

In October 2009, Texas Vietnam veteran Don Dorsey wrote of his personal wartime and post-war experiences in a story entitled *Coming Home – One Marine's Story*. Having returned from the war 39 years earlier, he had struggled many times in identifying and relating to the friends and relatives he had known all of his life. In a final attempt to reconnect with his high school classmates, he wrote his story, a story not unlike that of many Texas Vietnam War veterans.

In his own words, Don explains what led him to write *Coming Home – One Marine's Story*:

"Last October, my Port Neches-Groves High School class of 1964 held our 45th class reunion. Each alumnus was asked to send in an autobiography detailing the highlights of his life since graduation. My highlight was Vietnam. Before the war, I'd been an easy-going, fairly popular kid who had no problems at all relating to others. But after my service as a combat Marine, I found it increasingly difficult to establish common ground with even my lifelong friends. Our class had had reunions every five years, and although I'd never missed one, I was never really that comfortable among my classmates, not until I wrote this. After my story was distributed, I was no longer compelled to explain to each individual why I felt out of place. That story now stands as my disclaimer. Because many of my classmates now have kids and grandkids in the current military, feedback has been all supportive. More importantly, several Nam vets have sent me letters of thanks for telling their stories as well. That reunion was my best yet, and I finally recovered a sense of belonging among my peers. I suppose that's as close as I'll ever get to 'home'.

When I submitted my story, childhood friend and class coordinator Danny Davis wrote an introduction to accompany my senior picture and my high school accomplishments. I include portions of that introduction here because it's important that Americans understand that wars are fought by all kinds of loyalists, including those who don't always agree with national policy. And Vietnam in particular was not fought by uncaring and dead-end losers, but by highly patriotic citizen-soldiers who unselfishly and courageously placed country and brotherhood above their own lives.

'Dear Class of '64. ...Today we have an in-depth look into the life of Donnie Dorsey. ...His story is unusual because he tried to do what he thought was right in a time when the line between right and wrong was blurred at best. Many were opposed to the war in Vietnam and didn't support our troops. Many supported the war but didn't go themselves. Very few opposed the war and supported the troops. Almost none did what Donnie did... opposed the war AND volunteered to fight in it. ...Some of you may read his update and say that the Vietnam experience changed him significantly. To that I must agree... and disagree. ...None of us can know for sure the depths of his anguish. None of us went where he went, saw what he saw, experienced what he experienced, survived what he survived, and suffered what he suffered both overseas and back at

home... all while doing what he thought was right. Did he get everything right all the time? Tell me... who among us did?"

List of high school accomplishments:

DONALD PAUL DORSEY

Football: Junior Varsity 1; A-Squad 2, 3;

Track: 1, 2, 3 - Co-Captain 3;

U.I.L. Regional Track 2, 3;

Mile Run school record 1, 3;

Student Council 2, 3 - Treasurer 3;

Best All Around: Class 2, 3; School 3;

Royal Court 3;

Hi-Y (letterman's club) 2, 3 - Service

Committee 3;

Class Officer 3 - Treasurer;

Commencement and Gift Committee 3;

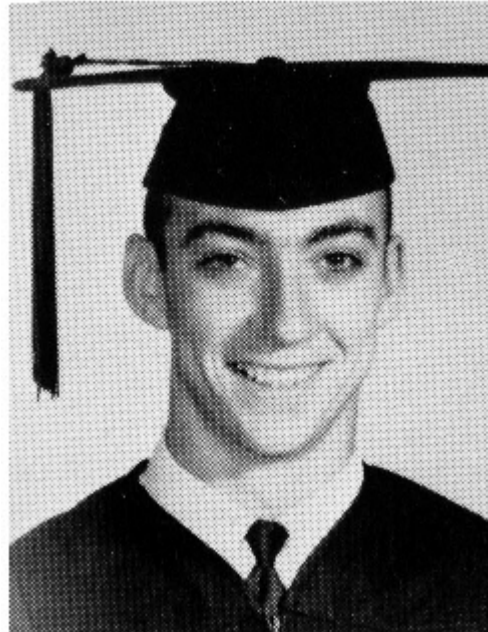
Junior Rotarian 3;

A-B Honor Roll 1, 2, 3;

Variety Show 1, 2, 3;

Farm & Ranch Club Good Citizenship

Scholarship 3.



1 - Sophomore year

2 - Junior year

3 - Senior year

Today Don Dorsey is a veterans' activist. He serves as Austin Chapter and State President of the Texas Association of Vietnam Veterans and is a life member of VFW Post 856 of Austin, Vietnam Veterans of America #915, Disabled American Veterans, First Marine Division Association, and Scout/Sniper Association. He serves on many local and state veterans committees, including the Veterans Outreach Committee of the Texas Capitol Vietnam War Monument.

Note: This story is unedited and contains strong language. - Webmaster

Coming Home
One Marine's Story
Sergeant Don "Tex" Dorsey

October, 2009. An open letter to my Port Neches-Groves High School classmates of 1964... and to America

When we were young and had few responsibilities, our concerns dealt mostly with fun and friendships. Short sighted and inexperienced, we must've thought that even unattended relationships would last forever. Then we grew up. Since those early days, we've let time, distance, opportunities, petty differences, and / or opposing ideologies come between many of us. And were it not for past reunions - and the internet - those "lifelong" friendships would probably have already become only lifeless memories. Despite what separates us, no friends will ever mean more to me than the kids I grew up with, even if as adults we have no more in common than the youth we shared. I've really enjoyed reading about all of you, the paths you've taken and the challenges you've overcome, and it's good to know that most of you are satisfied with your lives. I'm saddened, however, to learn of the deaths of so many of our classmates. I commend Danny for daring to keep the remnants of our class connected. And I thank Carrie and Peggie and Joe for their steadfast commitment and tireless efforts in organizing our past reunions.



#81 - Linebacker. 1963.



Mile Run school record. 1964.

Throughout the years, I've heard several rumors about me. Some are true, some

not so much. Let this be the definitive account. I'm not dead, in prison, in a nursing home, in exile, hiding, or strung out. Although I'm fairly radical in my thinking, I'm neither an old-school Communist nor a new-world terrorist, neither conservative nor liberal, but certainly left of center. Though government-certified combat crazy, I neither shuffle nor drool, and I'm neither unstable nor overly dangerous. And I've never married because, unlike so many of you, I've yet to meet my first ex-wife... I live alone by choice.

Most of my adult life has revolved around my time in the military. Though incredibly short, that obligation was extremely intense, as most of it was served in a combat zone. Though honorably discharged long ago, through personal introspection, therapy and veteran activism, my military experience, like my personal life, continues to be a work in progress. I view my time in the Marine Corps as a constant source of pride, my time in Vietnam as a constant source of strength.



My band of brothers. 1969. That's me dead-center holding something white.

As difficult as war is, Vietnam for me was easy compared to my return home 39 years ago. In Vietnam, there were no expectations and no disappointments. Arriving in country very well prepared, everything for me fell into place as though it was all preordained. Good training and better luck saw me through the worst of situations, making the war for me mostly a life-threatening nuisance. Endurance has always been my forte, and once I accepted my situation and established a pace, there was a certain beauty in the simplicity of battlefield cadence. Good guy. Bad guy. Live guy. Dead guy. One shot. One kill. One winner. One loser. Left. Right. Left. Right. It was all about marking time through ordered chaos. And in war, since most participants are armed, order comes naturally, especially among the "friendlies." At ground level, war is basic, much less complicated and much more honest than peace. I miss that.

On the other hand, back here in the States, nothing is simple, and little is as it seems. Everyone's both good and bad, with the line between the two always blurred. Unlike the military, there's no big picture, no common goal, no teamwork, and no broad, far-reaching consequences. And since few people here are ever

armed, there's no real deterrent to bad behavior. Looking forward -- and not -- to my return from war in 1970, I knew that life for me would likely be different. I had no idea as to the extent. Schooled in guerrilla warfare, I was fairly proficient at survival in the "bush." But back here in this "civilized" world, I felt incredibly inept, helplessly unprepared to fight a never-ending battle for personal peace. In retrospect, what I learned in combat would've probably better served me here, for in a world at "peace," honor among the masses is far from a common virtue, and almost no one here at home ever has your back. I discovered rather quickly that my war was far from over. It's taken many years for me to finally accept that I'll never really get back "home." And that's OK. Home was a state of personal -- and national -- innocence that ceased to exist long ago.

