

Marc Levy

Where were you born?

Newark, NJ US

How would you describe your childhood?

My parents were emotionally damaged individuals incapable of giving love. We were not poor, so material life was not hard. But emotionally, my brother and I suffered.

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

A few of my uncles were in WWII but it was not a tradition. I think they were drafted.

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

I attempted to enlist in the Navy at 19 but rushed through the exam and failed. I took the exam for the Army and passed.

How old were you when you first heard about the war in Vietnam, when was that?

Likely around 1964, during the Kennedy administration. I was 14 years old.

What did you know about Vietnam, the communists and the Vietnamese armed forces?

Nothing beyond what I read in Time Magazine, and saw on the nightly news. Both fell into the category of propaganda. The Vietnamese needed our help. The communists were the bad guys out to destroy the world. The Vietnamese armed forces needed our training and equipment to help save their country.

What motivation did you have to join the army?

After dropping out of college I was living at home. There wasn't much on offer in the way of work and my parents were not emotionally well people, making life increasingly difficult. I needed an escape and the Army promised a career and the chance to find myself. And it was rumoured the Paris peace talks would end the war soon. I enlisted in the Navy but rushed through the entry exam and failed it. Not long afterward, I enlisted in the Army. I was half way through the physical when a burly sergeant grabbed my arm and shouted, "Open your mouth!" Seeing my dental braces he kicked me out. It's a little known fact that during the war the Army would not

take men with dental braces. My orthodontist said anxious parents offered him extra money to put braces on their sons. I told him to take mine off. I passed the physical, and enlisted in the Army and became a medic. I wanted to help people.

Were you drafted? I enlisted first in the Navy. After rushing their entrance test and failing, I was accepted by the Army.

What did/do you think about the draft system?

At the time I didn't give it much thought. In hindsight, it was clearly unfair. The poor and the less well educated were over represented. If you had money or influence, there were ways to avoid the draft. Or if you had other priorities, like Dick Cheney, you could avoid the draft.

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

It's clear blacks and other minorities were over represented. There were a dozen or so black men in my company. Except for one man, I don't recall any problems.

Do you think the draftees were equally distributed over the different states? Did you have any experiences concerning this topic you think are worth mentioning (e.g a notable majority of soldiers recruited out of a single state or region)?

I can't really say, I'm not knowledgeable about the draft. It never really concerned me.

What unit(s) did you serve in?

In Vietnam I was in Delta Company, 1st Battalion 7th Cavalry, First Cavalry Division. Back in the states, I was in the 595th Medical Company.

How long and when did you serve?

I spent a year in Nam, eight months in the bush. I served 2 years, 8 months and 29 days in the Army. I was court-martialed twice. The brass loved me.

What were your duties and tasks?

I was an infantry medic. My job was to patch up the wounded when they were hit. Otherwise, I took care of various cuts and scratches, colds, infections, rashes, etc., and daily handed out the

malaria pill.

Please describe your everyday life.

Delta spent two to three weeks a month in free fire zones: areas without rules of engagement. We got up at 6am. Breakfast was C rations cooked with C4 plastique explosive. A small chunk boiled water in less than a minute. If an automatic ambush (booby trap) set up the previous day had not exploded, a patrol was sent to take it down and bring it back. If the ambush had exploded a platoon was sent to take prisoners or kill survivors.

Around 7:30am the company would move out. We might march for two or three hours. Then set up a perimeter, a circle with foxholes about every thirty yards. A platoon would be sent on patrol. The rest of us would hang out; there were men on guard around the perimeter. After an hour or two we would march, then set up a perimeter and eat lunch. We might rest an hour, then march another two hours.

By late afternoon we would set up an NDP (night defensive perimeter) and everyone would clear a small area to sleep. Platoons would be sent out to set up automatic ambushes on enemy trails. Afterward, the men would cook C rations or LRRP meals for dinner. Before dark, the men in each squad drew lots for guard. Two hours per shift. Two shifts per night. At sun up the daily cycle began again. Two or three weeks later Delta would chopper to a remote firebase (also known as an LZ) for perimeter guard. After seven days we walked or flew back to the jungle. There was a rhythm to it. A definite pattern.

Please describe your unit (the men you served with).

Delta was likely typical of most infantry companies. The men from all over the United States. Mostly middle or lower class. A few Native American's. Fifteen or twenty black men. Some Hispanics. A few had college degrees. Some were illiterate, or not well co-ordinated. Some officers were not ready for prime time. A captain was withdrawn from command. A lieutenant was frag happy.

Please describe the atmosphere in your unit.

When I came into the company, morale was good. But it began to decline as the old timer NCOs began to rotate out of the unit. Some of the replacements, from the 1st Division, did not work out. Things started falling apart during the Cambodian invasion. No one wanted to die for no reason. During Cambodia we took many WIA and so had many replacements. After the invasion, unit cohesion was low.

Did you see combat? If yes, how long?

I was in the bush for eight months. I saw my share of firefights, ambushes, rocket and mortar attacks. In Cambodia, Delta had perimeter guard when LZ Ranch was overrun. Sappers targeted the gun crews; Delta's fourth platoon took casualties too. My platoon guarded the eastern sector, out of the direct line of attack. The surviving gun crews fired HE directly into the wood line. You could hear the shells rattling through the jungle, crashing down trees. Gunships and jets worked out. Snoopy dropped flares. A friend and I heaved a few bodies into bomb craters the next day. As medic, I covered them with lime.

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

As mentioned, some of the men I served with had college degrees. Others were just smart. But many soldiers in my unit were just high school grads. A few were illiterate and several were not fit for combat. They did not have good common sense or learn quickly and tended to make mistakes that put us in danger.

