

George Knoll

Where were you born?

I was born in Washington D. C.

How would you describe your childhood?

Generally good. I spent a lot of time helping my father remodel our old Victorian style home and later building a home for he and my mother to retire in. Other childhood activities could be, as I look back on them, considered to have been dangerous. I played American football in school, I often played in the railroad yards, I swam in an old canal and a large river next to it, I spent much time camping and hiking and I hunted with my father and my friends.

Is it a tradition in your family to serve in the military?

No it is not a tradition to serve in the military. Having said that, my mother's family had ancestors who served in the French and Indian War and later in the Continental Army in the American Revolution. My great-grandfather fought in the Union Army in the Civil War, a great uncle in the Spanish-American War, my father and my uncle fought in World War II. My family was not professional military, but served when called.

At what age did you get in contact with the military?

I did not contact the military, they contacted me. I was drafted and I was 24.

How old were you when you first heard about the war in Vietnam, when was that? I was probably 10 years old. I read, in newspapers and magazines, about the French and their efforts in Vietnam against the Viet Minh and later their defeat at Dien Bien Phu. Later on, I can't recall reading or seeing on television any news about the United States involvement in Vietnam.

What did you know about Vietnam, the communists and the Vietnamese armed forces (regulars and militia) before you went there?

I knew very little about the geography of the country or the armed forces. I knew something of the communists and Ho Chi Minh from the material I had read in the 1950s about the French and

their involvement in the country.

What motivation did you have to join the army?

I was not motivated to join the army. I was a part-time college student and married so I had zero desire to embark on a military career.

Were you drafted?

I was drafted.

What did/do you think about the draft system?

I have no problems with a draft. It is a particular conceit to think that volunteers will fill all manpower needs when a country is in armed conflict. I was drafted under a draft that had been in place since World War 1. There were 1A who were first to be selected, then 2S who were students who were otherwise eligible to serve, but called after all 1As were drafted. My local draft board ran out of 1As, so I was drafted. Later the draft was changed to a lottery where depending on your number, you could be reasonably assured you would not be drafted. I did not think that system was more fair than the old system.

Do you think the draftees were distributed equally on the different ethnic groups? Did you make any experiences concerning that topic you think are worth mentioning (e.g a notable majority of an ethnicity in a unit)?

I think draftees were distributed fairly. There was no quota system for various ethnicities, nor should there be. In all the units I was in the army, the preponderance of soldiers were non-minorities. At this Point I want to honour Native Americans. On a per capita basis, the percentage of Native Americans serving in the armed forces was the highest of any groups in America. They were all volunteers.

What unit(s) did you serve in?

I served in the 2/12th Artillery, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile).

How long and when did you serve?

I served from August 1966 to October 1967.

I served, in total 22 months. Of that, 2 months were in basic training, then 5 months assigned to

1st Army Stockade guard troops, then 1 month on leave, the rest in Vietnam. The time period was December 1965 to October 1967.

What were your duties and tasks?

General duties, I manned perimeter defences on LZs, dug bunkers, strung razor wire, basically did what I was ordered to do. I also served as bodyguard for army chaplains (they are not permitted to carry arms of any kind, for any purpose).

Describe your every-day life.

Work, boring, sometimes, when interacting with the Vietnamese, I found it very educational and interesting. The times when one was being mortared, or otherwise shot at, there was, an adrenalin rush but strangely, I never felt I would die.

Describe your unit.

They were a cross-section of American social structure of that time period. There was a mix of racial and ethnic groups.

Describe the atmosphere in your unit.

Generally good, no one felt morose or bitter, most seemed upbeat and were eagerly awaiting returning home.

Did you see combat? If yes, how long?

Yes, I can't give a time, combat in Vietnam was not as it was in prior wars where there were front lines and clearly defined operations with timetables and objectives. Guerrilla warfare was somewhat random and sporadic, when it happen, it was intense, otherwise long period of inaction. The only personnel who saw continuous combat were search and destroy personnel and armed helicopter crews. I did a little bit of flying, it is scary. Generally speaking, since one never knew where or when the Viet Cong would strike, everyone was always under risk.

Do you think the men that served in Vietnam were well educated and able?

