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In-Country and Back
Essays and Reflections by Vietnam Veterans and CCSU Students
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Finally, we wish to thank all of the Vietnam Veterans who served our country. We hope by compiling this magazine for you we have made a small but positive contribution to your lives.

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Spring 2012
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**Introduction**

Even before the Vietnam War, thousands of servicemen and women had returned home from many wars to a cold or even violent reception. African Americans who resettled in the south after serving in the Civil War on the Union side were often treated like runaway slaves and killed. Communities often ridiculed women who dared sign up for military service in World War II; at one point the backlash against them was so strong, President Eisenhower ordered an investigation into whether or not the Japanese or Germans were stirring up the trouble.

Alas, it was just the sexist neighbors. As the famous cartoon character Pogo once said, “We have seen the enemy, and he is us.”

What set the bleak homecoming for Vietnam Veterans apart from any other conflict in U.S. history is that veterans of all stripes felt the chill. Despite endless efforts to shape the narrative taking place in Vietnam as something Americans could support, president after president failed. Were we stopping the spread of Communism in Asia or meddling in the civil war of another country? Were we keeping the French in or the Russians and Chinese out?

The answers changed depending on who you asked and when you asked.

Born in 1961, I was just two when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated and just seven when the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther...
King, Jr. was killed. But I have an older brother who turned 19 in 1969. He recalls watching television with a group of guys as a man on the screen pulled bullets marked with birthdates out of a bucket. Even now, more than 40 years later, he remembers various categories of eligibility: 2S (student deferral), 4F (unqualified for military service), 1Y (qualified for service only in time of a national emergency), 1A (ready for immediate action).

The first bullet had a February date, my brother’s birth month, but not his day. He recalls one of the young men in the room groaning; clearly his number had been called.

No matter what any of us may feel about the politics behind the Vietnam War, we must still respect the fact that the average soldier was 19 and, like my brother, sat in some chair watching some official decide his fate even as he himself had little understanding about what it all meant other than that his country expected him to serve.

It’s also hard to remember that for a 19-year-old today, the Vietnam War and all of its volatile vocabulary—Ho Chi Minh Trail, Gooks, KIA, 17th Parallel, fire-in-the-hole—is a language five decades old. That’s the same distance between me and my parents who fought in World War II, which seemed incredibly distant when I was growing up. In my mind, it was truly History with a capital “H” in school books, not a living element still impacting my daily life.

Our Vietnam Veterans magazine project helped Central Connecticut State University students break through the years and generational divide—if for just an instant—because it forced them to meet one-on-one with veterans, who not only shared their first-hand
experiences, but also photographs, draft cards, Zippo lighters, dog tags, letters home, a “lucky” troll, medals, pieces of their uniform, and sundry objects just as powerful as the stories precisely because they are so recognizable. They bring the war down off the shelf and into the palm of the human hand.

Of course I had my class read about Vietnam, in particular Mark Atwood Lawrence’s remarkably evenhanded *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History*, but it goes without saying that they learned so much more from the veterans themselves. We had the good fortune to have a Vietnam Veteran in our class, Ron Farina, a former Marine sergeant who served in-country from January 1967 to February 1968. In a special section, “Veteran to Veteran,” Ron explores the moment when he shares his own Vietnam experience with another veteran for the first time since he left the service. After locking the narrative away for almost 50 years, he found that for both of them it sprang out in unpredictable bursts, with flashes of boot camp in one moment and then images of unloading bodies from med-evac helicopters in the next. And even with their shared experience as Marines from the same war, the best they could do, in Ron’s words, was to glance “through a keyhole” into the many rooms of memory they each have.

All of the students interviewed at least one Vietnam Veteran and then transcribed a section of that interview into an essay. Many of the men reflected on their homecoming experience, though none so powerfully as Steve Basso, a petty officer who went in-country in 1970 and saw frontline combat against the North Vietnamese near Nhe Be.
When he finally returned stateside a year later, he saw a weathered “welcome home sign” at the airline terminal, “an insult that was barely legible,” he says.

“I got off the train in my hometown of Harrison, New York, on a dark November night. I preferred the mile walk to the idea of a cab ride. It was a little windy, but it felt good, the breeze had a chill in it. I arrived home to a sign flapping at my front door. My younger brother had put it there for me to see, ‘Welcome Home.’

“My road from Vietnam had ended but it will be with me forever.”

Our CCSU Advanced Creative Nonfiction Workshop hopes the Vietnam Veterans will see our magazine project as a Welcome Home sign, compiled with pride and sincere respect for the Veterans, and made to fit into the palm of a hand.

Mary Collins, Editor
ENG 483/Advanced Creative Nonfiction Writing Workshop
Central Connecticut State University
English Department
Spring 2012
VETERANS’ REFLECTIONS

I.

IN-COUNTRY
Outside, I have a sign. *Vietnam: If You Haven’t Been There, Keep Your Mouth Shut.* If you had been there and seen the things I’d seen, death of boys your own age, it’s true.

During high school and after, I worked at a Texaco gas station. I was a homeboy, a farmer. I lived at home, in a house built on land where my grandfather had had an orchard.

When one of my brothers was drafted, I said, “I’ll go in with you.” I put in my draft number early, in May 1964. Two older brothers had been in the service, and said to go in for the shortest time. I had the chance to go to West Point, but said no. It would have added six more years.

When I arrived in Vietnam, it was my 21st birthday. Isn’t that nice for a birthday?

Getting out of the landing boat, I smelled incense, garbage, sewage. One other thing you smelled over there was smoke, oily exhaust from motor bikes, taxis, military trucks.
I saw the results of combat. I saw and I learned. In war, there is no secure place. You never ever know who to trust. Your life was almost worthless. You never knew who was next. I couldn’t believe the ignorance of people who looked down on soldiers. When you’re there, you’re there for your country.

One time I was bringing a truck back. I had a three quarter ton truck. It’s the next one bigger than a Jeep. You know the TV series MASH? The truck in MASH with a cross was just like that. The truck itself is basically self-contained for communication. In the back of it I had wiring, radios, a teletype. It can go so many miles away, and I can call back to post with what I saw. The telephones were battery, you know the crank kind? They were so old; they were Korean, Second World War.

I was bringing a truck from Tan Son Nhut Air Base right next to Saigon, the biggest airport over there, up to Bien Hoa. I think it was about 30 miles. Down coast and then back up. There was nothing on either side to speak of. You might see rice paddies or trees, nothing there when I first got there. This particular time I think I was just dropping off and picking up guard troops.

That day, I stopped to get the truck washed. They used a little gasoline motor to pump up water from the rice paddies. The Vietnamese boy washing my truck looked scared. There was a box with three grenades under my seat. So I took and locked them into the ammo case in the back.

Later, I found three bullet holes in the truck within nine inches of where the grenades had been. I never heard the shots. The number three – three grenades, three bullets. Someone said, “You’re lucky
you’re alive.” The sniper didn’t have the right trajectory. He didn’t go high or long enough when he shot.

That’s just one thing that happened. I had a friend, Hector. People said he and I were a match, same height, we looked almost alike. He was a real Southern gentleman, a church boy. One night he was guarding the Bachelor Officers Quarters. The next day at morning report the captain held up a ragged jersey, soaked with blood and shredded. It was literally torn apart by the shrapnel. “This is what’s left of Hector.” He lived long enough to be evacuated to the U.S. I couldn’t find his name on the Wall; I looked twice.

I had a friend Jimmy who worked in Graves Registration. Formaldehyde so strong you couldn’t smell anything else. That didn’t bother him, you get used to it, he said. And besides, he was in a safe area. I went to visit, saw cargo planes unloading bodies in black bags. Vietnamese were hosing out the planes. You know, the bags leaked. Red water running over my boots.

Outside the USO in Saigon I saw a bus, three guys in it crying. I asked someone if I could do anything to help, maybe take them somewhere for a beer. I was told no, they’re going back tomorrow morning. They put you back in, start all over again.

I was there eight months then I came home. I was owed 21 days of leave, never got them.

One of the greatest things in my life was walking up hill home. My grandfather’s orchard was long gone, but some trees were still left. I smelled apple and cherry blossoms, brought tears to my eyes. Then you knew you were home. Only then I knew I was home.
Every time we got shot down, we seemed to walk away from it reasonably well. We were seriously downed three times and forced out a few others, but those don’t count. The worst was January 4, 1968, three days before my 21st birthday. We flew missions for a B-Team of the Special Forces, an elite group run by this crazy Colonel, Bo Gritz, stationed right on the Cambodian border out of a place called Tay Ninh. We arrived there in the morning and got briefed on the drop in Cambodia. Going into Cambodia was against what President Johnson was saying back here in the states. He claimed American troops weren’t crossing the borders but we were there. Our mission was to find American POWS [prisoners of war] the NVA [North Vietnamese Army] were moving around in these portable cages, as well as to gather general troop intelligence.

