



# WHEN WE WERE SOLDIERS

Personal Stories of Our Vietnam Veterans

September 20-November 9

**DAVID KOCH**

## The Things You Don't Want To Remember

I'm still service-connected, and I still go over to Coatesville every now and then, but I don't belong to any chapter (of the Vietnam Veterans of America.) I have a problem with some members from over there. It doesn't really put me in a bad state. It just gets me thinking. Certain movies I gotta turn off. They bring back things I don't want to talk about. One of worst movies I saw on TV—I watched about a half-hour and I was done. Platoon. I try to block it out. There's too much phoniness in it. The higher-ups got away with murder, and others suffered for it.

When I first came home, I had headaches and nightmares. Agent Orange affected my insides and ruined my pancreas. I'm on all kinds of insulin, about five times a day. I've had skin problems that are stable now. I've got hearing problems even though I wore a headset all the time. When I first came home, with all the headaches, they ran tests for a year and a half on me.

I was with the Army's 13<sup>th</sup> Pathfinder unit in the Mekong Delta. We were attached to two air units. Basically, we were what our name implies: path finders. We cleared areas for pick-up and landing zones and coordinated with captains on the ground for troop movement, re-supply, and medivacs. We knew wind and water conditions and how much equipment the troops had. We could fit 10 guys with infantry gear into a chopper, but if there was lots of extra equipment, we could only fit 6-8 of them.

Sometimes they had to put us in an area the night before to clear an area for choppers to land. We also set up a lot of makeshift runways.

We made sure we got troops in and out, then they would come back and pick us up. The Pathfinder motto is "First in... last out."

I enlisted in 1967, a couple months before I turned 26. I hadn't been drafted at that point and felt I wasn't doing my part. The fellow who sat in front of me in school was killed over there, and one of the guys near where I lived, at the corner of Evans and Jefferson in Pottstown, was a paratrooper, and I liked the uniform. I was the oldest guy in my basic outfit. They were calling me Grandpa.

I did basic training at Ft. Bragg and stayed there for jump school. Then I went to Ft. Rucker in Alabama, then a place called Little Vietnam, then back to Ft. Rucker for Pathfinder training. We were taught how to clear land, make a runway, and land aircraft at daytime or nighttime. I completed Pathfinder school, and they gave us three choices of where to go: Vietnam, Greece, or Germany. I picked Germany first because my dad's uncle ran the Koch harmonica company there, but it turned out that anyone who picked Vietnam last was going to Vietnam first. I went over in March of '68, the month before the Tet offensive, which reminds me... when I got there, right next to our compound, about fifty yards away, was a French convent and orphanage. We



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took turns pulling duty over there because we were all afraid the VC would work their way in; they had a beautiful site on our compound. We pulled two nights a week there with different guys. The French nuns were very nice. They always made some kind of pastry and hot tea for us when we were pulling duty. A lot of us volunteered to go over there because it was peaceful.

Thomas Beverley was another radio operator from Brooklyn. He wanted to go to Villanova after the war. He was scheduled for a mission at 2300 that night. He wasn't back at 2230 to take the briefing, so I took it and went out on; I got back at 0600 the next morning, and he had to take my mission that was scheduled early the next morning.

He went out to pick up a VC who was going to turn himself in. They were called *chu hoys*. They would get something like \$35 to turn themselves in to the South Vietnamese government and be "rehabilitated," a kind of incentive program. We called them 90-day wonders because they'd get the money and go right back to fighting within 90 days. So, on this particular mission, there was a U.S. Major, an ARVN captain (known as a *dai wee*), a pilot, co-pilot, gunner, crew chief, and Thomas Beverley, the radio operator.

They went to retrieve this *chu hoy* in an area that was "seeded" and marked red on map. A seeded area was where the Air Force dropped 750-pound magnetic bombs that didn't go off until someone (wearing anything metal) would get within 15-30 feet of it.

It stopped the VC from moving weapons at night; they knew to stay out of a seeded area. This *chu hoy* was in a seeded area. The chopper was disintegrated and everyone on the chopper was killed. To this day, I don't know how or why anyone went in there. Nobody understands what the situation was. The pilots were supposed to know. The gunships were flying the perimeter should have known. Obviously there was a lack of communication between the Air Force and Army, but if they mistake between 'em, they weren't going to own up to it. On the other hand, it could have been the VC that found that bomb and moved it...if they didn't have any metal on them. It was possible.

