the time you could hear the mortars or rockets making a noise when they were coming in. You never knew where they were going to land. It's not like someone pointing a gun at you.



# WHEN WE WERE SOLDIERS

Personal Stories of Our Vietnam Veterans

September 20-November 9

**LARRY HARP**

There was a randomness to it. One time it took a corner of our hooch. Most of them had sandbags up on the sides. There'd be sandbags on top of the roof. One came in and tore off the top of the roof. You had that experience. I was fortunate enough that I never got hurt with any of them. Most of 'em were at night, but there were some in daytime, too.

When I got home, I was living at home, not married. When I was first in the house sleeping, I could hear it in my mind. That constant sound. Once I was sleeping and my mother opened my bedroom door and woke me up. I thought she was talking to me in Vietnamese. It was like, don't approach me so quick. In Vietnam, if you were sleeping or someone came up to grab you, there's no telling what you might do. In Vietnam, if you had to wake someone up, you never put your face down to theirs. You kind of kicked them. My wife says I sometimes still yell out in my sleep.

One of the things that sticks in my mind is a mascot we had, a dog. Captain Brierly and Major Brown traded some cigarettes for this pup. He was black and brown with an orange tint. He got to be about 18-20 pounds. He stayed with us. Some wanted to take him back home, but that wasn't acceptable because of diseases. Anyway, he got to know us, and he could sense the Vietnamese after a while. One time our major went into meeting with a colonel and the dog goes in. The colonel says, "What's this thing doing here?"

"That thing is our mascot. That's Private Lewis," says the major.

After that Private Lewis could go wherever he wanted.

One night, we don't know what happened. Someone stabbed him in the back with a bayonet. We wrapped him in a towel and carried him to a medivac and asked what he could do for him. He stitched him up and we had to just wait and see what happened. Maybe four days later, that dog was up walking around again. He survived and stayed with us. I don't know who would do something like that. When I left, he was still there. That dog gave us companionship, something normal, in the middle of war. I'm a dog lover to this day.

I have a picture of me with a couple kids even though we weren't supposed to do that. You took a chance. I was over there maybe a month with some guys checking the perimeter of our base. We had flare trips set up and Claymore mines. We ran into these kids. I thought it was nice to have my picture taken with them, although those kids and civilians could have eventually gotten hit. Some of the guys did feel for the kids. A lot of them in the infantry, going into villages, being attacked, constantly on guard with people, it changes your attitude. *Do I trust this person, this girl?* I personally was kind of leery about who I mixed in with or how friendly I got with people over there.

I was in the communication part of our unit. I was talking on radios, or we had what was almost like an old switchboard. Our operator station was right next to our telecommunications system. That was a separate room. We took turns manning that switchboard, 24 hours a day, seven



## WHEN WE WERE SOLDIERS

Personal Stories of Our Vietnam Veterans

September 20-November 9

**LARRY HARP**

days a week. We also had our radios to the helicopters from our own personal unit, but if another unit called in and wanted to talk to our commander, we patched them in. Otherwise, we'd patch in our captain or lieutenant or the warrant officers who flew helicopters. Anyhow, we had the communication patch line and then we also had the radios... I also did work on the radios that were in the helicopters. Each one at that time was a top security. I worked along with the guy who used to key the radio – the crew chief. There were codes that you would change every day or every several hours; there were all different set ups between the helicopters and the communication centers. Because I was near the communication center, they let me in there because they knew who I was. You had to pass through a steel door that had a little peephole.

One time a guy came in loaded with a satchel charge waiting for the door to open. The MPs caught him before he tried to blow that center up. I wasn't at that location at that time, but I heard about it the next day. Now, when my wife and I go to different things, like in an auditorium, if I get towards the center of a row, I want to be in the back, where I can make a fast exit.

Most of the Vietnamese, their basic diet was rice, fish, and some kind of greenish stuff like lettuce that they'd mix all together. It smelled awful. They had bananas and sugar cane. Lot of 'em might have had black market stuff like sodas and they'd sell Coke for \$1.

I met different people from different states, different characters. Once I was with a guy from West Virginia, a tall skinny guy, missing half his teeth – Lonnie Purdue from the hills of West Virginia. My friend from Rhode Island, Ed Deroiser, asked us, "What do you miss the most?"

Ed said, "I miss going to a party and having a lobster tail."

The guy from West Virginia says, "What the hell's a lobster? When I get home, I'm gonna get my mom to make me a possum."

And I said, "I miss Parker Grow's vanilla fudge ice cream."