We dropped the Special Ops teams in through little holes in the jungle. After the drop, we’d fly back to the Vietnamese side of the border and wait for them to call for help, or whatever they needed.
It might be an hour, it might be two. On this particular day we took them in very early in the morning. With these holes in the jungle, we could typically only put one aircraft in at a time; there wasn’t enough room for two. We flew low-level, almost right on the deck, just over the treetops. We dropped in 12, six in each aircraft: six Americans and six Cambodian mercenaries working with the Special Forces. That’s about all we could carry because the air density was so heavy the helicopter wouldn’t lift with much more than that.

After a couple of hours an emergency call came in from the Special Ops team saying they were under heavy attack – two were killed, three seriously wounded. We flew into the same place we dropped them. What we found out later was that we inserted them into the middle of a battalion-sized force of NVA. And they were smart. They let us drop them because they knew we’d have to come back. They
could have killed all those guys if they had them trapped. A quarter of a mile out we started to receive fire and we’re low-level; as low as we can go, as quick as we can go. Two helicopters came to the LZ [landing zone] and loaded the wounded – I had two wounded and two of the KIAs [killed in action] on my aircraft. Receiving fire the whole time, just as we were getting level with the treetops, we took a hit.

All the lights started going off on the dashboard and oil pressure to the engine plummeted. We had two options: land back in the LZ or try to reach a hole or a mile north into Cambodia. We gambled with the hole. So, we stayed on the deck, the RPMs [rotations per minute] started freezing, the rotors were slowly starting to go down. We’re right on top of the trees and just breaking into the opening, then the RPMs slowly diminished and the engine seized. It was almost uncontrollable at that point. There was elephant grass on the landing zone and we rolled and tumbled and ended up on our side – the crash beat us all to death. I’m lying on the downside, the other pilot is just above me. He gets out of his seatbelt and drops on top of me – it was good to know he was alive. My windshield had been blown out from the gunshots we were taking. We kicked out the rest of it and crawled out the lower part.

We all gathered right in front of the aircraft and I was missing my crew chief, one of the two gunners in the back. I crawled back up inside and there he was underneath, his head pinned under the aircraft. Buried up to about to his shoulders, I could see his arms and his legs flailing down there. He was still alive. We tried pulling him
out, but he was pinned hard. Our wingman landed at the crash site with the other aircraft. They dropped off the troops they were carrying and they set up a temporary perimeter. All the while, the command and control ship is telling us that the NVA is coming through the woods; just get out, leave the guy behind, there’s no time. The Special Forces troops on the perimeter started engaging the enemy, while we tried to get this guy out. We finally realized it was the chinstrap on his helmet holding him in. The helmet was crushed on his head, but the chinstrap was still attached. So I took a knife, reached underneath, and popped it. Then we just pulled him out, ripping his ear in half and breaking his collarbone, but we got him out. We disobeyed orders getting this last person out of there.

That was the first time I got shot down, the most traumatic actually. We flew back with my wingman, Jonesy, to the hospital with the wounded guys we put on board and he dropped us off at Tay Ninh. They went back out to get the remaining guys and got shot down right in the landing zone. An RPG hit the side of the aircraft and mangled the side of the crew chief’s face and body. He lived, but barely. Their other co-pilot got shot in the head. He was an ex-Special Forces soldier flying co-pilot that day. He survived, too. Another aircraft went out and picked them up. The co-pilot literally jumped up out of the weeds and got in the aircraft with a bullet in his head—I don’t know how he did it. He was never quite the same after that. He went stateside, but I’ve heard that he survived.
During our off hours on the island near Okinawa we would scuba dive. I already knew how, so I would scuba dive with my friends. It wasn’t a big island, you know, so we would drive around it with friends. Some of the guys who were married had their wives there and lived off base, in these small bungalow type places. We were pretty much a close knit group. There were drugs there, mostly marijuana but some other things as well. There were guys who got busted, guys who got thrown into Japanese jail and thrown out of the service.

Towards the end of my stay in Okinawa, the war started to wind down. At least our part in the war. In fact, it was already starting to wind down when I got there. We had stopped the bombings, in Hanoi, that stopped ok, and we started to pull the troops out. So the length of the missions was cut from like 18 hours to eventually 14 hours. So the guys were starting to finish their tours, get out of the service early. We were cutting back our manpower. Unfortunately, that didn’t happen to me. It happened to my best friend but not me.
To me it was just doing a job. If it weren’t for the hours, it would be like doing a 9-5 job. We did a lot of the same things that you did here. You know, we went out to bars. Guys got into trouble. There was fights with a lot of the Marines. Marijuana was readily available; I’d say it was a coping mechanism in some cases.

It was the end of a mission and, I was being trained. They had these little tin cans where you could pull the top off. I put it in the oven, one of these convection ovens. I put it in and we’re flying along and all of a sudden, BOOM!

Did something go wrong? Did we lose an engine? Something must have happened. We didn’t quite think it was an aircraft shooting at us because we went quite far but….well. What happened was that I had forgotten to take the tab off of the can of soup. It exploded. It exploded! It was chicken noodle or something like that, you know. Campbells. Blew the door open and the soup went all over someone, an officer who was back there getting his own lunch or something. So it was a mess! And what they would do at that time, whenever they had someone who would screw up like that, you were awarded the Cup for the mission.

So that was one thing. That was the first time. Then the next time, I was “experienced,’ I had probably flown about 15 other missions. When you went through refueling operations you had to wear your parachute in case you had to get out of there fast. So you had your parachute on for an hour with your helmet and oxygen mask. I was sitting on the other side of the equipment; there were these long benches of canvas seats folded down. The refueling operation was
over so I went to get up. Now there is a little ring on that parachute, well that little ring of mine caught on the bench and pulled…there was parachute everywhere in that aircraft! So I got the Cup for that one as well. It was a little embarrassing but I figured, oh well, alright, at least it’s a funny story, I can live with that. At least no one got hurt.
I grew up in Connecticut. In my first 23 years I never travelled more than 300 miles in any given direction. I’d been down to Washington, D.C. and up to southern New Hampshire. That was the extent of my travels before reporting for active duty with the U.S. Air Force on Valentine’s Day, 1969.

I arrived at Tan Son Nhut Airbase in Saigon in early 1970, after spending the majority of 1969 at training bases in San Antonio, Texas and Denver, Colorado. Once we got off the plane, we were commanded to turn over all of our American currency. I didn’t understand this. Evidently in Saigon, there was a black market for U.S. currency. They weren’t taking any chances.

Our money was exchanged for Military Payment Certificates. These were just bills, no coins. We had five-dollar bills and single dollar bills, like we do in America, but we also had 50-cent bills and 25-cent bills. In the Army, we functioned on Monopoly money.

The climate at Tan Son Nhut was definitely tropical. The barracks were basically wood frames with screens. We had no solid
walls. The entire space was pretty much open. Inside the barracks were a series of cubicles, each with a two-tiered bunk bed, a desk and two lockers, one for each person living in the room. This was our living space on the base.

My job in the Air Force was to process motion picture film brought in from the field. I worked in a tiny office developing film in various chemicals. All of the chemicals had to be just so; the perfect pH reading, the perfect temperature, everything perfect. The weather in Saigon often made this task tedious and I spent many difficult hours in my office, battling with stubborn chemicals.

We normally worked six days a week. The hours were long, mostly 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. daily. We worked hard, but we got to go off the base, too. There was a big base in Da Nang, much further to the north from where I was stationed. People said it was a great place to be. Evidently, it had a really nice beach. But they were forever getting shelled up there.

I opted for the security. I stayed in Saigon.

Saigon was an amazing urban area, even at that time. It had been a city of 200,000 to 300,000 before the conflict, but had grown to four million by the time I got there. The streets burst with commotion and activity; the traffic was incredible. They drove around in old Peugeot taxi cabs painted blue and yellow that had been given to them by the French. I always resented the Americans who would look down on the Vietnamese and call them “dumb.” You have to figure, the French left Vietnam around 1954 so by 1970 Saigon had a fleet of taxi cabs that had to be at least 18 years old, with no access
to any spare parts. The Vietnamese had to be pretty good engineers to keep those things going on the road!

Amidst the crowds in the street, I felt safe to go out by myself. I didn’t go down any dark streets, but there were so many people around all the time, and I was travelling on major routes. Sure, there was always the threat of street crime, but you face that same threat in some areas of Hartford today.