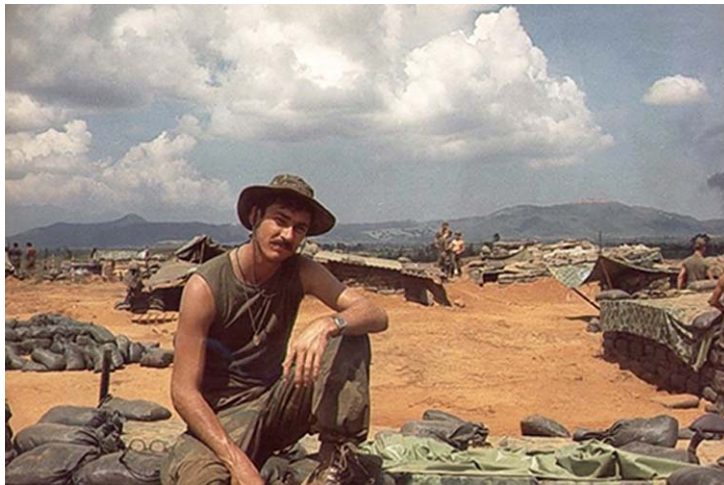


On Operation Pipestone Canyon in "Dodge City." 1969

After a year of combat duty, my perception of the world had changed considerably. No longer naive and much less "socialized," I returned to what I perceived to be a selfish, insensitive and ungrateful America, a nation hardly worthy of the time and energy I'd spent defending it, and to self-indulgent countrymen who were mostly indifferent to both the ongoing death and destruction being committed in their name and regretfully, to the loss of American lives. I saw a lazy country that, as a rule, took freedom for granted and contributed little more than canned rhetoric towards sustaining that freedom. As a whole, the Vietnam conflict seemed to have had meaning only to two specific groups of Americans: those with friends or family actively invested, and those adamantly opposed to our involvement. All others appeared oblivious to the war, blindly but proudly supporting all U.S. policy as though that alone was sufficient contribution to the effort and as though our government was beyond reproach. War for me didn't end with my return. It only shifted to the Western front. It would be another 25 angry years before I would come to the conclusion that war mostly affects those directly involved and that it's impossible to make the others care.

Though it'll likely do so, this writing isn't intended to solicit a response or to provoke an argument. Some of you may disagree with what I have to say, but

that's irrelevant, as this is my story, my perspective on my experiences. To those of you Nam vets who served in combat, I hope you're well. To those of you who served in support of combat troops, I thank you. To all of you, I hope your return has been worthy of your sacrifices. My story is in no way meant to detract from yours, nor is it meant to diminish your contributions to the war effort. And if my observations, opinions, and gross generalizations upset any of you, veteran or otherwise, well... chalk it up as the inane prattle of just one more pissed off Vietnam grunt. Shielded by war-scarred parents and lulled into complacency at a time of relative peace, our generation of baby-boomers was blind-sided by Vietnam, and whether for or against, passive or active, each of us played a role in that era of polarized national and global discontent, even if one did nothing at all. My role was combat, and in that capacity, I speak only for myself in this account. War, like peace, is personal, affecting each of us in different ways. With this writing, I attempt to put but one familiar face on both, a face you all grew up with. Judge me if you must, but please do so only after you've read my story.



Hill 22. 1969

Some of this is fairly technical, somewhat boring, and of interest only to gun freaks, hunters, military enthusiasts, and veterans. I include that information here for historical significance, and because I'm attempting to answer the usual questions well before they're asked. I'm also attempting to correct the wealth of misinformation surrounding my military specialty. If this reads like a history lesson, so be it. Stay with me on this, and perhaps you'll have a better understanding of at least one man's war and its consequences. Most of this I've never before committed to record, and I write it now while I'm still able. Consider this drivel my therapy, as it's something I've wanted to say for 39 years to not only those of you who'll probably never understand, but also to those of you who'll probably never give a damn.

For 15 years after my return from Vietnam, I rarely spoke of my military service except to other veterans. I initially tried to talk with some of you civilians, but even if you could've possibly understood what I found difficult to express, you were either too busy or simply not interested. And some of you, I suppose, were even

afraid of what you might hear. So I kept to myself. When I arrived home from war unannounced in June of 1970, I was looking for neither a hero's welcome nor a parade, just someone to show interest in where I'd been and what I'd seen and done. I needed to believe that my time in Nam was worth something to somebody, anybody at all. While you folks went about your lives, mine had all but stopped. Receiving not even so much as a cursory "attaboy" from outside my social circle, I unfairly began to resent all civilians. My few but frayed emotions after Nam all turned to anger, as I sought to distance myself from the very people for whom, a year earlier, I'd been willing to die. Feeling betrayed by my own country, I concluded that my true friends were still in Vietnam. After a year in a combat zone, I was welcomed home more by those who opposed the war than by the flag-waving "armchair patriots" who sent me there. Confused, confounded, and struggling with an unfamiliar antisocial identity, I became somewhat of a recluse, resorting to that which saw me through combat. Emotionally drained, I ceased to feel, returning instead to combat reactionary in a failed effort to put the war behind me. I spent many tearful days bunkered down in my darkened room at home, wishing I was back in the Nam, and many sleepless nights alone, sitting on a High Island fishing pier, watching the sun rise over the Gulf and longing for the South China Sea. Those were bad times for me, unaware that I was dealing with an undiagnosed mental condition now known as post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).



A clean weapon never jams. The dunes of "The Riviera." 1969

Alone and embroiled in personal conflict, I spent much of my time self-medicated, to the benefit of us all. Purposely avoiding confrontations with insensitive and patronizing civilians, not a day went by for years that I didn't mentally kill someone. Always in control and too disciplined to jerk the proverbial trigger, I waited patiently as the years passed. In time, Vietnam became fashionable, and when the phony Nam vets began to surface, an appropriate target had finally entered my kill zone. In honor of my buddies lost in battle, I was duty-bound to speak out against the theft of our valor. With limited military knowledge and a newfound national guilt, you civilians were -- and still are -- such easy prey for bogus war heroes. And since so few Nam vets experienced combat, most vets were easily fooled as well. With so many Americans unable to dispute the

fabricated and unofficially "documented" wartime adventures of the combat "wannabes," those phonies were quick to claim service in special units. Those stories, egregious though they were, afforded me the opportunity to speak of my tour in Nam, and finally, someone was willing to listen.

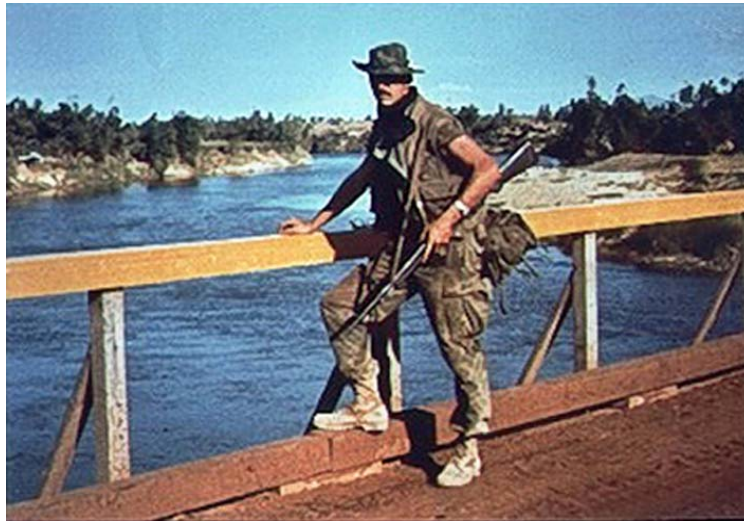


Removing war paint after narrowly escaping a night ambush. Hill 55. 1969

I'd been opposed to the Vietnam War from the beginning. But out of some perverse combination of team spirit, moral obligation and patriotic duty, I chose to serve. However, not at any time did I ever believe that the war was a just cause. Regardless of how they came to be in Vietnam, most of the men I served with in combat fought not for mom and apple pie or some obscure political ideology, but for each other. While many stateside Americans were arguing over "love it or leave it" patriotism and denying detractors the personal freedoms already paid for with the lives of others, those same self-promoting "bumper sticker patriots" were also sacrificing little in support of a distant conflict half a world away. Within the relative safety of the Continental US, neither a civil discourse nor a physical skirmish with anti-war activists equates to bearing arms overseas in defense of our nation. To defend our flag is to defend the rights of our people, all of them, especially the ones with whom you disagree. In the meantime, brave American kids in Southeast Asia were dying honorably for a vague cause... and for a plan with no direction. While America was tuning in to the supertime Vietnam casualty reports on television, her warriors were locked in a bloody stalemate, not allowed to advance, not wanting to retreat. Even when we were winning, America was losing. And sadly, most of you were just too damned busy to care.

Historians now tell us that the Vietnam War was never meant to be anything but a war of containment, an undeclared conflict designed only to slow the spread of Communism. But to many of us on the ground, the Domino Theory was a political holding pattern that resulted in the unnecessary deaths of far too many "expendable" service men and women. While the enemy fought the war their way, our hands were mostly tied. Except for a little "creative combat," we risked our lives daily in a half-assed attempt to adhere to strict rules of engagement,

rules created far from battle. From the perspective of most of my men, even the hardcore rednecks, the anti-war movement couldn't be all that bad if it would put an end to a war that we weren't allowed to win. Vietnam in the bush was a sentence, not a tour, and many of us on the ground viewed ourselves as simply innocent political pawns, prisoners eagerly awaiting our reprieves.



Patrolling off Hill 37. 1969

In Nam, it was mostly the non-combat "rear echelon commandos" and the ladder-climbing lifers (career military) who sought to prolong the war, not the grunts. The vast majority of those guys had safe 9-to-5 duties far from battle, and war for them meant little more than job security and promotions. Even now, they're the most vocal of veterans, parroting with pride -- and in denial -- how we won all of the battles in Vietnam and lost the war. Such bullshit bravado isn't backed by historical fact. We came up short at Ia Drang, Dak To, Khe Sahn, and Hills 881 North and South, just to name a few. I write this because I'm tired of all Vietnam veterans being painted with the same brush and all treated as combat experts by clueless civilians. Most Nam vets never actually saw combat. In the Army, those "fearless" troops were called "remfs" (Rear Echelon Mother Fuckers). In The Corps, they were known simply as "pogues," an obscure and derogatory term found only in Vietnam-era military glossaries. With the stroke of a pen, they virtually controlled the whole war. Our gear, our food, our ammo, our beer, our time, our R&Rs, and even our war trophies, promotions and medals all passed through their hands. Individually, remfs and pogues weren't all bad, but as a whole they were despised by grunts, for their war was less dangerous and more civil than ours. While we lived like animals, they were "in the rear with the beer," ever so bravely stoking the flames of battle. To them, war was just inventory and paperwork. But after a few weeks in the bush, even proud grunts shamelessly envied those in the rear their jobs. Only about 12% of in-country (Vietnam theater) American servicemen were actually combat troops. Of those, 50% would become casualties.



