

From War To Peace: Vietnam Veterans' Memoirs

[Home](#)[Photography](#)[Poetry](#)**Johnny Doe**

Bringing Each Other Home

When I was seventeen I was arrested in New York with some pot. I was offered a choice between the military and jail. I said, "Okay, where do I sign?" Literally, there was a recruiter in the basement of the Court House. I went right down there and signed up. I called my mother, "Ma, I'll see you in a few years," and she goes, "Why, what happened, did you go to jail?", and I said, "No, I'm in the Army," at which point she dropped the phone. Once she picked it up she said "Oh my God, don't you realize there's a war on?" I said, "Ahh, don't worry about it." I'm seventeen, I'm immortal, what's going to happen? I figured going into the Army beat going to jail.



In 1969 I went to Viet Nam in the infantry. I have nothing against the infantry, except that it's the infantry. You're on the line. I was an 11B with the 4th Division around Pleiku. In a very short period of time I became extremely proficient at what I did. After a bit I became a squad leader. For the rest of my tour - that time around - I was the guy who set up the ambushes and took a lot of people out.

My first Purple Heart, I was on a listening post in the middle of the night. I heard a thud. It's a listening post, you want to find out what made the noise. I stuck my head out and a grenade went off. I almost lost my eye and I got few pieces of shrapnel in my cheek. That was my first close call. I swore it would be my last one, but it wasn't.

The second time, I stepped right on a guy. I didn't even know he was there. He was cammied up pretty good. He should have shot me, but he didn't. He jumped up and stabbed me in the hand with a bayonet, so I retaliated with an ice pick to the head. That was the end of him. I just bandaged up my hand and we continued on. It got ugly and it got close and it got nasty, sometimes.

Our new lieutenant came up to me, "Sarge, I want to take that hill." I said, "Well, go ahead, draw your sword and charge on up and see what's up there." And he goes, "No, you don't understand, I want to take the squad." I said, "Well you're not taking my squad, 'cause we don't know what's up there. We don't know what moved in overnight." So he said, "What do you suggest we do?" - which was probably the smartest thing he ever asked. So I said, "Let me see what I can get." Well, I couldn't get our mortars, they were busy, I couldn't get Div Arty, they were busy. But a pair of Marine F4s in the area happened to be monitoring our frequency, which was extraordinarily rare. Their mission had been scrubbed. So they said, "Can you give us a 16-digit grid?" And I said, "Yeah, sure." They flew over and said they thought they saw some movement, then flew over again and dropped some napalm, then they dropped 500-pounders, and then they went back just for the hell of it to strafe it. When we went up there a few hours later, from the body parts that were left we could count well over a hundred guys. We would have gone up there and been wiped out! The stench was unbelievable. You had burnt foliage, you had ammo still going off every once in a while, which was a cheery thought, the stench of napalm, burnt bodies, heads, arms, everything else stuck up in trees and blasted all over the place.

My first Silver Star award, I was embarrassed to be singled out. We'd gotten caught in an ambush.

Bottom line is, I got us out of there, and yanked a couple of people out. I did the same thing that any other GI would have done. A lot of it's still a blank. I remember some, but to be perfectly honest with you I cloud it over because a lot of it's not the most pleasant thing that I've ever done in my life. I wouldn't say what I did came close to being criminal, but it was brutal, it was extremely brutal. Years ago I used to literally lie when people asked me if I was ever in hand-to-hand combat, because I didn't want to go through it again. Let's just say that sharp objects found heads and it was ugly. Back then I was strong, I was in a lot better shape than I am now and a lot quicker. When you're two inches away from somebody's face and you just stuck a bayonet in their head and you're watching them die, that's not something that you want to remember. It's something that you would prefer to forget.

My second tour I went back to 'Nam as a field medic at the ripe old age of twenty. Oddly enough, I was sent back to the 4th Division. I'm telling you, somebody didn't like me. However it was an excellent Division, I have nothing but the highest praise for those guys and for everybody else who fought there.

We were a team. That's the way I always looked at everybody that I worked with throughout the Army. We weren't Black or Hispanic or White or Amer-Indian, or anything else, we were all Green. We had each other's back. Being in combat intensifies brotherhood. You can forget all the Mom, apple-pie, flag-waving, girl-next-door stuff, all that other crap. You're in there for each other. You're in there to bring each other home.

The first time around was definitely about taking lives. I can count 21 that I had in my sights that I took out of this world. Those were all guaranteed. I cannot count how many times I called in artillery, mortar fire, got with our liaison, called in air. I would say I would somehow be responsible for well over 500 to 1000 deaths of VC and NVA regulars. But there were 21 that I specifically took out of this world, on my own.

As an 11B I did what I was paid to do. That was my job. I was indoctrinated to the point where they were just the enemy. I was saving the world for democracy. But it bothered me later, when I started to realize that a lot of these people I had taken out might have been farmers, they might have been doctors, they were probably all fathers, they were definitely all sons of somebody. When I started to put things into context is when it really started to bother me. Now, when I became a medic, things changed dramatically. I realized that war is really, really sick. It's a sickening monstrosity. I got into putting people back together as opposed to ripping them apart. It wasn't like the sky opened up and God's hand came down, or something like that, it was just something I felt very powerfully inside of me.