There were good restaurants in Saigon. The French had run the place long before we showed up and they influenced the Vietnamese cuisine. I ate some great French food, but eating the Vietnamese food was an experience in and of itself. The indigenous Vietnamese cuisine was exotic, to say the least. Over here, we have “American-Vietnamese restaurants” that are very tame by comparison. It wasn’t odd to be served a bowl with a chicken lying in it with its head on one end and its feet on the other or stuffed pig stomach.

When I traveled with guys from the base, we would go to a nightclub in Saigon called the Fillmore Far East. The name of the club was a take on the classic rock venue on 2nd Avenue in the East Village in New York City. You would walk into a multi-tiered venue to find it swarming with several hundred GIs in fatigues, all stoned and listening to this amazing rock group from the Philippines. They could imitate any rock group popular back in the States. They could be Jefferson Airplane, they could be the Stones. We followed them to different venues whenever we could. I never got to see a U.S.O. show during my stay, so this was my musical entertainment.

Living in Saigon, I came to see myself as sort of a modern-day
desperado; many of us certainly skirted the rules and regulations. We got our hands on Vietnamese currency by trading our cigarettes and liquor rations, especially Martell Cognac which the Vietnamese seemed to love. It was illegal to do so, but everyone did it and no one ever seemed to get caught. The brass had bigger things to worry about.

Some of my friends and I used our Vietnamese currency to rent an apartment off base in the city from a local family. I never figured out what the parents did; I think they were day laborers. The kids went to school. They were very well behaved and very smart. They spoke Vietnamese, of course, but they also spoke French and English and I think they were learning German. The image of the civilians, if you really got to know them, was very different than the one that was being told to people back home. These were smart, civilized people; I hated to hear the term “gooks” used.

What people don’t realize is that it wasn’t any treat to be serving your military time stateside during that period. The World War II Veterans thought we were losing the war; the kids our own age thought we were killers. The sad logic was that there were times when I was glad to be away from it all, serving over in Saigon. I always felt bad for the guys who were out in the field and enduring the horrors we now associate with the Vietnam War, but my way to cope with both the stress and tedium of serving in one of the safer areas of the war zone was to follow the tenet associated with so many of America’s notable expatriates: “Living well is the best revenge.”
The population of Winsted has gotten older and fewer since three local sons, Joseph Gondenzi, Paul Vaccari, and David Tazzara, left town to serve in Vietnam. Other subtle changes have taken place as well, including some renovations to the granite 20-foot Soldiers Memorial to Winsted’s Civil War soldiers. But it’s the sameness that must have struck all three men when they finally returned home from the war—the rivers, the 19th Century architecture. How can any of us imagine what it feels like to be in-country in Vietnam during the war one day and then on a bench overlooking the river in a historic New England town the next? And yet all three men came back and chose to stay. They graciously agreed to share their stories and even some of their personal letters they sent home. The end result is a snapshot of what the sons of one small American town gave to the war effort in Vietnam.
I was located in Pleiku in the central highlands, which was pretty close to Cambodia. It was a benefit to me. You were fighting the NVA [North Vietnamese Army]. They didn’t set booby traps; they fought man to man. This was 100 percent better. You didn’t want to be walking through the jungle and get something to the face. If I was going to die I wanted to die face to face.

One of the first nights there I went out with like 10 guys who’d been there awhile so we knew where we going. They were just taking you out, and I think what they were doing was sending you out so you could go back and tell the new recruits, “Oh my God, this is what goes on.”

The hour or two it was my guard watch, I had the other guys up every two or three minutes. “Something’s out there!” I was paranoid, totally scared.

They’d say, “Don’t worry about it. It’s a water buffalo.” It never turned out to be anything. At 19 years old, it was incredibly scary. I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy.
Later, we got shipped towards the Cambodian border. I was only in Vietnam for 61 days. On my last day, I got hit three times. I got hit with our own artillery. It felt like someone punched me in the back, that’s exactly what it felt like. I lost my breath for a second. Then I got back to what I was doing. I would get down and put a magazine in my mouth, a magazine in my hand, and a magazine in the gun. I’d come up and shoot, then duck, pop it, and put another one in. I did that three times, then I’d go back down, collect myself, and then come back up again.

My platoon sergeant told me I got hit. So I sat down to clear my head and I must have blacked out. When I came to he was lying across from me and the back of his head was gone. He had caught an RPG [Rocket Propelled Grenade] in the back of the head. I’ve always felt like maybe that was my moment where getting hurt like that, maybe that RPG was for me.

I always thanked God that I was fortunate that day.

Then what happened was I was laying there and I got his body across from me and I’m thinking what do I do? I’m 19, I don’t know what to do, and a grenade falls in the hole. Their grenades are not like ours. They’re basically used to hurt you and stop you from fighting.

So what I did was grab it to throw it back. Just as I let it go it went off. It blew my hand apart. And then I panicked again. I jumped up and crawled out of the bunker and got up beside a log and started hollering for a medic. The first two medics that came for me both got shot.
Then a tree nearby fell right on top of me. It crushed me. It punctured my lung. They actually had to bring in a chainsaw to get it off me when they came to evacuate me and the other guys that were hurt.

I was probably under that tree for two to three hours. All the shit’s still going on. This was 1968. There was a guy from Detroit, his name was Ronny Stuckey. He was a big six-foot black guy. He was my best friend over there. Great human being. All he kept saying was, “God damn it! You’re going home to see the Tigers you lucky bastard!” That was the year the Tigers beat St. Louis in the World Series. They had Mickey Lolich and Denny McLain. Danny McClain won 31 games that year. And they beat St. Louis.

He kept talking to me and he kept me out of shock, because I kept talking. He died five days after that attack. I’ve gone to the Wall twice to thank him for saving my life.
THE AMBUSH

My first night out in the field I was in the jungle. Out of a small group of 10 guys, they took five of us on an ambush. It was drizzly and the bugs were killing us, and of course, there’s the very real danger that you’re going to ambush the enemy or vice versa. If the enemy came along they didn’t know we were there in the dark and we would ambush them.

Theoretically, you want to be set up alongside the trail. Instead of parallel with the trail, we were across it and we didn’t realize that until morning. Being across the trail, they would have walked by us and we would have fired at them and at each other, which would have been horrible. Thank God we didn’t run into the enemy; they would have walked right through us instead of alongside us. We didn’t realize it until daylight because by the time we got out there it was later than dusk. It was lucky that nothing happened.

A few weeks later my good friend, Phil Davis, and his squad
were overrun in an ambush. My squad was awakened by the sounds of explosions. We were that close. We could hear the explosions. We could see it. We didn’t know what was going on. We were monitoring the radio and we heard the chaos. We could hear over the radio what was happening. It was not a pleasant night for sure. I was brand new, only three weeks in Vietnam. I knew Phil was over there and I found out in the morning he had been killed. They lost four guys so they sent me and one other new guy, who had come over on the same plane as me, over there and we helped clean up everything. I actually stayed with that squad for the remainder of my tour. I don’t even remember what squad, if we were first, second or third, but we were still part of ALCO Company, 196, second of the first. After Davis’s squad was overrun they stopped doing night recon unit ambushes; we were too small to be carrying out those things.
CLOSE TO HOME

I remember just 10 days before I was to leave Vietnam I was sent out to the field with two team members and a 90-recoilless on a chopper. One of our line companies had run into a bunker complex and wanted it destroyed and needed heavy firepower. I blew up the bunkers and then flew back to the fire support base. I told the commanding officer on the line company that I only had 10 days to go and I wanted to get out of the field as quick as possible; he let me go and left the other two guys there. They were fairly new; I didn’t know what happened to them but I always wondered.

Not even a few months after coming home, my high school friend Dave Tazzara and I were so disillusioned. Nothing to do, excitement was over. We actually talked about going back to Vietnam, as incredible as that sounds. Had there been someone there to sign us up that moment we probably would’ve done it. A lot of guys did. A lot of guys did two tours; I don’t know if it was the letdown or if it was psychological. I’m sure it had something to do with that, but I know the thought crossed our minds.

THE REUNION

In the early nineties, I went to Washington with a group of veterans from my unit. A friend of mine, Tom Denton, organized the trip. One of the guys he brought along was one of the fellas I dropped off out in the field before I left Vietnam. It was so good to see him. He looked just the same.
Hi Everybody,

I am on lunch break now out in the low lands. We haven’t found anything and that’s good. We’re working with Charlie Company and got sniped at last night after we were all day in.

The foxholes just filled up quickly and we all had fun firing back. Everybody just started shooting and we all had a good time of it. No one was hurt and you can imagine how the VC sniper felt after 135 guys opened up with machine guns, M-16s and grenade launchers. It was fun.