*Mac, "short-round," and me after a mission. Hill 55. 1969.
Mac was later wounded by friendly fire.*

And here at home, the loud-mouthed, anybody-but-me-or-my-kid crowd continued to steadily beat the war drums. According to a 1978 study published in *Chance and Circumstance* by Baskir and Strauss, nearly 9,000,000 draft-age American men were either deferred or exempted from military service during the Vietnam era. That's roughly 3 times the number who actually served in the Vietnam theater. While cheering us on from the hometown cheap seats, few Americans had any idea as to how U.S. policy was actually being played out on the battlefield. "My country, right or wrong" was their tired battle cry, as though it was unpatriotic to question the political process. To silence the opposition, to kill the messenger, was -- and still is -- the first line of defense for cowards, especially for those politicians who prefer to send and not lead others into battle. With no national commitment, there would be no national victory. America chose to fight in Vietnam, not to win. When my unit, a primarily offensive combat element, was told in 1970 to assume only a defensive posture, I knew that the war was lost. While ground troops continued to ignore the directive, the war raged on for several more years, killing untold thousands. With the predictable final outcome of Vietnam realized at the fall of Saigon, critique and blame were soon levied at those of us who fought, not at the non-combatants who orchestrated the war safely from well above the fray. Unlike them, I saw Vietnam up close and personal, and it wasn't the same war they promoted. Unless backed into a corner, the only good war is the one you choose not to fight. America's war of choice in my opinion was a disastrous mistake.



Arizona Territory. 1970

Vietnam was an unforgiving meat grinder, a 12-month lesson in survival where failure was often swift and permanent. The days were much too long, and the nights, because they belonged to "Charlie" (Victor Charles, VC), seemed to last for days. It was too hot and too cold, too wet and too dry, sometimes all within the same 24 hours. We humped through sand and mud and rivers and streams and rice fields and jungles. The serene natural beauty of the lush tropical countryside belied its extreme challenges. Mountains so steep that we pulled ourselves up tree by tree. Double and triple canopy jungles so overgrown that we cut our way through with machetes. Ten foot tall, razor-sharp elephant grass so thick that it trapped the 120-degree heat. Dark bamboo forests too dense even for light to penetrate. And then there was the monsoons.

Exhaustion. Thirst. Stroke. Hunger. Blisters. Jungle Rot. Infections. Diarrhea. Malaria. That was life in the bush. Discomfort was a daily fare with nature rarely in support of the troops. Flies. Mosquitoes. Spiders. Ants. Centipedes. Leeches. Snakes. Apes. Tigers. And too often unable to distinguish friend from foe, Charlie was everywhere, and nowhere. Living in the bush was living on the edge, where each day presented a new learning experience... that is, if you were fortunate enough to have survived the last one. Trip wires. Bouncing bettys. Daisy chains. Punji pits. Snipers. Incoming. Sappers. Ambushes. Firefights. But there was also that not-so-friendly "friendly fire." Co-ordinate errors. Misfires. Hangfires. Cook-offs. Long rounds. Short rounds. Duds. Agent orange. Mistaken identity. Fear. Panic. Anger. Frustration. All too often, we were our own worst enemy.

With Nam offering so many ways to die, death was rarely simple. Even when careful, a single misstep by anyone could exact heavy collateral damage. The fear of traumatic amputation was constant. Joking that at least in a combat zone none of us would ever die of old age, it was the gallows humor that kept us from going insane. It also kept us going forward. In order to function at all, grunts accepted death as a given, with how, when and where the only variables. To live

was the exception. As we awaited our fate, each day was a roll of the dice; each night, the flip of a coin. "Better him than me" became the unspoken mantra, as we "saddled up" and moved out, casualties medivac-ed (medical evacuation) or bagged and tagged, all temporarily forgotten, grieving postponed. A new day would bring more of the same... and more futility.

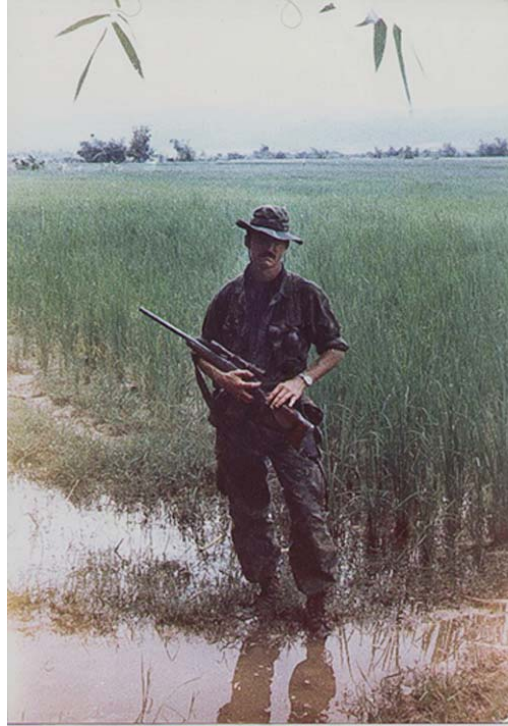


Hunting "Charlie" on Charlie Ridge. 1969

A member of an elite infantry unit, I was in awe of the basic grunts who served in Vietnam. Forced to endure that hostile environment continuously for months on end, those guys were a special, albeit hapless, breed. Constantly in motion and carrying everything they owned strapped to their backs, they never hesitated to close with the enemy, a shadow warrior who was neither very far ahead nor very far behind. For the most part, grunts worked in noisy numbers, their job simply to engage and overwhelm the opposition. Either by offense or by defense, contact was inevitable. Other than "stand downs," when grunt units would come in from the field to rear areas for a few days of rest and re-supply, the only way out for any one of those guys was either a lucky transfer, a life-threatening illness, a "million dollar" wound, a body bag, or by successfully completing a year-long tour of duty. Although I admired grunts for their courage and resilience, I avoided them in the field whenever possible. With their strength in numbers and unlimited firepower, combat discipline was often lost in battle. In the small unit action to which I was accustomed, fewer people tend to make fewer mistakes. Grunts draw fire and grunts return fire because firefights are what they do. That's the war my twin brother Ron experienced. Mine was different, more structured, less reactionary, and much more personal. We also suffered fewer casualties.

Regarded as one of your "high-dollar" grunts, I was never a permanent part of any specific line (infantry) company. Moving in and out of the field almost at will, I operated with many different units, loosely connected as a temporary "attachment." A member of a small, elite regimental group of highly specialized riflemen, I worked the bush freely and quietly in 2-man hit-and-run killer teams,

stalking and engaging the enemy most often on my own terms. I carried a bolt-action, scoped rifle that held only 5 bullets. Operating with a bounty on my head, I was trained to kill at up to 3/4 mile. I was a Marine Scout Sniper. Basically, I hunted people.



Dodge City. 1969

In the summer of 1968, having just finished my 4th year of a 6-year degree plan in pharmacy at UT-Austin, I decided to enlist. My grades were holding up, and with my major being in the medical field, the draft wasn't a threat, but I was broke, bored, disillusioned, conflicted, and curious. Though against America's involvement in the war, I still felt obligated to serve my country. The Vietnam Tet Offensive of 1968 had just turned the war into a blood bath, and despite my anti-war opposition, I felt that perhaps I should be there. Eighteen-year-old kids with hardly any life experience were being dragged into combat where many would die horribly and alone, far from their families. I was 22 years old, single, healthy, still fairly athletic, somewhat mature, and reasonably intelligent. And contrary to what some people may have thought, I was very much patriotic. Motivated by guilt and a lust for adventure, I decided that I should go to war in place of one of those kids. By then I had grown tired of being called an un-American coward by flag-wrapped sheep who were much less patriotic than I, and a combat tour would either validate or negate my previous two years of anti-war activity. Always one to have more confidence than talent, it never occurred to me that I might not survive the ordeal.

My opposition was not necessarily to war, but to America's self-appointed role as the world's policeman and to our "God-given" right to meddle in the affairs of other nations. Not a coward and far from un-American, I simply questioned our

country's leadership and direction and this war created from the curiously convenient Tonkin Gulf "incident." To question authority is not only an American's right, it's also his duty. Outside of committing military insubordination, the motives of those in power should always be examined by those in their charge. Governments, because they're created by men, are not infallible and must always be held accountable, just as any normal chain-of-command would dictate. Although my knowledge of the Vietnam conflict at that time was limited, it appeared to me that our government was acting irresponsibly. But with so much propaganda flowing in both directions, I was unsure. For me, the truth could be found only in Vietnam.

While I was here in Austin attending peace rallies in 1968, brother Ron was a Marine grunt fighting for his life in Vietnam. Despite my anti-war sentiments, I still supported the troops. Contrary to popular narrow-minded rhetoric, those 2 ideas can, did, and still do coexist. To believe otherwise would be to suggest that I would intentionally put at risk the life of my brother. That's bullshit. By separating the war from the warrior, I saw no conflict of interest. Vietnam had already lasted longer than World War II, and bringing our troops home from a self-perpetuating, undeclared and largely unsupported war would surely save them all.