As a medic, no matter who is wounded or injured, you have a responsibility to take care of him. At one point I was patching up one of our guys who had been shot in the leg. As I was doing that an NVA regular came out at me. I pulled my .45 out from the small of my back and shot him. He went down. After I finished with our guy - his name was Evers - I went over to the NVA. Evers says, "Where you goin', Doc?" I said, "Well, I gotta go take care of him," and he goes, "Damn, you just shot him," and I said "Yeah, that's what sucks about this job. Sometimes you gotta shoot 'em and then you gotta put 'em back together again." But that's the way it is. That's the morality of the situation. So I patched him up and they both took off in a Dust-off helicopter. The NVA Regular and one of our guys. Well, you gotta do it. The alternative is to either let the guy bleed out and die, which I guess you could say, oh, that is a casualty of war, or put a bullet through his head, but that is outright murder. I would never have been able to live with myself after that - you know, walk up to somebody and just blow him away. Although when I was in the infantry, situations arose where things like that came about.

They gave me my second Silver Star while I was a medic. Someone somewhere along the line decided this would be a good idea because I saved a shitload of people. I don't want to go too far into detail about that one, because it was an ugly firefight. It was just a question of making sure that you got everybody out. In the infantry when you get into a firefight you find a place to hide. You get behind rocks, trees, holes, anything you can find. Let's just say when somebody calls "Medic!", that you don't have that hole, that rock, that tree any more, you gotta get up and go. It's an entirely different scenario. There was a lot of hollering for a medic and I did what I had to do. Somebody thought that was worth something. I still say to this day it was the guys behind me. And I'll hold to that. A Brigadier General by the name of Gregg pinned that medal on me. I told him I didn't deserve it. And he told me, "Fuck you, take it!" Nice guy. Right in front of me he whispered that to me, like a normal conversation.

In that firefight a lot of people were hit, but none of them died. They all got out of it. I think I lost, oh, probably about forty pounds, couldn't shit for a week, you couldn't have driven a pin up my ass with a sledgehammer after that. I don't scare easy, but after it's all over and the adrenalin has gone down, that's when you start shaking. That's when the reality of the situation hits you. It's your training takes

over. Your dedication to your job takes over, so you don't worry about things too much. It's later on that you realize how quickly and closely and nasty things actually had gotten.

My third Purple Heart came next. I was thinking about going home for the last time. I wasn't paying enough attention. This guy came out of the bamboo just a few feet away and hit me in the throat with a machete. It severed my right carotid artery. On my way down I unloaded into him. I figured if I was leaving this world I wasn't going to be leaving alone, the son-of-a-bitch was gonna go with me. So I took him out, and I wound up staying. Our medic stuck his pinkie in my carotid. That's what saved my life. I got on a Dust-off and they took me out and patched me up.

Every once in a while I'll be walking around - this has been going on for forty-three years now - all of a sudden I'll smell something nauseating. I'll know it's not there, but I'll still smell it - a combination of burning diesel, kerosene, rotting bodies, burning bodies, burning hair, truck exhaust. Even though I know it's not there anymore, it's sort of like - I wouldn't call it hallucinations - but it comes to me for a few seconds and it reminds me of some of the things I went through. When I was young I would say, "Oh well, one more gone." Now I look at it and think, "My God, I was a part of that."

I used to see a couple of the guys from my squad. As a matter of fact two of them, Davenport and Braxton, lived in New York. Four years ago Braxton died behind a dumpster. He froze to death, homeless. I didn't know until my brother called me, because he knew him too. It broke my heart to think of someone who fought for this country, who put the uniform on, who bled for this country, to die homeless behind a dumpster. There is something absolutely unbelievably atrocious about that.

Most of us in Veterans for Peace have been there in some capacity or other, in uniform. Some have been combat arms, some have been support, but we all understand that war is by itself murder. It's destruction. We haven't tried every other alternative before coming to this. In VFP - I can only speak for myself - but if someone actually invaded this country I would be the first one there to defend the shores. I have no problem with that at all. I am not a strict pacifist. If somebody attacks my family, they're in for some serious trouble. But what do we do before we get to the point where we're actually invaded, or someone is trying to attack my family? What have I done, or other people done, that can avoid that situation before it comes to that point? People don't seem to realize that you can do other things. It's always, "Go for the gun!" That, needless to say, escalates to everybody else getting a bigger gun!

After my first tour, I did the Forty-eight States. I wanted to see what I had fought for. So I did a lot of hitchhiking, and a lot of odd jobs along the way. I'd get a ride with a trucker, help him unload the trucks. That was good for five or ten bucks. That kept me going. Plus I had money left over from - you know, I wasn't spending anything in 'Nam. I wanted to see the 48 contiguous, meet the people, let them know what we had done, that we had done it in their name. Everywhere I went people were slightly different, but they were all good old home-grown Americans. They just wanted to get on with their lives. It was fun, it was a lot of fun, it was a tremendous amount of fun. It gave me a wonderful knowledge base of how this country actually works, and what people really do care about. They care about the country, they care about themselves, and they care about their families.

Years later my son and I were coming back from New York to Arizona. We got off the interstate to take the side roads. At a stop in Arkansas I heard some music, so being the nosy clown that I am, I looked over the fence. There was a Black family, a huge Black family, having a wedding. A little old man noticed me. He came hobbling over to the fence and asked, "Excuse me. Can I help you?" I explained to him I lived in Arizona and that my son and I were heading back. We heard the music and we wanted to see what was going on. He said, "Oh, Arizona, that's pretty far away. You better come on over and have something to eat." So there we were, invited to the wedding party, which was fantastic. Then to my son's credit forever and ever and ever, before we left he said, "Dad, we've got to give the bride something." And I said, "Yeah, but we don't have anything." "No, no I've got an idea." He went into the back of the car and pulled out about an 8- or 9-inch-long piece of petrified wood. He went over to the bride and said, "May your love last as long as this does." I was so proud I almost fell over. Fifteen years old, and he came up with that on his own. I was just so proud, at that point I knew. He found it.



Home

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