Did you notice my rank now, Sp/4? Next comes E-5 or Buck Sergeant. It’s about time I made it.

We are going to be back at LZ Bronco the 24-5-6th so I’ll be en-
joying Christmas I guess. At least we’ll be in for a 3 day stand down.

I would like to submit a resupply list:

Twist
Mustard (squeeze bottle, small)
Canned goodies (fruit and shrimp mostly. I’m not fussy!!!
Much!)
Comb (lost the other one)
Everybody’s prayers.

That should do for a while. The knife you sent out was perfect.

It’s real good.

The weather is getting hotter now, and tempers get on edge very easily. Our Lieutenant is from a line company and he works us like one. He is going to learn one of these days if we get into a jam.

Today marks 5 months and 10 in the hole. I got R&R in 37 days. Wow!

Well, time to move, hope your Christmas was nice. I’ll let your know how mine was soon.

Miss you all much.

Love,

Dave
IN-COUNTRY AND BACK | VETERANS' REFLECTIONS

THE WINSTED TRIO

IN-COUNTRY AND BACK | VETERANS' REFLECTIONS

35

[Handwritten text]

IN-COUNTRY AND BACK | VETERANS' REFLECTIONS

THE WINSTED TRIO

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IN-COUNTRY AND BACK | VETERANS' REFLECTIONS

THE WINSTED TRIO
II. HOMECOMING
Well it all started on the morning of May 22, 1970. The Chief Petty Officer in charge of my department, Mr. Hanley from New Jersey, approached me with “a change of orders.” This all happened just before our department, M Division, was to assemble for roll call, or muster, and inspection. Talk about rubber legs. I had all I could do to keep from passing out.

I would head home for a 30-day leave, before I would be sent first to California and, from there, Vietnam. I thought it better to call, rather than just show up at the front door. My father answered that night, something he rarely ever did. We had a short conversation before I told him my news. He didn’t say much. I reminded him of the chance I had taken by enlisting and what could I do.

The time came to leave and say goodbye to my shipmates. I wondered if I would ever see any of them again.

I spent the next 30 days one step at a time, enjoying the early summer weather, and going out at night with friends.

The naval base at Mare Island was an old World War II sub base.
that was in the process of being shut down. The four months I spent there in training were a real challenge. From learning the language and culture of the Vietnamese people, to the use of the weapons we would use to defend ourselves on their land. Those in charge of training really did their best to prepare you for your tour of duty. All but maybe one or two of the 58 of us guys from “The Fleet” had bonded.

We all went over there together and what a flight, 24 hours of flying time doing not a damn thing.

We arrived okay, but when the door to the plane was opened, what a stink!

It set in. I’m in the ‘Nam.

We were driven to Saigon, to our billet, where we were given jobs to do, mostly just to keep us busy. The first night in Saigon wasn’t very reassuring, the sounds of warfare in the distance.

After about a week we were given our assignments. I got lucky: I would go along with six of my training school classmates to a base just 45 miles east of Saigon. What a trip! The sights and sounds of the two-and-half hour ride to Nhe Be made for quite the culture shock. Naked children crying and staring out at you, houses built from beer cans and straw with barrels on the edges of each to catch what the rain season had to offer. No AC. No TV. Nothing like what we have back in the world. Most if not all the people I saw had very bad teeth, from lack of care perhaps, or from chewing on betel nut.

We arrived at base, better known as home for the next year, should we last. Once settled, the six of us reported to the advisory hut to meet the officers in charge of us. They weren’t much older
than us; I was 21, old for most Army guys.

From there we were to meet our Vietnamese counterparts, oh joy!

These people, some, if not all, had been fighting for years, some as young as 15 or 16.

Captain of the PBR, the river patrol boat that we playfully called the plastic river boat (it had a fiberglass hull). My job was to be an advisor to the boat crew. What a joke!

The crew, which consisted of four Vietnamese, were for the most part set in their ways. I was basically along for the ride (help!).

They would say to me, “If VC [Viet Cong] shoot you, fini war for you, you die!” Sometimes I couldn’t tell if they weren’t kidding.

I figured to myself that these people I encountered knew nothing but war and militant service, and what else could you expect from a culture that had nothing to lose. There were times when one of the crew would take something from a junk or a sam pan, checking for ammo or weapons, things that would help Charlie. There would be this look in their eye, as if to say please don’t take that from us. I would try to get the crew to give them a bag of rice or some dong in exchange, most of the time I was told “no sweat.”

My boat crew did do some good though. One time we attempted to save a baby who had been severely burned in a home explosion and discarded into the river. Many Vietnamese were somewhat superstitious and this damaged baby served as a bad omen. Another time we helped a woman deliver her baby, what a night that was!

I suppose one of the hardest things to overcome was the bore-
dom, and how to keep from going insane after seeing just what our
tax dollars were paying for, a civil war.

It all was certainly an experience. Military service will either
make you or break you. I did learn a great deal. It’s too bad for the
ones that didn’t make it back, and their families, the babies that were
never born, the broken marriages.

I arrived home to a weathered “welcome home sign” at the air-
line terminal, an insult that was barely legible.

I got off the train in my hometown of Harrison, New York, on a
dark November night. I preferred the mile walk to the idea of a cab
ride. It was a little windy, but it felt good, the breeze had a chill in it.
I arrived home to a sign flapping on at my front door. My younger
brother had put it there for me to see, “Welcome Home!”

My road from Vietnam had ended, but it will be with me forever.
I went to Vietnam for the same reason most of us did back then. I loved my country. Hell, it’s the same reason most of the guys are out there in the Middle East. I went so that we could have a free country. Today I’m 64 years old and if my President needed me in the Middle East, I’d go. It’s that simple. I’d pack my bags and go today if it’s for my country.

Coming back to the States though, that was something I didn’t expect. I wore my uniform because I was proud. Proud of my country and proud of all the other servicemen who went to war for us all. A lot of vets came back and became bitter. Was I one of them? You bet I was. I was never bitter towards my country but damn was I bitter at the younger generation. When I came back people spat at me, at all of us! We got lit cigarettes and matches thrown at us. One time I was standing at a bar and the spot I stood at cleared out. People left because I got a drink in my uniform! Shit, we went overseas and did a service so that our country stayed free. Getting spat on was our reward?
Eventually, I took my uniform off and stopped wearing it around in public. Packed it away for a time when we wouldn’t be looked at with contempt. I kept getting into fights because of it. You’re not going to spit at me and my country and walk away. I’m a goin’ to slam you, or damn near try too. Were we treated like shit? Yes, we were. My father was in World War II and his homecoming was nothing like ours. We didn’t get a parade; we got resentment from the younger generations. “Peace not War” was something I heard and saw a lot. Sure peace is nice to have but taking it out on me? Your servicemen? Why? I never understood any of that. In turn it made me feel like a piece of crap for the job I did.

Looking back at it, I hated the Sixties. It became a time of protest. So much protesting! The Sixties were a violent time for everyone. The public was upset; hell, we all had our grievances. What really hit me were the songs. The Beatles, The Doors, all those musicians sang songs about the war but they never truly painted it in the right light, the right picture. That’s what really bothered me. I’d hear all those songs on the radio or in restaurants and just get mad.

It’s a nightmare but you go on. You have too. I’d never treat my servicemen like that now or those who retired. I go to VA hospitals now and then and I see them. In their uniforms I walk up to them and say thank you. I’ll see a group of men at a restaurant and do the same. Army, Navy, Marines—all of them it doesn’t matter to me. I’ve walked up to tables of them and said thank you. Thank you for serving our country. Almost every time they ask me if I served, I tell them I served in Vietnam unless I’m wearing my Veterans hat then
I just point to it. They’ve stood up and thanked me. Thanked me for taking the brunt of it so they didn’t have too.

I’ll never forget it, one time I was at a parade for Veterans who were coming home from the Middle East. I stood on the sidewalk and watched as the soldiers walked down the street. I wore my Vietnam Veteran hat that day. One soldier walked up to me, out of the parade, and shook my hand. She thanked me the same way those other servicemen did. I respect the soldiers who are fighting for us now because it’s the right thing to do. I never expect any thanks for my time served. My time of parades and handshakes are long gone. I just make sure to support our troops anyway I can.
Ann and Robert Weisel were married halfway through his service during a two-day leave. Bob left for Vietnam about a year later and the couple did not share an anniversary together again for three years. Currently, they live in Simsbury, CT. They have been married for 38 years.