The men were trained and in that sense able. Well educated is up to definition. We had college and university graduates, most all soldiers were high school graduates, but there were some from

Appalachia or other rural areas who had only a very limited education. I did run across one soldier who could not read or write, he had others do it for him. He wrote to his minister who took the letters to his mother, read them to her and wrote her letters for her. She lived so far into the mountains of East Tennessee, the minister rode a mule to get there. He was offered a chance to leave the military, but turned it down.

Do you think the officers you were commanded by were well educated and able?

Yes.

From which social class do you think did the average American soldier in Vietnam come? What do you think was their background?

I think the average soldier was from the Middle Class.

How were you treated by other soldiers, officers and the army in general?

I was treated fairly. Please understand, the growing army of that time was just a big organized mob. You were noticed, but no special regard was taken of you.

What were you afraid of the most during the war?

Being killed and leaving my wife and new born daughter alone. It bothered me that I might not ever see my daughter.

Who did you think were your enemies, what was their goal?

My enemies were the ones shooting at me. I believe their goal was to kill me. This may sound flippant but the Viet Cong and NVA Regulars in fact did want to kill as many Americans as possible. It was clear their strategy was to make the war so costly in American lives that we would quit and go home. The ultimate goal of the North Vietnamese government was to intimidate the South Vietnamese into accepting a communist government imposed by and under North Vietnam, this was “national unity” as they saw it. The North Vietnamese government was prepared to eliminate all who opposed this. I suggest that you read comprehensive news accounts (not from American sources) of the time after the fall of Saigon to see what happened to the South Vietnamese people, like the Khmer Rouge in miniature.

What did/do you think was your mission in Vietnam, why were you there? I thought my mission,

along with the American Army, was to help protect the South Vietnamese civilians so they could live their lives as best they could without being intimidated or coerced.

Did your opinion on your enemies, why you were in Vietnam and what your mission was change (before, during, after the war)?

My opinion about the mission never changed.

Did a relation between you/your unit in general and the locals exist? If yes, how would you describe it?

I had a very limited view, but my personal experience was that we had a very good relationship with the local citizens (except of course, the guerrillas).

How would you describe the supply that your unit received (food, water, ammunition, medical supplies)?

Our supply was adequate except during the period of Monsoon rains. Aircraft had limited flight opportunities, and the roads were seas of mud making truck transport difficult. Food was a little short, but fuel and ammunition took priority and we always had enough. Not much in the way of mail from home. In general, I only received about 20% of the letters sent by my family and they got less than 10% of mine.

Did you suffer a traumatic incident?

I did not experience what is defined as a serious physical or mental traumatic event.

Do you know anyone who suffered a traumatic incident?

I had 2 buddies killed. One died when his helicopter was shot down and when he went back for the pilot, it exploded. The other was shot in the stomach and later died in hospital. Those were traumatic for them and for their families.

Are there any events/incidents you remember in a special way--positive, negative, dangerous, etc?

There is an incident that I did not share with anyone, including my wife, until recently. Four of us were in a jeep on the road to Bong Son when we ran into a crowd of civilians and South Vietnamese soldiers and we were stopped. On the side of the road were a group of young children, maybe 6 through 10 or 11 years old. One of them threw a grenade under the jeep, when

I saw it coming I pointed my rifle at him and was within 2 seconds of shooting him. At that moment we pulled away and I did not fire. Fortunately, the grenade was a red smoke grenade, not high explosive. (I don't think the boy knew that though). I have always wondered if the boy grew up and had a good life or if he became a Viet Cong and went on to kill American and South Vietnamese soldiers and civilians, and if so, it would have been my fault for not shooting him when I could have. This will remain with me the rest of my life.

What is your comment on the widespread rumours/ theories that claim that a big part of the American soldiers that served in the Vietnam War came from a low/poor social class and that many of them were trained insufficiently?

The rumour that the soldiers were from the poor and were badly trained was absolutely false. This was begun by anti-war activities and perpetuated by media that was opposed to the war and could not bring themselves to investigate and get the facts.

Do you think you benefited from the time you spent serving in the military?

Yes, I benefited from my time in the military. It increased my resolve to face and deal with life's problems and it made me more compassionate.

Assuming you were you again: Would you serve again, even knowing the outcome of the war?

Yes, I would serve again. Our cause was just.