



# WHEN WE WERE SOLDIERS

Personal Stories of Our Vietnam Veterans

September 20-November 9

**DICK HURTER**

## Medic Proud to Serve

I had been working at Weitzenkorn's, the men's clothier on High Street in Pottstown, Pennsylvania. One day I got a call from my Dad at work and I knew I had been drafted. It was 1965 and I was nineteen years old. I sort of expected it, because if you weren't married and not in college, you were drafted. We had to report to the YMCA on King Street in Pottstown. I was born and raised in the area but I didn't know anyone there so it was kind of scary. Then I went to the induction center in Philadelphia and was sworn in on September of 1965. I did my basic at Fort Gordon, Ga. and then my Advanced Individual Training or AIT at Fort Sam Houston in Texas, which was the Army's medic school. AIT is where you learn your military occupation specialty or MOS.

At the same time you were learning to be a medic, you were also continuing with physical training, marching, jogging, firing your rifle, and so on. In my medical training, we learned how to treat various kinds of wounds, amputations, how to stop bleeding, what side to roll a wounded soldier on, etc. There was a lot of theory and training on dummies, getting us ready to handle the wounded in Vietnam. Anyway, I arrived in Vietnam by troop ship on Thanksgiving morning 1966. It took us thirty days to go from California to Vietnam. We had to climb down the side of a ship on a rope ladder. A lot of us were only 19 years old, in good shape—most of us—but you don't realize how high up the side of a ship is from the water line. We climbed over the side wearing our heavy pack, flak-jacket, and our M-14 rifles, and some of the guys who weren't in good shape really struggled. Eventually, however, we all made it into a boat, which headed to the shores of Cam Rahn Bay. Then we were transported by truck to Qui Nhon.

They had a Thanksgiving dinner ready for us complete with turkey and all the fixings. Immediately after dinner we got into a convoy of ambulances, trucks, buses, and jeeps and headed out for Pleiku. Our company was an ambulance company, about a hundred soldiers or more. We were supported with 50 caliber machine guns mounted on jeeps to protect us, as the VC were active along the route we traveled, which was the Anke Pass. But I was still way too green to appreciate what that could mean. The fear of being in a war hadn't kicked in yet. I remember the Vietnamese buses with people hanging all over them were also in our convoy. During the convoy one of the buses got turned sideways, blocking off part of the convoy from the rest. I was driving a jeep, with an officer in the passenger seat, and towing a small trailer with supplies. One of the jeeps with a 50-caliber gun pulled up to us and said, "This might be an ambush". The officer in my jeep said, "Hurter, can you get around that bus?" I replied, "Watch me, sir." Only I forgot I was towing a trailer. I backed up and jackknifed the trailer. When I got my nerves in check I drove around the "sideways" bus. I then had to catch up with the rest of the convoy. I was driving way too fast for the dirt road, but I wasn't thinking much about that. This was my first day in country. There were only dirt roads so it took us three or four hours to get to Pleiku. Part of the base was occupied by the 71st Evac. Hospital, and the 18th Surgical



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Hospital was up the road. Camp Holloway, which was a helicopter airport, was miles away on the other side of our camp.

As medics, we assisted the hospital with the wounded as they came off the choppers. I remember one time there was chopper after chopper lined up waiting to unload wounded soldiers. Hueys hovered over the ones that had landed. It was orderly but intense, what with the wounded men and the chopper noise from the helicopters. The 1st Cavalry had been hit pretty hard that day. In the middle of this, four or five gunships arrived, and we were surprised when Gen. Westmoreland emerged from one of them. He'd come to comfort the wounded. We really had no interaction with him, as we were busy doing triage on the wounded, which we had lined up on stretcher after stretcher all around the hospital. This was probably in February or March of 1966. I don't remember feeling a lot of pressure as I was tending the soldiers, as your job was to assess them and treat their wounds. We weren't supposed to give the wounded men water, but one time I gave some to an officer who wasn't that badly wounded. About five or six months later I was with a friend in Cam Rhan Bay enjoying in-country R&R and this guy bought me and my friend a beer. I said to him, "Thanks, but I don't know you." He said, "Yes, you do. I'm the officer whose canteen you filled up in the hospital." We shook hands and he thanked me again.