A day later, we had a memorial service at the chapel for those killed. The helicopter outfit set up on one side of altar and we set up on the other with a pair of polished jumpboots and a black hat that the 13<sup>th</sup> Pathfinders wore in the delta. Boots and flight wings were on the other side.

I was over at Coatesville hospital in 1975 for numerous things – headaches, nightmares – and had a lot of tests done. Someone made the suggestion that I go talk to Thomas Beverley's parents and tell them how I felt. But what good would it do? Would I tell them their son missed his appointment, that I took his mission and he took mine, and I'm here and he's gone?

## Ambush



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We were going to pick-up zone, which was a landing zone the day before. ARVN was supposed to clean out the area. There were ten U.S. aircraft and ten ARVN craft—about 400 troops and equipment to move. I was standing in a rice dyke. We made an American lift, then a VNAF (Vietnam Air Force) lift, then American, then VNAF, alternating through all the choppers. There were two fellows with me; one had about the same time in as I did – he was a sergeant. The other guy was new in-country. On the last lift, as they were pulling off, the sergeant noticed bullets hitting the water in the rice paddy. We were wet and muddy and down in the water. I wasn't afraid, but the young kid froze on the radio. I took the radio, gave him my carbine, and called our maintenance ship that dropped us off.

“You need to get us out of here!”

“We're landing to re-fuel. We're about 16 clicks away. We'll get there as soon as we can.”

The gunships heard us, broke off the flight and came back. They took out the hooch about 75 m in front of us, while we stayed down. The main ship called and said, “We're inbound. Let us know where you're at. Raise your hand.” I said, “I'm not raising my hand.” They flew over us, I told him to make a 180 and come back.

“We're just below the dyke.”

He spotted us and flew around. Bob, the sergeant, jumped on, I pushed Daryl, the new guy on, and as we pushed off, we took 6 hits in the tail blade. A couple days later, February 18, 1969, we each got a Bronze Star, with a “V” for valorous service. We had gotten all 400 troops out.

There were the things you don't want to remember... We got word that a man and a woman—VC—wanted to talk, to give information. We flew out to pick them up with a captain of the ARVN army, but when we had them in the chopper, they clammed up. Their hands were tied. They wouldn't say nothing. The captain was doing all the talking; we didn't know what he was saying. Then the captain tapped our pilot's shoulder and gave the thumbs up to, “Take it up.” The pilot took it up. The captain asked one more time and neither of them would speak so the ARVN captain pushed the man out with his foot. The woman screamed and then she started talking.

And there was more... One of the worst things I ever saw was on a Medevac after three ARVNs had been hit by a trip mine. We were on a re-supply and just happened to be in the area when we got the call to pick them up. The VC would put out trip mines, which were staggered and formed a triangle. In the jungle, guys would walk 5-10 feet apart and follow each other. The VC set up the mines so that when one person tripped one of the mines, the other two would go off as well and there was a good chance that multiple guys would get hit.

When they loaded these three into the chopper, one was already dead, his scalp kind of hanging down, still with a black bandana on it. The second guy was also dead, with shrapnel all



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over his chest and three fingers blown off. The third guy was on a stretcher. He was awake in the chopper, but he had a big opening in his mid-section and all his insides were sort of outside his body and wrapped in a towel. Blood was flying everywhere. I was sick for two days after that. When we got to the hospital, and ARVN came to pick up the litter, they just kind of tossed it onto the Jeep. They knew he wasn't going to make it. I tried not to look. I can close my eyes now and still see the colors.

I didn't have any bad experiences when I came back, as far as being a Vietnam veteran, but just last summer some kid called me a "baby killer." I was out walking my dog with a buddy of mine in my neighborhood. This kid must have seen my Vietnam veteran hat from across the street and he called out, "You one of them baby killers?"

I said to my friend, "Did he say what I think he just said?"

I knew this kid was a little touched, so I didn't go over. But that's how it is. After all this time, that's what we get.