In September 1970 I got to go on R and R for a week with my buddy Ed from Rhode Island. We had 5 different places to pick from. The married guys usually went to Hawaii where they met their wives. We called the girls back home "round eyes," and we wanted to go to a country that had round eyes, so we went to Australia. One of first things me and my buddy did was buy civilian clothes and then have them sent home when we had to go back to Vietnam.

The day after we got there, Ed and I were walking around Hyde Park in Sydney, Australia. There was a girl on a blanket. She had a bottle of wine. We came walking down through there, and she offered us some of that to be hospitable. They were real friendly. Then we got in a taxi and the cab driver says, "Where you want to go?"



## WHEN WE WERE SOLDIERS

Personal Stories of Our Vietnam Veterans

September 20-November 9

**LARRY HARP**

“Wherever you want to take us,” we say.

“You’re two bloody Yanks,” he says and he took us around and showed us different things. Of course, when you had to go back, I wasn’t looking forward to it, but I only had two months of my time to go. I did have the thought that if I would have gone to Hawaii and met up with family members... I had friends from school who were in Vietnam prior to me. One guy met his wife in Hawaii, and she got pregnant. He didn’t see child until he got home. You still have to think, “Well, when I get there, what will it be like? Will it be the same as when I left?” In my mind, it was like I took this trip with my buddy, and we traveled together and went back together. You were still in the war. It wasn’t like I had to actually leave my family again.

I always received lots of care packages from home. My mom’s real close to me. She did a lot for me. She sent me letters, packages, tapes. I’d send tapes home, they’d listen and send tapes back.

This was the hardest part: telling my mom on the phone, “I’m leaving now. I might not come back.”

In addition to operating radios, we also had to replace radios and make convoy runs from Na Trang to Cam Rahn Bay. Driving a deuce-and-a-half (2.5 ton vehicle) was sometimes challenging. One day I was re-fueling a truck when a new guy came in behind me. I turned around to find out that he was from Pottstown. He knew my brother and me from school. His name was Cranston Green. In all my time over there, I’d never met anybody from Pottstown. I’ll never forget our conversation.

He said, “I know you. Are you Jimmy Harp?”

“No, I’m Larry Harp. Jimmy’s my brother.”

I told him what I was doing, and we talked about things from back home. It was kind of like a dream. I wondered, “Was this really happening?” He’d just arrived in-country. Then he was sent to one of our other units elsewhere, while I only had about 60 days left. In Tuy Hoa I also drove a truck to bring new guys that arrived in country. When they asked me how many days I had left, I always felt bad telling them, and I would say “about 30.” At that point, most would say “back to the world.”

In my unit we used to have leather shoelaces or ties, for every other month, we’d put one on our wrist so guys would know how long we’d been there. Then someone would ask how many days you had left. If you got down to 30 or 60 days, you were a “short-timer.”

I was supposed to leave Vietnam on the 24<sup>th</sup> of November 1970. They flew me into Cam Rahn Bay. For four days I ate turkey sandwiches and milk, waiting for a plane to come in. It was an Eastern Airlines jet. Before I got on the plane, I threw a knife I had into a box; I didn’t want to



## WHEN WE WERE SOLDIERS

Personal Stories of Our Vietnam Veterans

September 20-November 9

**LARRY HARP**

have any contraband so that they could keep me there. I remember as that plane was taking off, everyone went over to the left side of the plane. As we left the runway, the plane banked to the left, and everyone went to the windows, making kind of obscene gestures and yelling things – you were on that freedom bird and you had a lot of different feelings. The only other thing you had to worry about was if the plane was going to make it. You had 13 hours to get home.

I remember, right after I got home, Richie Geyer, one of the guys I went to high school with, he was at the community college on Route 202. I went down for the day with him and I had my army coat on. Nobody came over to talk to me. You see in movies or on TV, maybe they didn't hate you, but it was a different scenario – people being negative toward you. How could you be over there and people your own age are back home partying and protesting that you're there? Of course, there was the drug scene. Acid drugs in '68, '69, '70 and you had guys over there with access to grass, marijuana, LSD and now they're doing it in the military, and no one gives a shit. We were part of the same age group of the people back home doing it, and I think we wanted to still fit in, wear peace necklaces, beads. Of course, the commanders didn't want to see it. Had to keep mustaches trimmed. Guys would start growing a beard and long hair. I grew my hair long and had it long for my wedding. That was part of getting back in to what was going on back home and feeling like you belonged.