The plane that was to leave Da Nang was unbelievably quiet for a World Airways 707 packed with American Service-men going back to THE WORLD – the favored expression in Vietnam for home. I think like most of the other guys I was very afraid that something was going to happen to the plane or us, and we were not going to make it out.

When the flight attendant, a very attractive 20-something American woman, suddenly burst out of her seat and ran to look out one of the windows, we all assumed the base was under attack and that we would be stuck in Da Nang for another night. But it turned out that her boyfriend was an F-8 Marine Fighter Pilot and she wanted to see the planes in his squadron. As the adrenalin surge wore off, the plane...
took flight without incident and left Vietnam airspace, which released a collective sigh from all the passengers.

We landed in Alaska to refuel and then proceeded to Los Angeles. As I stepped onto American soil for the first time in 13 months, I was struck by the fashion change that had occurred: guys with shoulder length hair, women wearing skirts that looked like short shorts, and grungy hippies seemed to be everywhere. Another Marine Captain and I went into a bar to get a Budweiser before we caught our flight to Philadelphia. The waitress carded us. I was 27, in my captain's uniform, and my friend was dressed the same. That was the last time I was legitimately carded.

The flight for Philadelphia was a red eye that was to land around 10:00 a.m. My wife of nearly three years, Ann, was to meet me
there and we were going to go to drive to Montreal. When I arrived I couldn’t find Ann anywhere. As paranoid and superstitious as I was at that time, I was sure she had been killed in a car crash and I was never again going to see the first and last person I thought of everyday. Our story would become one of those tear-jerking final items on the nightly news. But as luck would have it, there was some parade in Philadelphia that day and she was delayed by 30 to 45 minutes.

Overwhelmed by the fact that Ann was in fact alive, we began a blissful two-week leave that started after we made a quick stop at home so I could see my mother, my in-laws, and my English Pointer. I had thought when I got home I would want to have a big party and see all of my non-military friends, but, to my surprise, I wanted to see no one but Ann.
In many ways that moment holds more memories than my wedding day. Bob was one of my older brother’s very good friends and he and I went to the same school but never together. We were married on a two day leave he took before finishing flight training. The Marines had a saying about marriage, “If you love your wife or hate her you will be happy half the time.” For our first three years wed we only spent 18 months of that time together and 13 of those months Bob spent in Vietnam. Stretch those 13 months out as a time period of waiting, dreaming, and preparing. I kept myself busy finishing my college degree. I tracked his squadron by watching the news. We wrote letters almost daily and shared two phone calls when Bob took R&R in Hong Kong.

Some military couples rendezvoused in Hawaii to spend their husband’s short leave together, but for both Bob and I saying goodbye again would have been unbearable. So for those 13 months that was the total of our communication.

I remember buying a special and expensive suit for the occasion
of Bob’s return. My father had booked us a few nights at the War-
wick Hotel in downtown Philadelphia and we had spent every letter
talking about when he got home where we were going to go and
what we were going to do. I wanted to swoop him away; I wanted
him all to myself.

I had spent the year Bob was gone living in a cottage near my
parents, about an hour drive from Philadelphia. I had very exact
directions to the airport and left our little town with plenty of time
to spare, I thought, for that long drive down through the countryside
and eventually down Broad Street through the entire length of Phila-
delphia.

Lo and behold, I came upon a parade—a long parade—and got
to the airport quite late. Poor Bob— I knew he was a wreck waiting.
When we finally met all angst flew away and our reunion was noth-
ing short of wonderful.
In April of 1990, I attended the first reunion of HMM-164. I had left the squadron in 1968. We were meeting in Washington, D.C. While driving down the highway, I thought to myself that maybe I should leave it all in the past. The war was over. Then I thought that there might be some closure for me and I wanted to see the brothers that I had left behind.

Upon arriving at the hotel, there was a sign over the registration desk stating, “Welcome HMM-164 Association.” The employees were wearing buttons saying, “Thank you Vietnam Vets.” This was the first time that anyone had ever said thanks to us for our service to our country. It seemed a little strange after all these years.

After registering I made my way to the conference room and there I found former Marines from 1966 to 1970. This was the entire time the squadron had served in Vietnam. This unit had been the first Ch-46 squadron in country and had suffered the last two deaths during Operation Frequent Wind in April 1975. This was the evacuation of Saigon at the end of the war and South Vietnam.

About 125 Marines attended this reunion. Luckily, there were
about 30 from my era, pilots and crew chiefs alike. It was like an Old
Home week, a real family reunion. After all the years, the family had
come together. We shook hands and hugged each other. We learned
and healed from each other. There were no feelings of having to
explain anything. No matter what year we served in Vietnam, we had
experienced the same pressures, fears and pains. The feeling was that
of, “Been there, done that—I understand.” Nothing else needed to
be said. We were not demented veterans, as society had labeled us,
but pilots, doctors, lawyers, businessmen, policemen, firemen, and
the average working man.

We had melted back into society living our lives and raising our
families as best as we could. We did not care what society thought
of us or of the war. We were a true Band of Brothers. Wives and
girlfriends stated that this meeting should have taken place 20 years
earlier. They were starting to understand the emotions that we had
been carrying inside throughout the years.

I don’t mind being called a Marine. This is not a label, but a title.
It is an honor and I am very proud of it. I had earned this title, as
did every Marine that has served the Corps with honor. Every time
the Marine’s hymn is played there is a sense of pride and a tingling
sensation that comes over me. These feelings come from the tradi-
tion, memories, experiences of being in combat, witnessing countless
acts of bravery, and my being a part of history. The loss of our fellow
Marines was not in vain. They gave their lives trying to help their
fellow Americans to survive. For those that served with them, their
sacrifice will never be forgotten.
Our ENG 483 class had the good fortune to have a Vietnam Veteran, Ron Farina, in our class this term, who opened up about his own experiences in Vietnam and provided invaluable advice on all things great and small when it came to writing about the subject and the men who served. In this special section, Ron interviews his assigned veteran and then reflects on what it feels to talk about his own experiences in Vietnam with another veteran for the first time. Ron is writer, student and veteran all at once, and, thus, the ideal person to bridge the two parts of the magazine—the veterans’ reflections and the students’ essays.
By Jerry Winn
with Ron Farina

Jerry Winn, USMC: A Vietnam Odyssey

Jerry Winn served in Vietnam. We share the experience of serving in the Corps, members of a brotherhood bonded by our time in-country. Some of what Jerry tells me about Vietnam I know: my tour ended before his began. The scars all over his body are covered by a long sleeved shirt and jeans, but a hand, damaged in the war, rests conspicuously on the kitchen table where we sit the morning I interviewed him.

He talked about his experience and shared his stories in a calm, sometimes raspy voice. He told me several stories randomly, just the way they came to him that morning, with transparency and honesty, humanized by the texture of his gravelly voice. These are his words, randomly, the way he told these stories.

SPEAKING OUT NOW

I’ve never even spoken that much but you know I’ve done this for Eileen [Eileen Hurst, Director of the Veterans History Project]. She has this network of guys. She has guys all the way from World
War II, Vietnam, all the way down to Iraqi vets. That’s her mission. I don’t mind talking about it but people don’t have a freaking clue. I never talked about it a lot. I was out of high school flipping burgers and just said the hell with it I’ll beat the draft and went down and joined the Marines. You know the funny thing is I had to join for three years. I signed on the dotted line. God works in mysterious ways, my duty station after the ’Nam was supposed to be Fort Mead, which would have been Dress Blues, all that, and after humping the bush I don’t know how that would have went over, you know.

*Here I am struck by Jerry’s relief. He looked at being wounded as a Godsend that kept him from reporting to Fort Mead, a spit and polish stateside military base.*

I grew up two houses down the street, talk about, you know, full circle and all that. It never really left me. I didn’t talk about it but if people asked me, well . . . . It’s just not something I talk about. So I did the interview with Eileen and she said when this is over you are going to remember stuff and sure enough she got through with the interview and I said to myself, that was a shitty interview. Things that I could tell her now . . . .

*Here I asked Jerry what he would tell me that he did not tell Eileen. He continued.*

Well you know things just come back, you know, things like humping and humping the bush, the craziness, you know living like animals.

**WOUNDED**

At my eleventh month I tripped a booby trap. Yep, yep, tripped
a booby trap. We were always out in the bush somewhere. And thing is I knew it was coming. There was a guy behind me. I pushed him back, Chu-Hoi Leaflets all over the place, within a second I pushed this guy back. It was probably a grenade or a reverse mortar or rocket, who knows. I was in the hospital six, seven months, before they discharged me, Medical Discharge. I didn’t have to go to Fort Mead.