With so many casualties in Vietnam at that time, the Marine Corps was offering in 1968 a 2-year volunteer enlistment program as enticement to fill the ranks, guaranteeing only an infantry designation and a "vacation" in sunny Southeast Asia. Rejecting twice a 6-year offer for OCS (Officer Candidate School) and the possibility of non-combat duty, I instead enlisted for the short term. I wanted to be a grunt. It wasn't my most ambitious of moves, but one I've never regretted. In my "rite of passage," no kid would die in my place; I'd never grow old listening to the war stories of others; and I'd never be curious as to how I might perform under fire. Besides, in order for me to continue opposing the war in good conscience, it was necessary that I experience it.

I entered MCRD (Marine Corps Recruit Depot, aka Boot Camp) in San Diego on 2 Dec 1968. With Vietnam an absolute certainty, I trained hard and completed boot camp 10 weeks later, graduating number one in my class of 95 recruits and receiving the coveted Marine Honor Blues Award for leadership. In addition to being appointed the Platoon Honor Man, I received a complementary Dress Blue uniform from "Leatherneck" magazine and was meritoriously promoted to PFC (Private First Class), a rank awarded to only 10% of each graduating class. It seemed that in addition to my being a "war-protesting, un-American coward," I was also a pretty good Marine. Throughout the training, my opposition to the war never wavered. Having a rough idea of what lay ahead, I simply focused on survival, determined not to come home in a box, and preferably, with all of my parts. I trained to live, not necessarily to kill, as killing would come naturally in the course of battle. I was willing to give The Corps my body, but not my soul.



Platoon Honor Man, Boot Camp. Feb 1969

At the end of Boot Camp, I was assigned the Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) of rifleman, 0311, a grunt, a ground-pounder, "the backbone and the pride of The Corps." With the military knowledge I'd acquired in basic (boot camp), I moved effortlessly through the next two phases of infantry training, always commanding troops at some level, from squad leader to acting platoon sergeant. From those positions of authority, it became readily apparent to me that far too many trainees were much less enthusiastic than I, and that my chances of getting through the war totally unscathed would be slim. In an attempt to offset the grunt 50% casualty rate in Vietnam, I requested specialized infantry training.

My rating as a rifle expert, the Corps' highest marksmanship qualification, proved crucial to my brief military career. Eligible for Reconnaissance and also for Scout Snipers, the only two advanced infantry specialties offered, I volunteered for the latter, surmising that the unit was probably the best trained and, therefore, the safest. And better yet, I could keep my distance from the enemy. I knew little about scout snipers other than that the unit was an elite, semi-secret, bastard force of well-trained riflemen adept at long-range kills. What I didn't know was that they were hunters who served in the field under a constant threat of death. Because the enemy placed bounties on them, their casualty rate, if a 2-man team was compromised, was about 90%.

Generally speaking, the sniper is among the most feared and hated combatants on any battlefield in any war. From a great distance, one carefully concealed, strategically placed sniper can hold up -- and pin down -- indefinitely the forward progress of any advancing enemy force. In the process of killing a few, he'll demoralize countless others. And because he singles out individual targets, he'll piss off the enemy in a very personal way. With so little defensive firepower at his disposal and so much animosity directed towards him, a sniper when detected

almost never lives long enough to become a prisoner. To all warring elements, us and them, an enemy sniper has no real value other than the trophy weapon he carries. And to he who kills the sniper goes the glory and the spoils.



Doyle, me, Boston, and Opie. Back from a mission. Hill 55. 1969

Not exactly your spit-shined, Hollywood types, Scout Snipers during the Vietnam era were bush Marines. Mostly independent loners, they were both admired and ostracized by more conventional Marines. What some perceived as arrogance was in reality a death-defying confidence born of knowledge, skill, and discipline. Though seemingly aloof, scout snipers were always aware, always alert, and always under control. I was unsure that I'd measure up and not entirely convinced that I wanted to. Still, it was a better chance at survival. And it was far too late for me to turn back.

After a civilian background check, a review of my military record, and a psychological evaluation, I was accepted into the Marine Corps sniper program at Camp Pendleton, California. Raised hunting birds and rabbits with a shotgun, the fact that I'd never fired a high-powered rifle before joining The Corps assured me of no bad shooting habits. With the slow, constant heart rate of a distance runner and the attention-to-detail and steady hand-to-eye coordination of a natural artist, my becoming proficient with a rifle was easy. Still, my rifle inexperience, together with my wearing glasses and firing the right-handed sniper weapon left-handed presented three distinct disadvantages. That I was even allowed to attend the school was probably an oversight on the part of The Corps, but against the odds, I tied for top shooter, one shot from a perfect score.



Scout Sniper School, Camp Pendleton, California. 1969

For those of you unfamiliar with Marine Scout Snipers, here's a brief overview. Though we were known as shooters, our primary duty was reconnaissance. However, we spent most of our time in combat running killer (assassination) teams. Shooting was the easy part, while getting into position unseen was the challenge. Getting out alive, if a mission was compromised, was an even bigger problem. To that end, sniper school was less about shooting and more about field craft, observation, stalking, and survival. As low-tech "cowboys," we learned to read people, trails, the terrain, the wind, and the weather. We learned enough of the Vietnamese language to ask basic questions of the villagers and to give simple commands, communication skills not exactly designed to win hearts and minds. We learned weaponry, booby traps, navigation, map reading, radio procedure, first aid, range estimation, camouflage and concealment, basic survival, and hand-to-hand combat. We were trained to see what others ignored and to question everything we saw. Our lives depended on it. And we were conditioned to think fast and react quickly to any situation. In combat, a 2-man team would be on its own and could expect neither reinforcements nor a rescue. All decisions were final. When detected by the enemy, the only course of action was to escape and evade. With a bounty on American snipers, death was the alternative. Since most of the time in the field we had no means of communicating with choppers, extractions for us were extremely rare.

Scout Snipers are the Marine Corps' best combat shooters. Although The Corps has other scout units (S-2 Scouts and Recon), only scout snipers are trained specifically to hunt. As a rule, the unit is composed of only expert riflemen with infantry backgrounds. During the Vietnam era, each Marine regiment, a few thousand men strong, was served by only one sniper platoon. From that platoon, a 2-man killer team would be dispatched on request as an "attachment" to a field unit or compound usually for a specific purpose. In 1969, a full strength sniper

platoon would number on paper about 35 men, including a platoon commander (Lieutenant) and an armorer. In reality, my sniper platoon in Nam operated with as few as 15, with most often no functioning sniper-qualified commander and never an armorer. Like most grunt units, we too were under-manned and overworked. Attrition took its toll, and when the supply of snipers failed to meet the demand, we retrained expert riflemen volunteers from grunt units, turning them into shooters. While only a Corporal (E-4) at the time, but still senior NCO (non-commissioned officer), I served for two months as acting platoon commander, assigning and coordinating killer teams. At any time in the entire country of Vietnam, with no more than six or seven platoons in operation, Marine Scout Snipers numbered only about 150 men total.



Painted up for a "suicide" night mission off Hill 55. 1969.

Bull, on the left, killed himself when he returned home. Boston, above Bull, returned home and was immediately declared 100% disabled due to PTSD. Little John, on the right, was shot in the face when my team was ambushed. Patched up, he finished his tour and disappeared somewhere in California.

The basic 2-man killer team consisted of a shooter (team leader) and a spotter (backup man) to protect him. The shooter's primary weapon in 1969 was a .308 bull-barreled, bolt-action Remington 700, Model 40 "bolt gun" with a 5-round internal magazine. Mounted on the weapon was a variable 3 x 9 power, anodized aluminum, green-body Redfield scope, specially made for the Marine Corps. Most of you would consider the weapon only a deer rifle, but to us it was a surgical instrument. Far too top-heavy to accurately fire off-hand (free standing), the weapon was generally fired from a stable position, preferably prone (laying down), but always with the rifle resting securely. The shooter was also equipped with an over-used and usually severely pitted hand-me-down .45 caliber pistol, the accuracy of which depended on how well and how far he could throw it. The spotter, never more than a few feet from the shooter at all times, usually covered the rear, but on occasion would help adjust the shooter onto the target

by observing through binoculars where a missed shot fell. In order to provide cover fire for the shooter's retreat in the event of a mission's compromise, the spotter carried an M-14 semi-automatic rifle, also heavy but arguably the best all-around American assault weapon in the war, more durable with a greater kill range and a greater knock-down power than the M-16. It could also deliver a substantial butt-stroke to the head in close combat. Should the shooter get hit, the spotter was to ensure that the sniper weapon remained out of enemy hands, even if its destruction was his final act before being overrun.