One thing I still remember very clearly is a guy that came in and his mouth had been completely shot away. He was bleeding badly. I assisted in his surgery, where we gave him a tracheotomy. I remember that the soldier was spitting up blood so I kept turning his head toward one of the doctors, so he wouldn't spit on me. Finally one of the doctors said, "Okay, Hurter, enough," and both doctors laughed. It was amazing to watch the doctors do their job so calmly in any situation. The wounded soldiers, because you were treating them, sometimes saving their lives, took you into their confidence. You very quickly became friends. One guy came in and told me that their company had got hit very badly. He whispered to me, "We killed our commanding officer." I was sort of shocked and asked, "What happened?" He said that they had been out in the field for a couple of weeks and the CO kept volunteering them to go back out again and half their company was lost. He went on to say, "We drew straws and put a hit out on him". Many of these soldiers came in with human ears on a wire, hanging from their belts. These were cut off from the VC they had killed. Another thing you came to understand were the wounded VC being brought in to the hospital. We had to take them due to the Geneva Convention. We'd put them in a corner of a room and pull a curtain. We didn't want the American Soldiers see we were treating them. Sometimes we just let them lay there until they died, then got them out of the hospital.

I recall one day we were sent to Camp Holloway to get soldiers out of an ammo dump that was blown up. When we got there we were told that they weren't sure that all the ammo had been blown up. They said we wouldn't be ordered to go in so my partner and I volunteered to go in and bring the soldiers out. I guess we were hoping that someone would be alive. We brought



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out bodies burnt and charred. We were really scared, but that was what a Medic was trained to do. We worked twenty-four hours on, then twenty-four off, unless we got a push (many wounded soldiers coming in at the same time). You were seeing severely wounded soldiers all of the time, but you learned ways not to think about it so you could do your job. Plus, the job was so rewarding, the soldiers so appreciative of the care you gave them, that it overrode any of the fears. Every day I would get a list of the wounded and scan down it looking for guys from near my home town. One soldier from Pottstown named Craig Kohler, who was a good friend of my brother, was on the list. I saw he was severely wounded and listed as an amputee. He was evacuated immediately to a more secure hospital in Qui Nhon.

When I left Vietnam in September of 1967, I flew into an airport in Washington State. I remember it was the first time I saw girls in mini-skirts. That surely was a welcome sight. I was and am proud of my service in Vietnam, but it was tough coming home with all of the anti-war protests going on. I think the main thing that stays with me about my Vietnam experience is how my loyalty to my country became very strong. When the United States flag is displayed, or the Star Spangled Banner plays, I get emotional. I think everybody should serve in the military, just like they do in other countries. Last summer I went down to Washington DC to see the Vietnam Memorial with a bunch of guys I served with in Vietnam. We had a small reunion, and even though we hadn't seen each other in forty-seven years, within a few minutes we were all brothers again. At the black wall of the memorial, which has engraved in it all the names of the soldiers who died in Vietnam, my Vietnam brothers and I joined hands and lowered our heads near a soldier's name from our company who had been killed. We were amazed how other people who were visiting the WALL stopped dead in their tracks, and became totally silent as we took a moment to remember our friend. It was almost eerie as the place was so silent and no one was moving. When we finished they applauded and yelled "Thanks for your service", and "Welcome home." I can't tell you how proud I felt to have the respect of our fellow countrymen again, to feel like we were welcomed and that other people appreciated what we had sacrificed over there. Later that night someone asked us what we felt when the people had become silent and stood in place. We all looked at each other and just smiled. None of us knew how we really felt, or we just wanted to keep it to ourselves.