GUYS DON’T KNOW WHAT THEY CAN GET

Like you say, you come home you know. I went to Mattatuck College for a while in Waterbury. I dropped out with one course to go. They were paying me to go. School was cool but you know [just trailed off here]. There are a lot of guys out there, clueless, don’t know what they can get, no one is going to come knocking at your door.

NO PICTURES OR LETTERS

When I got wounded all my stuff went to the wind. I contacted this one guy in Ohio I was good friends with. I let it slide the last few years. I got to get a hold of him. Basically everything I had, albums, names, addresses, but it’s all gone with the wind. I just came home.

CAN’T WIN

We were never going to beat them goddam people. Our hands were tied. Going in we fought for so many spots, kick their asses, then pull out, then watch‘em just come right back in. I mean, Arizona territory is where we mainly worked. I mean they lived under-
ground. During the day we walked right over them. At night they came creeping out.

**Tunnel Rats**

I did tunnel rat once, just once. That was plenty for me. I didn’t even go in 20 feet. I was like everything was going this way and that way and you can tell one of these tunnels leads to a . . . Something’s going to happen. I got my ass out. Ain’t no way. That was my one and only. Matter a fact this guy had a dog and I came out and this freaking dog went berserk because I smelled like them after being in the tun-

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**A Prayer to St. Joseph**

Oh, St. Joseph, whose protection is so efficacious and whose success before the throne of God is so prompt, I place in your blessed hands all my hopes, confide in you all my interests.

Deign, Oh, St. Joseph, assist me by your powerful intercession and obtain for me from your Divine Son spiritual and temporal blessings through Jesus Christ our Saviour so that having enjoyed here below your heavenly favors I may each day of my life offer my affections, thanksgiving and homage as to the most loving of fathers.

Oh, St. Joseph, I never weary of contemplating Jesus asleep in your arms but I dare not approach where He repose on your breast. Press Him to your heart for me, kiss softly His forehead, ask Him to return that kiss when I am drawing my last breath.

Oh, St. Joseph, patron of devoted souls, pray for me. Amen.

(Original copy came from a soldier. All those who carried a copy of this prayer during the Civil and World War returned home without injury.)
nel. I’m like get this dog away from me. There were a few guys that did it, tunnel rat, but by ’69 we knew it was useless going in and out of those tunnels. I mean, you know blow it up, big deal, big deal, they had so many ways out. We used to pump tear gas down them, all this crazy shit, you know flame throwers, C4, and you know they had us all figured out, they had been doing this since World War II.

LUCKY

But this Arizona territory, this one place we called Dodge City. Whenever we went in there it was Dodge City, a shoot out, every time. One time we went in there on a company operation and we did our thing and we were waiting to be ferried back out and word came that we were moving out. I was with five guys and I got them together, you know and word came, stand down again, and we must have fallen asleep while waiting. Next thing I know we are out there all alone. The company pulled out but we didn’t get the word, there’s five of us in Dodge City, alone, in NVA territory; I mean it’s all theirs. We just go in come out but it’s all theirs. We’re sitting there, and what a scary feeling. We could see them popping up all around. Finally they got a chopper in to get us out. When the copter pulled us out you could hear the tinking all over, they were trying to pull that chopper down. They owned the countryside, I mean they owned it.

WE CARED ABOUT ONE ANOTHER

It was the closest thing to hell I ever want to come. I mean, don’t get me wrong, we had some good times. I was finally sup-
posed to go to Australia for R&R but I got hurt first. Australia, round-eyed women. I picked Australia because I wanted to get away from . . . well I wanted to see round-eyed women. That is why I picked Australia. I wanted to get away from all of it. I never made it anyway, so yep, chalk that one up.

I gotta say I had some trouble with my teeth this week. My teeth went to hell over there from C-Rats. They wrecked your teeth but I would not go to the rear for shit like that because we were all in it together and R&R was that way too. I put it off because I did not want to leave the guys. What if something happened to the guys and I’m in the rear in a dentist’s chair. If something happened to them and I was not there that would not have sat well with me.

F U C K I N G  C L U E L E S S

But still people made us out to be some kind of monsters. We were doing what our country told us and we go over there and they didn’t back us up and then we come home and they call us monsters. I remember being in St. Albans Hospital with guys that were broken, busted, twisted, wounded bad, and freaking peace protesters were outside. Like what don’t you fucking people get? These people are hurt here, what don’t you fucking get?

H U M P I N G

For a year when I came home I did nothing. I partied. I had a lot of catching up to do. Then, you know, like I said, I went back to school but didn’t finish. Then I got into the post office. I retired six
years ago, 31 years as a letter carrier. I always said that is what kept me going, humping the streets.

HOME

First thing I did when I came back to this town, I sat there on the church wall, watched people go by almost all day. That was a big deal to me. That was like you say, you know, just glad to be home. Glad to be home.

_A few days after this interview I called Jerry. He called me back from Ohio, told me he was visiting his daughter and his two-year-old granddaughter. And oh, hey Ron, I got my medals last week. He told me life doesn’t get any better than that. Welcome home, Jerry._

EPILOGUE

Jerry Winn is one of Eileen’s Guys. Eileen Hurst works with many veterans recording their stories for future generations. She has known Jerry since their high school days. When Jerry was med-evaced out of country almost half a century ago all his personal effects were lost, including the Purple Heart pinned on his chest by the Commandant of the Marine Corps. Jerry never received the other medals and decorations he earned in Vietnam. Once Eileen became aware of this she went on a one-woman mission to secure the medals Jerry earned in-country. He received them a few weeks after our interview.
He tells me his story. Even if I try, I will not capture the whole of it. Shadows that cloud his memory lift, sometimes slowly, sometimes in a flash. He remembers and gives me as much as he can. I understand; my own memories of Vietnam, uninvited guests, visit randomly.

Two days earlier I introduced myself to Jerry Winn asking if we could talk about Vietnam, then invited myself to his home. The morning of the meeting I awoke to a pounding rain reminiscent of the Vietnam Monsoon. As I drive to meet him I stare hard through the wall of water into 45-year-old memories. I make a note to ask him about patrolling during the rainy season. Later, when we talk he tells me about fighting in rain-drenched jungles, slogging through muddy trails that made it impossible to spot booby traps or the enemy. He fought in a sea of rain for seven months, the length of the season, without refuge or escape from the wet.

I find his house on Mountain Avenue overlooking the Mad River. The town, Winsted, past her glory days, looks thin and worn, like a black and white ferrotype. He has lived here all his life.

I park on the steep hill behind his jeep; the Vietnam campaign...
ribbon on the bumper tells me the jeep belongs to him. We both drive vehicles made in the USA. Rain pelts my windshield, beats on the hood, rolls off the rooftop in small waves and I am pulled back to another time, another place, where rain drummed fiercely on the canvas tops of perpetually wet huts. I remember more.

Since my tour ended, shadows have hung over me hiding the past. As they lift, I struggle with memories now revealed. I take a deep breath then exhale slowly, the same action one takes before squeezing the trigger of an M-14 rifle. I remember shooting a perfect score at the 500 yard targets during weapons training at Parris Island. I could have been a sniper, but shot two Maggie’s Draws during the rapid fire round. Target spotters waved the red bloomers attached to a pole to signal that I completely missed the target—twice. We were whisked through boot camp in eight weeks instead of the normal 12. Eight weeks: all the time needed to overcome aversion to battle, all the time needed to learn how to kill another human being. For the slightest moment, I hesitate to step out of the car and contemplate driving off before gathering myself.

I leave the car.

The door opens and there he stands: the former Marine Lance Corporal, the squad leader who deftly led his men on patrols, the letter carrier for 31 years, retired now and older, the veteran who will speak freely about Vietnam—if asked. I think to myself he looks old, before remembering I am older. We both wear the uniform of our generation: jeans, flannel shirt, moccasin style shoes. The greeting, open and warm, feels familiar. Although strangers, we know
each other. We own the shared experience of serving in the Corps, members of a brotherhood bonded by our time in-country.

Since coming home I have met Jerry hundreds of times: the quiet loner at the end of the bar, black baseball cap with gold lettering. I buy him a beer and he looks up, we nod. I wait behind him in line at the power equipment parts counter. He does business with a minimum of words. When he turns we stare at each other, understanding reflected in eyes that meet and a nod as we pass, saying it all without uttering a single word. He delivers wood for our fireplace. I pay him but before he leaves he turns and asks where I served. I rattle off names of places in-country, he does the same. We shake hands muttering welcome home to each other. We have met before, hundreds of times. The meeting: almost always the same.

I step into the warmth of Jerry’s home and he introduces me to Angie, his girlfriend. She will stay (protectively) in a room a few feet away while we spend our time together at the kitchen table. Slowly, we feel each other out with small talk. I sense a comfort level, turn on a tape recorder, and he begins to answer my questions.