*Dewey, Carter, and me. Preparing for a mission off Hill 55. 1969.
Carter was killed by shrapnel from a booby trap.*

On missions, the team leader was equipped with a map, a compass, a few extra rounds of ammo, and a battle plan. Attached to the web gear (belt and harness), each team member carried a fighting knife, a few grenades, battle dressings (bandages), M-14 rifle magazines (not reading material), and a couple of canteens. In the trouser pockets were sometimes carried pop-up flares for signaling. Often attached to the back of the belt was a small butt pack, in which was stored food, water purification tablets, kool-aid, cammo face paint, rain gear, socks, string, malaria pills, signal light, salt tablets, matches, heat tablets or a chunk of C-4 plastic explosive (to rapidly heat food), and anything else deemed useful. On day missions, instead of a butt pack, the cargo pockets of our jungle trousers would suffice. If it fit the mission, one man on a reinforced team was equipped with a PRC-25 field radio and smoke grenades. We carried only what was necessary. On some missions, a designated team member carried a marker panel. The neon red panel was to be quickly placed on the ground near our position if threatened by American choppers or spotter planes (reconnaissance). Visible only from the air, the panel's sole purpose was to alert approaching aircraft that we were "friendlies." Given that coordination was often lacking among friendly elements and given that from the air we may not look so American, the panel was a good idea. Usually we were able to hide from aircraft,

but when surprised on one particular mission by a fast-moving, low-altitude recon chopper, we quickly placed the panel out just in time to prevent my 5-man team from being shredded by U.S. helicopter gunships that had already zeroed in on our position.



Weapons from a cave complex on Charlie Ridge. 1970

On large-scale operations, we were required to wear helmets and flak jackets, but on patrols and killer teams, we wore only camouflage clothing and bush hats, as protective gear slowed us down and affected our shooting ability. In our rifles, both the bolt gun and the M-14, we fired only NATO 7.62 match (competition) ammo for accuracy. The scope was "doped in" (sight adjusted) for the shooter at the maximum setting of 600 meters (slightly over 6 football fields), point-of-aim, point-of-impact. At that range, one irregular heartbeat will cause the shooter to completely miss a stationary target, so technique was critical. Most kills were ideally in the 700- to 800-meter range, requiring a "hold-over," (aiming above the target). It was necessary that each spotter be proficient with his shooter's bolt gun and his shooter's "dope," adjusting by sight his own aim should he be forced to shoulder the weapon. Since no two people have exactly the same rifle dope at long ranges, it was incumbent that the spotter determine, by trial and error, his own personal "hold-off," an imaginary point at which to aim another man's rifle in order to make the hit. Each rifle was different. For example, as a spotter to one particular right-handed shooter, my hold-off, firing his weapon left-handed, at 600 meters was low left completely off a stationary target.

When Ron's Achilles tendon was severed by shrapnel in a firefight in early 1969, he was medevac-ed to an in-country hospital near DaNang to recover. By the time he was patched up and returned to his unit a couple months later, I had completed stateside sniper school and was in California awaiting orders. Since a

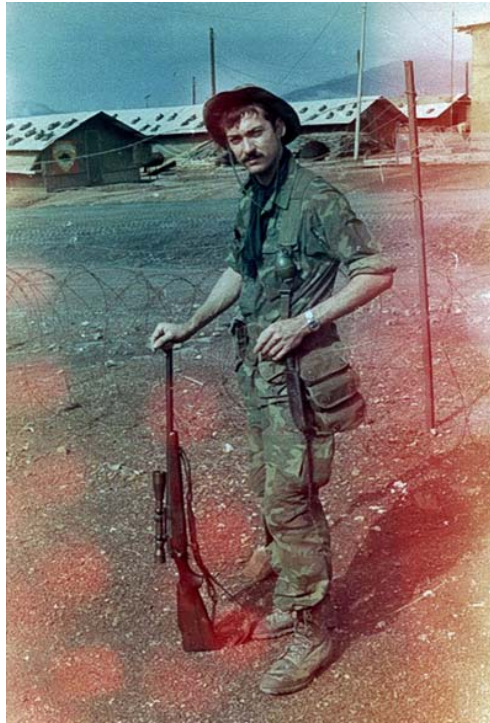
foot injury is a liability to a grunt and knowing that his injury would never heal adequately, I waived my rights under the Sullivan "law" and volunteered to immediately replace him in Vietnam. The Sullivan Law, a courtesy ruling and not a real law, gives immediate family members the option of serving at the same time in a combat zone. In WWII, 5 Sullivan brothers all died on the same ship, the USS Juneau, prompting the ruling (see "The Fighting Sullivans," a 1950's tear-jerker). Following Staging, the last phase of training, I was deployed to Vietnam, arriving in mid-June of 1969, and was assigned to the First Marine regimental sniper platoon. I immediately contacted Ron, only a few miles away, and he was then given the opportunity to rotate (depart Vietnam) if he so desired. He chose to leave, and we met briefly for a night of partying before he transferred to the secure island of Okinawa. His war was over. He'd completed 11 grueling months of a then 13-month Marine tour in Nam. His foot was permanently damaged, but he would live.



Me and Ron in Nam at Fox 2/7 HQ. 1969. He departed Nam the following day.

Shortly after settling into my sniper platoon, I became a spotter to one of our better team leaders, a Kentucky shooter named "Hillbilly" Hooks. Working one of the most heavily booby-trapped areas of southern I Corps (pronounced "eye" core), the northernmost of the four war zones, he and a Louisiana shooter named Dukes taught me and my best buddy Mac how to stay alive. The following month, because Hooks would be going home soon, I was reassigned to another team leader. The two of us, along with Mac and his shooter, were then sent to an intense 3-week sniper school in DaNang, where we learned more about the country, the culture, and the enemy. We also re-qualified at a more difficult sniper range, competing against scout snipers from other regiments. Using the hold-off I mentioned previously, I graduated top gun, easily out-shooting my team leader. I became one of the very few, and the only left-handed sniper and the only backup shooter, to ever qualify with a perfect score on the sniper course, firing at both stationary and moving silhouettes at 600 meters. For familiarization, we also fired on targets at 1200 meters (3/4 mile). In 1969, Marine snipers were recognized

internationally as among the best-trained combat shooters in the world.



Another mission off Hill 55. 1970

Based on my standing at the DaNang school, I was to be a team leader as soon as a bolt-gun became available. Always in short supply, scoped rifles were passed down only when a shooter completed his tour. But before becoming a team leader, I needed more field experience. Volunteering as spotter for Dukes on a particularly dangerous 4-man, 4-day mission in a heavily foliated and unfamiliar area known for enemy activity, I was replaced at the last minute by Hooks who, out of concern for my safety, chose to run one last mission before going home. Feeling rejected, I was summarily pissed, but about eight hours into the mission, Dukes and Hooks walked into an ambush and were both killed. The other team members escaped and hid as an estimated 150 North Vietnamese regulars scoured the area. The loss was tragic, as just prior to that, we had another team hit by friendly fire. Severely wounded, the two men, including Mac, were medivac-ed. Months later, only he would return. With our casualty rate normally low, those two failed missions had a profound effect on our platoon. Accustomed to having the upper hand, the loss of four of our best men was a devastating reality check. With ten months still left of my tour, Vietnam for me had suddenly become dangerous.



Me and Hooks in The Riviera. 1969. He was killed 2 months later when he voluntarily replaced me on a mission.

But with each mission and near-death experience, my confidence grew such that I even forgot on occasion that I wasn't bulletproof. On one memorable mission near Hill 55, I lay in the tall grass, concealed but clearly overextended, trying to get a better view of a distant tree line through my scope. Suddenly my view turned completely white. Knowing instinctively that someone close by had crossed my field of vision, I looked up to see that an old papa-sahn had passed in front of me not more than 15 meters away. My heart sank. An inexperienced teammate to my left had failed to warn me that someone was coming up the trail. Suspecting that we'd likely been compromised and in an effort to delay the inevitable, I instructed my men to snatch the next person on the trail, as we were less likely to get hit by the VC if we held a hostage. When a baby-sahn showed up, my men grabbed the little girl, who quietly and bravely curled up behind me. In a frantic search for her daughter, a mama-sahn soon appeared on the trail. We snatched her as well. With my sniper "pos" (position) now too crowded and with my misgivings about hiding behind women and children, it was time to abort the mission. That day I was one of two team leaders, working 4-man teams in tandem about 50 meters apart. I notified the other team of my intentions, released the hostages, and put my men on alert, expecting the worst. After setting up security, three of us moved to an area behind a hedgerow to adjust our equipment. Almost immediately, the tree line 150 meters to our front erupted with enemy gunfire. Little John, on my right, was bending over to pick up the PRC25 field radio when he was shot in the face. A "through-and-through," the bullet passed through his right cheek without doing any real damage, a clean entrance and exit wound. Diving in different directions, we were defenseless, our weapons out of reach as the event played out in slow motion. Pinned down in the open, the short grass offered us no cover as dirt kicked up all around us. Limbs showered us from the trees to our rear, as the VC continued to aimlessly spray the area with automatic weapons. My fourth teammate, still concealed, immediately returned fire in the direction of the tree line, just as the other team

arrived to lay down a base of fire for our retreat. The firing ceased as quickly as it began, and we crawled to safety. With Little John's wound battle-dressed, we walked out of there laughing, amused at our good fortune. At that range, any half-assed disciplined soldier could've killed the three of us with three shots.