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

As noted above, some were, some weren't. My lieutenant was gung ho, but he was good. He was confident, decisive, clear headed in combat. The lieutenant who liked to throw frags into empty bunkers was a fool for glory. The captain who replaced the captain who couldn't read a map, was thirty three years old, looked like Ernest Hemingway, had leadership in his veins, loved combat, was a natural born killer. I think everyone liked him. I know I did.

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

That's hard to say but the majority of men I knew seemed to be from working class backgrounds.

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

I was treated well by the men in my platoon and the rest of the company. I did not get along well with most rear echelon officers. A remf tried to send me out to the bush after I'd been rotated out and had a job burning shit on a fire base. I refused the order, got on a bird headed not to the bush, but back to the rear, and headed for the battalion aid station, where I knew he was. I was carrying all my combat gear, and locked and loaded. It was a twenty minute chopper ride. Once we landed, I walked a half mile, then spotted him from fifty yards as I was coming round a corner. My M16 pointed itself at his chest. Someone yelled, "Are you sending me out? You m****f*** are you sending me out?" He froze. He raised his hands over his head. "You don't have to go. I'll send someone else." And I walked right past that bum, I found an empty bed in the aid station, I threw down my gear, and wept. He never bothered me again.

I couldn't adjust to stateside duty. I didn't like not being respected for having been a grunt. I should have made E-5 in Vietnam, but the medical XO who liked me was killed in a mortar attack (I found his body); his replacement was the guy who tried to send me back out. Once back stateside, the brass thought I had a chip on my shoulder. I just wanted out. After five Article 15s and two court-martials, a good civilian lawyer brokered a deal. In the end, I did five days in jail, and got a General Discharge.

What were you afraid of the most during the war?

Getting shot, or wounded by mortar or rocket shrapnel.

How did you think of your enemies?

In the beginning I thought they were human beings. Not long after that I thought of them as 'other' and less than human. I hated and feared them. Only after meeting Bao Ninh in 2000, did that change.

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

The VC and the NVA. But many of the Vietnamese in the rear bases likely spied on us on the rare occasions we were there. We didn't patrol many villages. The US line of propaganda was that the VC and NVA were communists who we had to defeat or they would invade the US and

take over and make it communist (really, many American's believed that too). On patrol, all we knew was that the NVA or VC hunted us and we hunted them. Much later, I learned they were so much politically sophisticated than US troops. I met and interviewed the North Vietnamese veteran and author Bao Ninh in 2000. See Strange Meeting in the Post War section.

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

I don't recall that being talked about. We just went on patrols. The general mission was find VC or NVA before they found us, and kill them. We were lucky. We weren't in any big battles. A lot of skirmishes and ambushes and firefights.

Did your opinion of the enemies, and your mission change before, during, after the war?

We feared the enemy, and it's likely they feared us. We were regular grunts, not Special Forces or LRRPs. I don't recall any specific mission, other than going on patrols and setting up ambushes. I think everyone realized the goal was not to get shot or killed. That was it. There was no mission. Just daily survival.

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

No. None at all. We patrolled 'free fire zones,' unoccupied jungle or unpopulated land. There were no rules of engagement. If it moved, we shot it.

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

Resupply was good. Every three days helicopters re-supplied us with c rations, ammo, water. Once a week we got mail and clean clothes. On the other hand, sometimes it took weeks for replacement items (poncho, air mattress, etc) to get from the rear to the bush. Sometimes getting medical supplies was slow. Later I learned this was likely due to corruption. Men in the rear stole supplies and sold them on the black market. Or they just didn't care that much about supplying us, or the Army was disorganized. Nothing new, but certainly demoralizing.

Did you suffer a traumatic incident?

In my eight months, I saw my share of combat. My closest call was being with a machine gun

team that got Chicomed twice during an ambush. The first one wrecked the machine gun. The second land right among us. Boom.

Do you know anyone who suffered a traumatic incident?

One way or another every man in my unit suffered a traumatic event. We were involved in hunting and being hunted by other human beings. We saw and did ugly things, though we did not torture or mutilate. You get used to it, but it's always new. The smell. The gore. The terror. The immense relief afterward. Until it starts all over again.

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

When we first flew into Cambodia everyone thought we were going to die. It was a twenty chopper assault. Gunships circled around us. Heavy arty prepped the wood line. Then the gunships powered dived and opened up with rockets, 40 mike-mike grenades, mini-guns, and we started to descend and skim the tree tops. And nothing happened. For the next ten days I had a heightened sense of awareness. Everything was so real and vibrant. Then Ranch was over run, and the rest of Cambodia played out like a bad dream. We walked back to Vietnam. We were followed by NVA SF. It was scary. I had a nightmare and woke up and almost shot the man next to me with my forty-five.

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?

My basic training was a joke. It was geared to a conventional war. Only in the last week did we train specifically for guerrilla warfare. Medic training at Fort Sam fared the same. We were taught nothing about tropical rashes, fungal infections, ringworm, malaria, etc. Not nearly enough simulated jungle training. It was WWII all over again. And that was in 1969, five years since the war officially started.

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

The training and the war itself was a rite of passage that changed my life in good ways and bad. I can think of more productive methods to develop one's character . But combat does accelerate

knowing what you're made of. I have pretty bad PTSD.

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

Yes. It's exciting, it's boring, the stakes are high, you're needed, you get close to people, you see and do things not possible elsewhere: there's nothing like it. But the price is steep. You're inwardly changed, and maybe outwardly wounded, and most civilians don't understand that, and really don't care to.