He tried college directly out of high school but decided against continuing and started flipping burgers. He joined the Marine Corps in 1968 as an infantryman, a grunt, a ground pounder, and landed in-country March of 1969. The first day in-country he pulled patrol. Ambushed that night by NVA regulars, he saw casualties. He knew immediately that none of the training prepared him for the reality of the bush. Days turned into weeks, then months, now a dangerous routine with odds stacked firmly against survival. The routine: go out in the
bush, almost always at night, fight in shadows, secure the objective, survive the fighting, pull back to base, watch VC or NVA retake the objective. Once back on base, clean weapons, get hot food, party and drink until sent back out, start the dangerous absurdity over again.

While he talks I drift off remembering a morning in Vietnam when a Crew Chief asked for volunteers: three to go north. My friend, Al Rose, a salty Marine Corporal, nodded in my direction that morning and we stepped forward, joined by Phil Curran. We flew north the next morning and separated. Left behind at Phu-Bai, an air base outside of Hue, I watched Al continue on to Dong-Hoa. I never saw him alive again. Two months later I unloaded his charred corpse from the deck of a blood soaked helicopter. I still smell the blood mixed with helicopter exhaust. Al died, killed by a rocket, trying to save others. Phil stationed at Khe-Sahn, a lethal hell hole on the DMZ [Demilitarized Zone] would return to Marble Mountain, our base of operations, safest of all Marine Air Bases in August of ‘67. In the most bizarre twist of fate he was killed by a rocket attack his first night safely out of Khe-Sahn. Phil, at a diminutive 4’ 11” needed a congressional waiver to join the Corps.

I slowly move out of my reverie and listen to Jerry continue his story.

We continue to talk and I learn how deeply he cared about his men. He refused to go out of country for R&R or go to the rear and take care of teeth ravaged by high protein C-rations. “How could I leave? What if something happened to the guys because I was not there?” he tells me. With less than 60 days remaining on his tour, he stepped into a VC booby trap. In the split second before the explo-
sion, he pushed others back out of harm’s way, taking the full blast and quite literally getting blown up. The pilot of the Huey med-e-vac gave him the thumbs up as they loaded him onto the chopper. He tells me that before he passed out he thought, “I’m out of here.”

He survives.

We sit in his kitchen. His eyes well up but we continue. I ask about coming home. Six months and several operations later the Marine Corps determined the recovery sufficient. He makes it all the way back. The scars all over his body are hidden by the long shirt and heavy jeans but a damaged left hand rests conspicuously on the table.

His first day back he sat on the church wall in town staring at the Mad River. Later that night in a coffee shop with a friend, his hands shook uncontrollably as he tried to stir sugar into a cup of coffee.

I sense our conversation coming to a close. Again I see his eyes well up. He tells me about the protesters outside of the VA Hospital where he lay recovering with hundreds of others. For the first and only time I feel his anger, the sense of betrayal. “We are up in
here, all busted up, maimed and they have the nerve to protest right outside our window,” he says softly. Then in voice not much above a whisper he says, “They were clueless, fucking clueless.”

We talk about the homecoming, no parades, no fanfare. “I didn’t need it. A simple thank you is all I wanted, a thank you for doing what my country asked me to do.” The Marine Corps fought with him over his disability and eventually lowered it. “I earned every penny of my disability,” he says. I look at his disfigured fingers. Turning off the recorder I take his hand, our eyes lock, “Jerry, welcome home brother, is all I have left to say.”

I stepped back into the black and white world of the rainy January afternoon surprised at the ease with which we spoke of Vietnam, the lethal randomness of everything in-country. I am surprised at the balance of conversation between us. How does one talk about war? No one ever sat me down and explained the rules. My father, silent about his service in World War II, kept his wounds to himself. My teacher, instinct, said one does not speak, does not whisper unspeakable things and so I buried Vietnam in the deepest recess of memory. Whenever I meet another veteran the understanding between us says everything: we did not and do not need to speak of Vietnam other than acknowledging, one to the other we were there.

For many of us, memory has found a voice, a voice refusing to be silent and so we speak of Vietnam, for now. For each story told, 10 remain untold, but it does not matter what or how much we say because all we can give you, will ever give you, amounts to no more than a glance through a keyhole.
I knew people in town who went into military service during the Vietnam War, but I felt lucky. Nobody I loved died in Vietnam. My neighborhood was a microcosm of the differing attitudes about the war. A classmate up the street went into the Marines. The next street over, another joined the Army. Others went to college to avoid the draft, one went to Canada. There was a conscientious objector. Born female, I didn’t have to worry about it.

All of their families continued to speak of them, still their parents, brothers, sisters.

In high school, most of my friends and I were in the college preparation program, boys worrying about the draft and whether colleges would accept them, worrying that the war would last longer than their deferment.

The boy who would become a Marine was in my senior year homeroom. He played on the football team. We knew each other casually, our mothers friends through church. His younger sister babysat my younger sister. We didn’t have much in common; different friends, different groups. Not unfriendly, just neutral.
As high school seniors, we felt very mature, worldly. We were competent and determined to make our own decisions, perhaps a little cynical. We learned about the world from television, thinking that was all there was to know. We were in the back years of the sixties. Civil Rights meant protests, folk songs, Freedom Riders. Vietnam meant Agent Orange, bombings, fire fights, rows of body bags stacked up. We saw all this on the nightly news, just hours after it took place. We were removed, apart from the action, yet part of it.

The Marine was Thomas James Tingley. Born February 2, 1948, he would be 64 years old now.

Tom started his tour August 16, 1967. On December 30, while on patrol in Quang Tri province in South Vietnam, near the Demilitarized Zone separating North and South Vietnam, he was a casualty of gunshot or small arms fire. Killed in action at 19.

Back home in Connecticut, Tom became a casualty of another kind – growing opposition to the war. His service to his country, his sacrifice, his family’s loss, were tainted by the increasing unpopularity of the war. Opposition to the war often became disrespect for the warrior, even in death.

I was away when they brought his body back, but my parents attended the services. In exchange for their son, his family was given a flag and thanks from a grateful nation. For the hole in their family, the hole in their hearts, they had words and cloth.

Among other friends and family, my mother and the ladies from church brought food, support, prayers. Grieving the personal loss of Tom, how many were grateful that it was not their son, their brother?
How many could explain the reason for this great loss?

Years later, when I visited the The Moving Wall, a half-size replica of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, I made a rubbing of Tom’s name – Panel 33E Line 005 – and sent it to his mother. She and her husband still lived in the same house, though my family and several others had moved away.

When I learned of the Veterans History Project at Central Connecticut State University, a collection of oral histories of veterans serving during wartime, I thought again of Tom, who would never tell his story.

Of those boys in my neighborhood, I knew all of them better than I knew Tom. Still, he’s the one I think about now.

However you see Tom now – soldier, warrior, veteran, lost son, hero – I remember him as the boy up the street who didn’t get the chance to grow old, who died for something I still don’t quite understand.
all and lanky with none of the facial hair that has obscured
his face for the last 30 or more years, he faces the camera,
one arm draped over the back of a chair, the other holding
a half burned down cigarette. Over his standard issue white t-shirt
sit two flat metallic disks on a silver beaded chain. The half smirk on
his lips is the only recognizable feature to me in this photograph of a
man I only knew as my stubborn and bearded uncle.

I don’t know anything about this man in the picture, someone
I had known for my entire life. So young, he exudes an aloofness
that I can’t reconcile with the know-it-all that corrected my posture
throughout my teenage years. I didn’t even know my uncle was ever
in any branch of the service. He was never one to listen to anyone
else. I can’t imagine how he made it through boot camp. The only
remnant from his time in the Army is the tags that sat around his
neck. They still exist, somewhere in a box, in an attic or a basement.
Or perhaps they are gone forever, forgotten until I asked about the
picture in the dusty photo album on the shelf.

Sitting on a couch in the pristine living room, photographs of
him and his wife decorate the walls. No family portraits, no friends,
just pictures of the two of them on cruises and on beaches, testament to their lives without the hindrance of children. A life of pleasure, hard won after years struggling as a sales clerk in a now defunct retail chain. What I had always taken for a grouchy frown was, in fact, the result of spending a lifetime trying to be taken seriously. The only chain that rests around his neck now is one of thick gold links with a golden cross hanging down into the curly knots of hair on his chest.