Frosty, Lifer, and me. Disarming homemade grenades found on Charlie Ridge. 1970

For 11 months and 27 days in Vietnam, I alternated between shooter and spotter, running all-sniper patrols and 2- to 5-man killer teams, as well as occasionally standing tower watch or serving as security on special missions. Affectionately called "scout skaters" by grunts because we "skated around" (avoided) firefights, snipers were utilized primarily as offensive weapons. With almost no defensive firepower, our effectiveness and ultimate survival on killer teams depended on how well we could adapt to and blend in with our surroundings. Exchanging fire with the enemy just wasn't conducive to our longevity. Always cognizant of that bounty on us, we were extremely cautious near suspect villages, concealing our scopes from view at all times with an OD (olive drab green) towel. And we often wore war paint which, to our advantage, struck fear in the hearts of the Vietnamese while keeping our presence mostly undetected. We always traveled light and would hide for days at a time from the enemy, as well as from trigger-happy Americans, avoiding unnecessary contact when possible. I spent many cold, wet nights curled up in a fetal position, shivering myself to sleep, my K-bar (fighting knife) held firmly against my jugular vein in a last ditch effort to prevent my throat from being cut.

A 2-man killer team was usually inserted into a grunt unit by regular supply choppers, but sometimes we were dropped off by truck or track (armored personnel carrier or tank). Once attached, depending on the area and the mission, we'd sometimes pick up one or two grunt volunteers to fortify our team. Since any mistake in the field was potentially life threatening, all risks were calculated. We took no more men than was necessary, excluding immediately anyone with emotional baggage. Considering ourselves professionals, we ideally operated on a rule of strict discipline.



Hill 55. 1970

Even though we were often berated by grunts as being prima donnas, they still viewed shooters generally as "fuckin' nuts" for leaving the relative safety of the perimeter with a weapon that held only five bullets. The irony was that even with less ammo, we were more secure in the bush where we could hide, while the grunts, in plain sight, were always easy targets for enemy mortars and snipers. For the grunts, there was no escape. By the time they were dug in and their perimeter set up, their grid coordinates (numerical position on a military grid map) were likely already plotted by enemy observers. Snipers, on the other hand, were a part of the landscape, position unknown. But still, that had its drawbacks. A major concern was our returning to the perimeter and getting shot by a paranoid American FNG (fucking new guy).

As snipers, our directive was to "stalk and kill key enemy personnel." However, in our assigned area, my platoon dealt mostly with the more illusive Viet Cong, who were often villagers by day, enemy by night. "Key enemy personnel" within their ranks were extremely difficult to detect. To add to the confusion, North Vietnamese (NVA) soldiers, paymasters, medical personnel, and recruiters would often move through our Area of Operation (AO) disguised as villagers. The only way for us to fight effectively was to concentrate on targets of opportunity. Identifying the enemy was simply a judgment call based on close observation. Suspicious activity and / or general appearance, like soft skin on a villager or anyone overweight, always piqued our interest. We developed a "feel" for

anything out of the ordinary and supplemented our skills with a heavy dose of intuition. The rules of engagement were tenuous at best, but "free-fire zones," where anyone alive was considered enemy, and dusk-to-dawn curfews for all villagers made target identification less confusing. Anyone carrying a Communist weapon or contraband was always considered enemy. And since all able Vietnamese males over 16 years of age were usually conscripts, healthy young men not in South Vietnamese uniforms were always suspect. When radio communication with our superiors was possible, it was required that targets be clarified before taking the shot. Still, with no absolutes in a combat zone, mistakes were made, and innocent people were sometimes killed, even kids.



Providing security to China Beach. 1970

On a typical shooting mission, the killer team, before daybreak, would move into a predetermined pos usually scouted the day before. In place by sunrise, we'd lay motionless for hours, observing trails, rice fields, and tree lines, looking for suspicious activity. We'd fire only when we had a suitable target; sometimes, especially when discretion was the better part of valor, not at all. It was our call. Best-case scenario was to make the hit at a distance of at least 700 meters, out of earshot for the target and out of range of accurate enemy return fire. After every two shots fired, we'd cautiously relocate from one position of concealment to another lest our position be pinpointed. Most often, we'd leave the area altogether. Bolt guns, being extremely loud, tend to draw attention, and even though the targeted individual may not hear the shot, unseen enemies nearby might. Ever aware that we were most vulnerable when in motion, we never set into any pos without first determining two escape routes. And no, we never fired

from trees, as that's a death trap made famous by suicidal snipers and Hollywood. Trees offer no avenues for escape. More vulnerable than most, we'd occasionally get ourselves ambushed, and if we survived the first volley, our chances for escape were good. Since my weapon held only those five bullets, I discovered rather quickly that even a distance runner, when properly motivated, can run a respectable 100-yard dash. Fortunately, most VC shooters weren't rifle trained that well, and we, quite literally, were able to dodge their bullets.



Bringing in prisoners to Hill 55. That's me in front carrying a blindfolded suspect through the "tanglefoot" (a latticework of ground level wire).

As scouts, we were always aware of our surroundings, constantly gathering information and logging enemy troop movement. Occasionally our teams would discover weapons caches, bunker complexes and bodies. When the opportunity arose, we took prisoners. Following each mission, we were debriefed, and our observations and intel were recorded, plotted, and distributed to field units.

Between field missions, we usually manned towers in a compound day and night and sometimes ran 2-man listening posts (LPs) all night, 100 to 200 meters outside the wire (perimeter). LPs, the night version of observation posts (OPs), served as human early-warning devices in the event of a ground attack, making for long and sometimes terrifying nights. Rather than give our position away with a muzzle flash from a discharged weapon, we were instructed to use our knives to subdue any enemy sapper (infiltrator) probing the lines. With senses more acute and with heightened vigilance, snipers were ideal on LPs and OPs because we alerted to anomalies that regular grunts might ignore. We literally

could smell the enemy. Since the primary weapon for snipers utilized a day scope, we weren't actually required to conduct night acts. However, whenever our backup M-14 rifles were available, we never refused a mission, day or night. With our extensive training and field discipline, we lost only three snipers killed during my tour, but several others were wounded, mostly hit by friendly fire.



Saddled up for an operation in Dodge City. 1970

Back at Regimental Headquarters (HQ), we rarely talked "shop" except when a lesson was learned or a mission was being planned. A kill was almost never discussed, except when it was an interesting shot. In our "off" time at HQ, when not on missions, in towers, on line watch, or fortifying our position (filling sand bags), we usually just hung out, "smokin' and jokin'" in our sniper hootches (wood-framed, screen-covered, tin-roofed, open-air houses), which were usually positioned well away from other troops. Our sniper platoon was the only combat unit of Regimental HQ, and though often treated as personal bodyguards by rear echelon officers, our men were regarded generally as rogue warriors and Marine misfits. Usually out of proper uniform and occasionally less than respectful to "deserving" superiors, we were almost always a rear-area disciplinary problem. Some of our more rowdy snipers would spend their free time drinking and / or fighting at the compound's E Club (enlisted man's club), while others might sneak off to burn a reefer or unwind at a local "skivvy" (whore) house. Some snipers listened to loud rock music, and others strummed guitars and sang country songs. Some "read" Playboy; some read classics and wrote poetry. Despite our differences, our platoon was a tight-knit unit. For fear of our "contaminating" rear echelon, non-combat troops, our area was generally off limits to all but snipers. It was a no-man's land that even officers avoided. Being perceived as crazy had its

advantages. While awaiting our next mission, we'd use the down time to write home or gamble. In the meantime, our weapons and combat gear were always clean and battle-ready. We never waited long.



Winning hearts and minds, 1970.

What I don't include in this writing is my body count, the most frequently asked question. I have a rough idea, but it's personal. Only clueless civilians or non-combat military personnel dare to ask such a question. For the average sniper, performance wasn't about numbers, as none of us were out to win the war single-handedly. It was just a job, and most of us respected the enemy as honorable soldiers, knowing full well that any one of us could've just as easily been in their sights. As for actual body count, such numbers are usually inaccurate anyway. For a Marine sniper's confirmed kill, either of two forms of proof were required: the kill shot had to be witnessed by a Staff Sergeant (E6 - SSGT) or higher (erroneously assuming that integrity is a function of rank); or the body had to be "policed up" (verified) by a grunt patrol. Well, ...the only SSGT who ever accompanied my team on a mission was an untrained liability who had to be protected. So we avoided "witnesses." And grunt patrols were usually too far away to assist with body retrieval or anything else. For us to approach a downed target from our distant sniper position would entail our being exposed, a deadly gamble that went against our training. Consequently, we chalked up most long shots as "probables," and moved off in the opposite direction. Even though several of us did have confirms, none to my knowledge appear on record, as most were scored as kills for the units to which we were attached. Consequently, I tend to question any sniper who brags about a specific number of kills. Proof is hard to come by. Almost all of us had probables that could've been verified. But be advised that body count is never the measure of a man, and several of our best shooters preferred to serve only as back-up men. Missions were always considered team efforts, and success relied on the skills of all involved.



One-on-one with Buddha in a pagoda off Hill 22, 1970

About body count in general. The enemy count was almost always adjusted up for maximum efficiency. American casualties, on the other hand, were adjusted down for the same reason. Body count is how officers make rank, how grunts get special favors, and how politicians convince the home folks that their tax dollars aren't being wasted. Body count, as a whole, is generally bogus. Dead villagers and blood trails were often included in the count. Even severed body parts were sometimes counted as individual kills. You folks were often misled, and still are. War is big business, with "facts" always distorted in favor of the obvious, more likely in support of those whom it would most benefit. Don't be so naive.

