

Henry Roll

I am a Vietnam veteran and the VVA asked me to reply to your questions. Since I get many similar requests, I have included, below, answers I gave to similar questions asked by another student recently. I flew attack helicopters for the US Army in Vietnam during all of 1967. I was raised in an affluent family in CT and had a very happy childhood. Our family had a summer home on a lake in NH where I spent many wonderful summers with my two brothers and sister. Before starting Georgetown University, I had graduated from Fairfield Prep School in Fairfield, CT. If you have any additional questions, please e-mail them to me. I started active duty in '65 and left the service in '68 with the rank of Captain after my three year obligation was completed.

How did you get involved in the Vietnam War? Were you drafted or did you enlist? How old were you when your service started, and what year was it? Why did you join?

When I started Georgetown University in '61, I enrolled in its Army ROTC program because I wanted the military to train me to be a pilot. Upon graduation in '65, having earned a commission as a 2nd Lieutenant, I was caught up in the war which was just beginning to escalate. After graduation from flight school in '66, I was sent to Vietnam to fly attack helicopters in support of my fellow soldiers on the ground.

Did you think the war was right? Did you think that was the right solution?

In retrospect I believe we should not have gone to war in Vietnam. The Vietnamese people were fighting for their freedom from colonialist occupation just as we did in our revolutionary war.

What branch of the military did you serve?

The US Army!

How long were you in Vietnam? What years? Start and end year?

I served in Vietnam for one full year from 1/'67-12/'67. At that time you could only be required/ordered to serve one year in Vietnam.

What was basic training like? Did it prepare you for Vietnam?

All of my training was excellent & I was well prepared to fight in Vietnam! I graduated #1 in my flight school class because I took my training very seriously. I knew I would soon be flying in combat & I wanted to do the best job possible in protecting my fellow soldiers on the ground from enemy attack.

Where were you stationed? What was the area like?

I was stationed in the SE area of S. Vietnam. The area was partial jungle and partial rice paddies. It was very hot in the summer and during the rainy season we had daily soaking rains that turned the ground to mud.

What was your job/assignment?

As I have mentioned above, I was an attack helicopter pilot. My helicopter was armed with 7.62mm machine guns, 2.75" rockets, and a rapid fire 40mm grenade launcher. I had a co-pilot and two enlisted crewmen, there were no women in combat in that era, one was my crew chief and the other was a door gunner. I also had a wing man who flew a similarly armed and crewed helicopter. We worked as a "fire team" flying to the rescue/support of our troops on the ground when they were under enemy attack.

What type of things did you go through on an average day? What were the conditions there?

We flew missions every day, mainly at night, averaging about 6 hours of flying time per 24 hour period. We had to land to re-fuel and re-arm multiple times during the night. I was very intense flying because we were shot at during most missions.

Did you see any combat? If so, what types of things did you go through during combat?

Ninety per cent of the hours I logged were combat hours but I was never shot down. I was never wounded but members of my crew received wounds from bullets and/or shrapnel.

What were some difficulties you had to overcome during your service?

The biggest difficulties related to dealing with incompetent fellow soldiers or officers who were incapable of fighting during very dangerous missions. Those that couldn't stand the stress of

combat were quickly given desk jobs away from the fighting.

Did you witness the use of napalm? If so, how did you feel about it?

I saw it dropped frequently and even though it is a very damaging weapon, it was used to keep my fellow soldiers on the ground from being overrun or killed by the enemy. I escorted USAF cargo planes which were spraying AO north of Saigon. I had heard that it was bad stuff so I always kept my helicopter up-wind of the spray patterns. I don't think that our commanders knew how dangerous AO was/is to humans when they ordered it applied.

Did you develop any friendships during the war? If so, how did you meet?

I had many friendships during the war; all developed from within the unit I served with. I keep in close touch with them to this day and we have several reunions each year.

What did you think of officers or fellow soldiers?

Ninety five per cent of the officers & soldiers I served with were 1st class and very brave human beings. We worked closely together to protect each other so we could return home alive after our 1 year was up.

Were there any casualties or injuries in your unit? Did you receive any injuries?

We had many KIA, killed in action, and wounded in my unit but I didn't get a scratch. 40,000 helicopter pilots, from all branches of the military, flew combat missions during the Vietnam war and over 4,000 of them were KIA.

Today we are told the war was fought to stop the spread of communism. What were you told you were fighting for when you were in service? How did you feel about fighting in Vietnam? Did you have any doubts about the war?

We were told we were fighting to stop the spread of communism. When in combat, however, we did not have the luxury of thinking about the national or international politics of why we were there. We had to concentrate 100% on doing the best job we could to protect our fellow soldiers on the ground and we expected them to do the same for us if we were shot down.

Did you have any trouble readjusting to life after you returned from Vietnam? How were you treated? Did you experience any problems?

I had no trouble readjusting to life in the US upon my return and was well treated by my family, neighbours, and friends. I am now retired from a very successful business career and am in excellent physical & financial health.

How did your service and experiences affect your life?

The keys to my success in business were the leadership skills I learned in the military and my ability to perform well under very stressful situations; learned in combat. Nothing I encountered in business ever came close to what I experienced in Vietnam.

Did your military experience influence your thinking about war or about the military in general?

Yes! We should re-institute the draft so that ALL eligible Americans should be required to serve if their country calls them. Also, if we had the draft, the American people might not be so willing to send our finest young men and women into combat in foreign lands. Our volunteer military asks waaay too much from too few and they come home after multiple obligated combat tours broken in mind and body. A great tragedy to be sure!!

Can you tell me about the Vietnam Veterans of America? What kind of activities do you guys do?

I am not a very active member of the VVA because 99% of its members are former enlisted men and I was an officer. Even after almost 50 years, there is still a gulf between officers & enlisted men which is too bad. Enlisted men resent officers because we had to tell them what to do and we had many more privileges and were paid much more. To learn more about what the VVA does, log onto; www.vva.org.

If you could do it (the war) all over again, would you?

Under the same circumstances I would have followed my orders into war. Otherwise your question is too hypothetical. I do not condone the acts of the Americans who went to Canada to avoid the draft. If Americans could pick and choose whether they wanted to go into combat or not, we would have a useless military. Our best weapon is the ballot box where we can choose leaders that will only send us into combat when it is absolutely necessary for the preservation of our freedoms.

Do you have any war stories you'd like to share?

I have dozens and dozens but my favorite is: In October of '67 my helicopter's engine failed and I made an emergency landing in the middle of very hostile Viet Cong territory. A Navy helicopter in the area, after receiving my "May Day" emergency radio transmission, flew to my rescue and when he landed beside my aircraft to pick us up, there were Viet Cong shooting at him and at us. Five minutes later, he would not have been able to save us and we would have been executed on the spot. The VC did not take prisoners in that area at that time because it was too far away from the POW camps in the North. In 2010 I tracked that pilot, Mike Stock, down over the internet, and we had a great reunion in 2011. We have been very close friends ever since. I have attached the write-up I did of that event.