I worked throughout southern I Corps, the most northern of the four designated South Vietnam war zones, operating from the coastal sand dunes of the Leprosy Village south of DaNang to the foothills and mountains of Charlie Ridge near the Laotian border. My team even ventured into the mountains north of DaNang on occasion, but with so little field of fire (visibility) in the thick jungle, my spotter and I preferred to work the tree lines and rice fields that were spread throughout the lowlands. Even though snipers had the ability to move about freely, it was required that all changes to previously plotted patrol routes be approved, coordinated, and re-plotted by command control. Keeping the rear area abreast of all changes minimized our chances of being hit by friendly fire. In addition to the usual dangers associated with small unit movement, we were also the targets of enemy counter-snipers and bounty hunters. During my tour, I served as spotter, team leader, squad leader, and acting platoon commander. Although I had more than a few close calls, I made it through Nam without a scratch. More importantly, I never lost a man.

With two meritorious promotions, I rose to the rank of SGT and departed Vietnam June of 1970, 19 months after I enlisted. A few days later, I was honorably discharged under the "early out" program, a special military release plan for non-career combat veterans with only a few months remaining of their active duty obligations. That's when my real war began. I didn't become a sniper because I wanted to kill. I became a sniper because I wanted to live. Coming home was

hardly worth the effort.

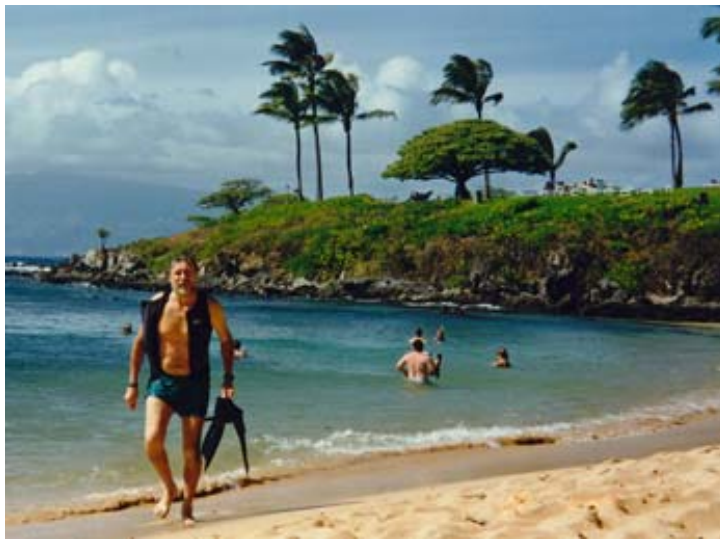


Dodge City from Hill 55. 1969

Of my 19 months of active duty in the Marine Corps, 12 were served as a sniper in a combat zone. I spent the first half of my Vietnam tour trying not to die, the second half trying to stay alive. Each mission chipped away at who I was, and by the time my war was over, I was used up and fairly callous, jaded by the entire experience. Upon my departure from Nam, decompression would've been beneficial, as I was wound pretty tight. But in a rush to thin out the troops, the government processed me out of The Corps and dumped me on you home folks only six days after my leaving Vietnam. Back in Port Neches, after the initial culture shock, I found myself surrounded by a hostile enemy I was ill prepared to fight, the American people. Out of my element, unarmed, outnumbered, and paranoid, I trusted no one. I spent months staying close to home, wishing I was back in the Nam with my men, where I had purpose and respect. It was a lonely time, and I grew more and more angry as I was forced to interact with uncaring and impudent civilians. I came home old and battle-worn, and you folks were still young and naive. Looking back, I suppose I was envious of that innocence. Having seen far too much for polite society, I no longer fit in. My world had been about death. Your world was about life. And most of the things that concerned you folks seemed awfully petty to me. They still do.

For a while, I traveled alone around the country in search of a rush just to feel alive. Sometimes I hitched; sometimes I drove. I skied a few mountains, rode a few rivers, and dove a few oceans. I worked construction initially as a pipe fitter and later as a carpenter, but none of those jobs lasted very long. I was too restless and had a hard time with employers. Returning to pharmacy school was out of the question, as I had no desire whatsoever to serve a public that I no

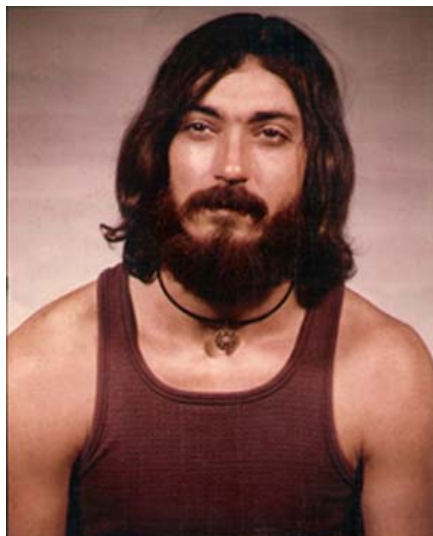
longer trusted. In addition to a bad attitude, I had trouble concentrating. I grew long hair and a beard and smoked a lot of pot to numb my brain, burying myself in the counter-culture. In 1972, I returned to UT to study art, the one thing I was able to do that required little effort. It was also one of the few disciplines that allowed, and even encouraged, erratic behavior. I wanted a degree, any degree, and this was my opportunity. Though I had few close personal friends, my social life was full. Those were high times, literally. The music was loud, the pot was cheap, and the love was free. While still a student and unable to afford a good defense, I was forced to cop a plea to a crooked DPS pot bust in 1973 and was put on probation for 5 years, further adding to my distrust of "the system" and ending any hopes of my ever returning to the medical field. More pissed than before, I continued to smoke pot, as unlike alcohol, it was the only substance available that would keep my ghosts at bay and my anger in check.



Diving on Maui.

Despite the distractions, I still managed to get a BFA (Bachelor of Fine Arts) in graphic design with mostly A's, class of 1975. Avoiding the pomp and circumstance of a graduation ceremony, I received my degree in the mail. When I left UT, two of my art pieces were still prominently displayed in the student museum. I never went back.

For several years, I lived an unconventional lifestyle in Austin as a long-haired, free-lance hippie artist and street vendor. Though I was never in denial and never ashamed of my service, few people knew of my military past. I returned eventually to the anti-war movement, and by the end of the 70's, with the war over, I turned my attention to veteran issues, becoming active in the Agent Orange, POW, and judicial review movements. I've been fighting on behalf of veterans ever since.



A portrait for Mom. 1972. She loved me anyway.

In the mid-80's, I sort of rejoined society, dropping back in "to see what condition my condition was in." A war-themed design I painted in college led to my partnering for a brief time in a small veteran t-shirt company. When the partnership failed, I branched out into other veteran items. For the past 24 years, I've owned and operated Vietnam Veteran Products, a 1-man, mostly mail-order military memorabilia store where I keep weird hours and where the customer isn't always right. I sell pride-in-service items, not war toys. It's not a lucrative operation and the benefits are few, but before the downturn in the economy, it paid bills and allowed me to travel. Mostly now, it just keeps me close to the people with whom I best relate. Never intending to be a "professional" veteran, it somehow worked out that way. For me, it was just the path of least resistance.

There it is. Nam was an intense experience that's affected every aspect of my life. And this is my "disclaimer" for not being like most of you folks. Even now, not a day goes by that I don't think of my tour, especially when I'm pissed. What's done is done, and I regret nothing, even though my life would be drastically different now had I never enlisted. If I've proven anything at all, it's that you don't have to like war to be good at it. And you don't have to love your government to love your country. In Vietnam, I learned more about human nature than anyone should ever know. I experienced simple life and witnessed violent, complicated death. I learned about trust and brotherhood, and about sacrifice. I was exposed to cruelty, brutality, and inhumanity. And I learned to suppress emotions and avoid close relationships. Though I always use the term sparingly, I served in the company of real "heroes," incredibly brave kids who did so much more than simply wear the uniform. Heroism is earned, not bestowed by costume, condition, or circumstance. To serve one's country is a duty and an honor, and he who merely serves is a patriot, not a hero. In all, Nam taught me the difference between what's real and what's real bullshit.



Boston, Doyle, Bump, Lifer, me, and Mac. Hitching a ride back to Hill 55. 1970.

What I witnessed in Nam was a surreal, reckless waste of lives and property, a poorly organized and poorly executed war effort waged ineffectively by the world's most courageous people from the world's most powerful country. With no real provocation, no master plan, and no national support (other than lip service), we invaded a country that posed no direct threat to America, turning a tropical paradise into a war-ravaged testing ground for chemical warfare and new military hardware. And brave kids, both Asian and American alike, died needlessly as our troops, often equipped with sub-standard (lowest bidder) and obsolete gear (WWII and Korea vintage), were denied the opportunity to win, taking and retaking the same ground over and over again. With little help from the South Vietnamese military, our country, with all its might, committed its troops only half-heartedly to victory, sacrificing 58,000 members of our generation and well over 2 million Vietnamese. And the struggling dirt-poor villagers whom we sought to liberate, peasants who wanted only to peacefully grow rice on their ancestral land, were caught in the middle of our 10-year firefight. There were no real winners in Vietnam, only survivors. It's probably best that we didn't win that war. By giving it away, our leadership unwittingly prevented the creation of another Korea-like perpetual DMZ. For me, my opposition to the war was validated. Because of my military background, most people assume that I'm a gun freak and that I hunt. Not so. I've little knowledge of -- and almost no interest in -- weapons. I knew very well what I needed to know as a sniper. A few years after my return, I quit hunting altogether when I realized how unfair it was to pit my skills and equipment against unsuspecting animals. Besides, having been a target in Vietnam was a humbling experience, and I'd come to identify more closely with the prey. Surprised by a spontaneous outburst of emotions when I killed my last dove, I realized that I'd simply lost the desire to kill, even for food. I also realized that I respect all animals more than I respect most people. Though I

no longer hunt, I'd be willing, however, to again shoulder a weapon for an open season declared on trophy hunters.



*Dewey, Hooks, me, and Dukes. Dodge City, 1969.
Hooks and Dukes were killed a month later in an ambush.*

In 1996, Nam caught up with me. Angry outbursts and sleepless nights sent me to the Veteran Outpatient Clinic here in Austin, where it was determined that I suffer from a severe case of combat-related Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), an untreated Vietnam souvenir I've carried around since 1970. In those early days, the condition otherwise known as "battle fatigue" and "shell shock" wasn't recognized as a legitimate mental disorder. I knew from the onset that I had readjustment problems, but in those days government assistance in mental health was severely limited. Expecting the condition to go away, I was only in denial. I'm now in and out of group therapy with 11 other Vietnam combat vets where I'm learning to make friends with my ghosts. And my drugs these days are government-issue anti-depressants, poor but legal substitutes for pot. When I discovered several years back that two of my friends had returned home and committed suicide, I began searching for my snipers, locating about 20. Though productive members of society, most of my men have had brushes with the law, substance abuse, and multiple marriages. Very few, if any, lead normal lives. All suffer from PTSD, mostly undiagnosed and untreated due to the stigma attached to mental health. Seven of us met in DC four years ago to visit our three sniper buddies on The Wall. The emotional reunion proved that the bond forged under fire remains intact. Although we're scattered around the country, we now make it a point to communicate on a semi-regular basis, giving support to each other as needed. I've even managed to get a few of them in PTSD treatment. I served with each man only a few months, but I would still trust, without hesitation,

any of them with my life. And I would still protect their lives with my own.



Copied from "Death From Afar, Vol 3" by Chandler and Chandler.

Since Vietnam, snipers have become romanticized in books, movies, documentaries, and video games. Once regarded as heartless bastards of dubious character, snipers are finally receiving the positive recognition they deserve as skilled combatants. However, we're still considered pariahs by American troops. Though not always apparent, our risks are generally calculated. What few people realize is that the acceptance of one's impending death is profoundly liberating. Since dead men can't die, in Nam we were bulletproof and fearless. However, for that liberty, the price snipers pay comes well after a war. One well-placed sniper team can affect the course of any battle or even the outcome of a war. However, during the Vietnam era, the legality of snipers under the Geneva Conventions again came under question, mostly by left-leaning Americans, who erroneously cited sniping as pre-meditated murder, a war crime. To maintain the good-guy reputation of America, sniper units were traditionally disbanded between conflicts, only to be quietly reorganized for each new American war, which generally occurs about every 10 years. While our country had historically fielded only wartime sniper units, all other nations continued to train and deploy permanent sniper forces. For America, that was changed by Vietnam. According to the book "One Shot, One Kill," the kill ratio for American snipers in Vietnam was 1.3 rounds (about 13 cents) per kill, compared to the overall Vietnam War ratio of 200,000 rounds per kill, easily making the sniper the most cost-effective weapon in our country's vast (and expensive) arsenal. As a

direct result of the accomplishments of Army and Marine snipers in Vietnam, our military has since changed its policy and now maintains a permanent sniper unit in each branch of the service. It's a legacy for which I'm extremely proud.



A lighter moment on Maui.

I'm now in my 14th year as President of the Austin Chapter of the state-chartered, non-political Texas Association of Vietnam Veterans (TAVV) and my 7th year as State President. Six of us, Ron included, founded the group back in the mid-80s as a reaction to the disrespect Vietnam veterans received from a local VFW post, whose WWII and Korea members viewed our sacrifices as less courageous than theirs. Statistics, however, show that the average Vietnam infantryman, thanks to the helicopter, saw more combat in one year than the average WW II infantryman saw in four years of walking to battle. Those "greatest generation" guys, the men we revered all our lives, did more damage to our collective psyche than the anti-war people ever could. While the left called us psychos, war criminals, and baby-killers, the right called us crybabies, druggies, losers and whiners. That lack of acceptance by our countrymen was a common national experience for Vietnam vets and an affront to our service to America. So that we'd have a place here in Austin where we were welcome, we chartered our own organization and designed it to fit the social and psychological needs of the Vietnam veteran. Our membership still continues to grow, and now includes era veterans and civilian sympathizers, as well as in-theater Nam vets. As for that local VFW post that snubbed us... Well, soon after we organized TAVV, we joined that post en masse and quickly gained control. It's been run by Vietnam veterans for quite a while now and is more efficient than ever, serving all war veterans equally. It also houses our TAVV meetings.

In TAVV, our primary concern is the care and well-being of hospitalized and disabled veterans. And unlike most veteran organizations, we stress community service and the interaction with other veteran groups. Purposely competing with no one, we've become somewhat of an unofficial veteran coalition, with our membership including the leaders of many other and more powerful vet groups. We monitor VA facilities and veteran legislation and take an active role in the struggle for all veteran rights and issues. Although we number only a few

hundred, TAVV-Austin is one of the most active and respected veteran groups in Central Texas, and our members and supporters stretch across 48 Texas cities and 11 states. Recognized by both the community and the State, our chapter has amassed a roomful of awards and certificates of appreciation. Among our supporting associate members, I'm especially pleased to include classmates Danny Davis and Tommy Massey, as well as Class of 65 friend Lynne Bixler.

As part of our veteran organization's oral history project, each year my friends and I give unscripted, informal talks on request to high school and college kids about our war and post-war experiences. Mine is unique in that there just aren't that many combat decorated, anti-war Marine snipers around. For me, the talks are cathartic, giving my time in Vietnam some measure of purpose.



James, Tom, and me. Guest speakers at West Lake High in Austin. 2007

As President, I represent TAVV on quite a few veteran councils and committees, one of which is a national pilot program that seeks to secure, for the current returning vets, State funding for PTSD counseling, a need inadequately addressed by the federal government. Also, I serve as chief liaison to the local Vietnamese community, encouraging cultural interaction between American and Vietnamese veterans. Originally on the design committee for a \$1.3 million Texas Capitol Vietnam Monument (see website below) soon to be erected on the Capitol grounds here in Austin and tentatively scheduled to be dedicated in 2012, I was just recently appointed to its Executive Committee. I also serve as the sculptor's technical advisor for the sniper figure included in the bronze, 120% life-sized, 5-man combat grouping, assisting him with concept and detail and providing him with authentic gear and war photos. To our knowledge, a modern sniper has never been a part of any monument. It wasn't my idea, but I'm honored to be involved. For my continued service to the State veteran community, I was recently recognized at the 1st Annual Austin Image Awards Banquet.



*Roy, John, me, and Harold
State delegates. Vietnam Veterans of America national convention. 2009*

Beginning my journey as a patriotic but anti-war, anti-government radical, I've come full circle. Regarded as a designated "hit man" for the veteran community, I'm considered by many to be outspoken, tenacious, socially challenged, somewhat fearless, a tad intimidating, and a general pain in the ass. I still fight the system, but now I do so as a veteran activist. Those of you who still believe that governments are infallible and not to be questioned will still consider me un-American. My military and post-war records show otherwise. I personally believe that it's un-American to become uninvolved. I earned my right to complain, and I intend to exercise that right in pursuit of improving the status of veterans in this country. Without hesitation, I'll continue to demand the earned rights and privileges that veterans and their families are routinely denied by your "infallible" government. I love my country but recognize that, as a first-world nation, our government can do better for our veterans. Although we deserve no less than the respect of a grateful nation, few within our ranks are willing to fight for what veterans are systematically denied. I will.

No wives. No ex-wives. No kids. No ex-kids. I currently live alone, but not lonely, in an older home in an older South Austin neighborhood, surrounded by artists, photographers, writers, musicians, dogs, cats, coons, possums, squirrels, birds and trees. I haven't produced art in years. In an effort to preserve our war history, I spend much of my time collecting Vietnam memorabilia and war artifacts to display at veteran functions and school presentations. I gave up long ago trying to put Nam behind me and now embrace it. But if this is peace, ...peace is hell.

I've no intention of retiring anytime soon. I can't. I did that when I was young and restless. Now I work to pay for my mistakes. Despite the usual old man ailments, I'm reasonably healthy and expect to be around a few more years. Because of my veteran activism and extensive community involvement, I've come to treasure my privacy. When I really want to disappear, I go out to the Texas hill country and walk the land. However, I'm still cautious on trails and still visually scan the area before stepping out into the open. Nam is never ever very far away.

Life for me has been an adventure not suited for everyone. Like so many others in our warrior culture, I learned my limitations under extreme conditions. But the experience was costly in missed opportunities and unrealized potential. However, I'm a survivor, and given the current state of the union, that's a plus for me. That I would be defined by a 12-month period of a 63-year life is mind-boggling, but this is who I've become. I'm where I'm supposed to be, doing what I'm supposed to do. With my future behind me, what I do now with what I've already done is all that really matters. I'm still a Marine, and as such, I diligently serve my country with the honor and the pride of the Corps. But nobody owns me.

And visions of killer teams still dance in my head...

semper fi!
Donnie (aka Don)

SGT D.P. "Tex" Dorsey
1st Marine Division
1st Marine Regiment
Headquarters Company
Scout Sniper Platoon
South Vietnam Jun 69-Jun 70

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