The cross brings to mind the dog tags around his neck in the picture. I don’t know how I would feel having to wear a reminder of my own mortality around my neck. Would I put them away as well, giving them no more significance than the boots and uniform I was presented with upon enlistment? I recounted a fairly recent story I had heard about a retired Army veteran who happened upon American Vietnam era dog tags being worn as a fashion accessory in Hanoi. Finding this to be offensive, he purchased as many as he could find and began the task of reuniting them with their owners or to their families. For some, it was a healing gesture, for others it reopened old wounds.

Having never served in active duty, the cigarette that dangled from his fingers was the most potentially life threatening part of his service. My uncle never had a reason to put his dog tags in a place of esteem or consider the implications of the necklace he had worn around his neck. His dog tags did not hold the significance to him that they did for so many of his military brethren. These identifiers, first issued by the U.S. Army in 1906, contain vital information like name, social security number, birth date, blood type and religious
preference. Used for body identification and for medical assistance, the necklace is made up of two tags; one to stay with the body and one to be sent to the morgue. Before they were introduced into standard uniform issuance, soldiers in the Civil War were known to sew their names and addresses into their jackets so, if killed, their families wouldn’t think they had deserted or wonder at their fates.

In Vietnam, soldiers were known to tape their tags together so that the metal clinking against itself would not give them away as they crept through the jungles. I have trouble with the idea that the very object that is used to help save your life or to bring your body home could be the same that placed you in danger as well.

There are now “Smart” dog tags, encrypted with Radio Frequency Identification (RFID), that allow a soldier to wear his entire medical and service history to be worn around his neck at all times, thus allowing for better medical care in the field. It also will help to minimize “friendly fire incidents” by alerting the readers whether or not it is an enemy that they are picking up on or not.

“What do you think about that? Pretty cool and high tech, huh?” I ask my uncle after confidently spewing off the technical terms about the smart tags that I didn’t fully understand, only memorized for this discussion, soon to be forgotten. “Eh. If they are so easy to read, who says the enemy can’t figure them too. Aren’t those Ri Fi things the same stuff they use for the grocery stores or something? What if I just go out in the field with my stock boy and pick up all the information on our American soldiers. Who says they can’t do that too…” My uncle begins his rail against technology as I knew he
would, imagining scenarios wherein the United States is overrun by scanner wielding terrorists. After attempting to interject that this is a problem that has already been considered, albeit in slightly different terms, I give up. The easy access to vital information that these new tags would afford American military forces is also a potential for security leaks as an enemy with an RFID reader might also have the capacity to either read or pick up on the proximity of them.

“The problem really is with these Administrations sending these babies into war in the first place, between Bush and Obama and who knows who will come next, America is just getting into wars for the sake of whipping it out and showing off what they can do.”

I know this tirade, or some similar version of it, as I’ve heard it every Thanksgiving and Christmas and Fourth of July for as long as I can remember. I feel no shame in effectively tuning out of the conversation and focusing my attention on the family pictures in the photo albums.

“I found them. His dog tags. I found them in the attic.” My aunt’s quiet voice over the phone two days later has the tone of pride but also disappointment. I can imagine her in the attic that I had forgotten even existed in their house, poring over boxes yet repacking everything with the precision she exhibits in everything. The disappointment over showing my uncle this relic from his past and his disdain over the several hours she spent looking and “wasting time over old junk” foolishly.

“He didn’t even look at them. They looked brand new, not even really rusty or anything. I left them out but he said to throw that other
stuff away. His Army time was never important to him.”

Only having part of the story from my mother, I know there was a negative end to his enlistment but he never talks about it and I am afraid to bring it up. Able to so casually toss away this piece of his history, there are so many others that do not share his sentiments.

I recently overheard a story where the daughter of a World War II veteran found blood spattered dog tags belonging to someone else among her recently deceased father’s effects. The name was not familiar to her and her father had never discussed the loss of a friend in the war with anyone in the family. Could I begin to imagine the relief my family would feel had we been reunited with my uncle’s tags, saved for all these years, a reminder of his impact on history or at the very least, someone else’s life? Someone that cared enough to bring them across the world. I don’t think that my uncle will suddenly have a great late respect for these symbols that others feel such pride for, these items that can reunite a piece of the fallen with their families, but I hope that the next holiday I will see them perhaps on the mantle among the pictures of leisure and freedom.
His anecdotes were safe and light in comparison to the heaviness of the war, yet I didn’t feel the need to break him out of his routine. The drinking water stood at room temperature, he told me, about 95 degrees. Basic training was first, he said, but everyone went through that, even guys that didn’t go to combat. Letters went home only once a month, he said, communication remained limited.

Before I called Paul, my professor described the war as a traumatic experience for some Vietnam Veterans; many may not want to relive the events and I shouldn’t take it personally if they refused an interview.

My finger hesitated over each number as I dialed. What if he says no?

I forgot how to breathe as the phone rang. In, out. In, out.

A man answered the phone. It was Paul. Please say yes.

Paul told me he wouldn’t mind answering a few questions; he had participated in a few interviews before. My anxiety faded as we spoke. It seemed my good fortune allowed me to pick someone willing to share his story. I let out a sigh of relief as I hung up the phone.
A few days later I met with Paul. He appeared younger than I expected, only 64 years old, and only 19 when he went to Vietnam in 1968. He welcomed me into his home and we began the interview. I realized his uneasiness matched mine as he rigidly sat on the edge of the couch, arms crossed. I focused all of my nervous energy on absorbing his personal account of the draft, basic training and his homecoming. As he spoke of these subjects, his posture eased, but he quickly tensed at questions that led to detailed, personal answers. It didn’t take long for me to realize that the things he wanted to share were things he had discussed in previous interviews. His story of the draft; signing up with his two high school friends, Dave and Joe; basic training; learning to be an infantry soldier in the Army; and his homecoming, returning to Connecticut uncelebrated, had been recited in an interview posted online in May, though I felt an ele-
ment of newness in hearing them first-hand. He seemed guarded and I could feel that he only skimmed the surface of his experience. I felt as though he left his true story untold.

My mind weighed heavier on the silences during our conversation than on the stories. I became frustrated at my inability to focus and analyze his words rather than the absence of them, yet I left Paul’s house with an unexpected feeling of satisfaction even though I hadn’t seemed to discover anything new.

I felt a sense of ease in a situation that should have alarmed me.

After a few hours of resting soundlessly on my bed, thinking of the interview and of my experience with Paul, I told my roommate about a personal piece I tried to write last year.

“At first I felt compelled to open up to my readers. The safe classroom environment encouraged me. I thought honesty would make my piece stand out and be more interesting, but I struggled to put the words on paper; something felt wrong.”

Remembering and sharing the moment with her stimulated a rush of the same frustration and fear I felt when writing the piece, frustration that I couldn’t ascribe my feelings and experiences to words, and fear that my peers might misjudge me.

“What was wrong with it?” she asked as her eyes lifted from her textbook.

“Every time I wrote a sentence, I hated it. Something always sounded off. I kept telling myself I could rephrase it or try it a different way, but after rewording and rearranging for over an hour, I gave up. It sounded like someone else was trying to tell my story.”
“Why?” she said. “Wasn’t the point to be open? Why didn’t you just put it in anyway?”

“It just didn’t fit with the rest of the story, I guess.”

I didn’t tell her that the feelings that came over me through writing the words were overpowering; instead of the relief or healing I expected to feel from seeing the words and sentences that constructed my story, I felt an unmanageable sense of anxiety and tension. Those words, those feelings, didn’t belong to anyone else. How could I put something in an essay for others to read when I couldn’t even write those words in my journal? The essay had to function without the truth because I wasn’t even able to be open with myself.

People hide all sorts of things: personal thoughts all the way up to traumatic, painful, or challenging experiences in their lives. They often try to hide or forget in order to mask the pain or to avoid dealing with the problem or to prevent others from feeling the pain they endured.

Some people believe that talking or writing about their problems are universal methods of healing, but what if they’re not? What if bringing back the memories of trauma and pain only force us to relive the bad experiences that we’ve locked away?

For some, freeing themselves of the secrets they keep through verbal or written communication with others with similar conflicts or experiences allows a sense of community and drives a sense of release from the hurt or conflict they’ve felt. For others, healing comes from concealing the past and constantly pushing toward the future.

Paul appeared comfortable talking about a subject that many
Vietnam Veterans weren’t comfortable with because he had an understanding of himself. He knew which details were appropriate for an audience and shared them willingly while the other details remained private.

I felt so sure that I lucked out with my assignment after my phone conversation with Paul. His friendliness and cooperativeness encouraged the thought that I’d learn a lot about the Vietnam War and his experiences. I thought I knew what I needed to get out of the experience, but instead I restricted myself from recognizing and understanding the unique aspect of my experience with Paul: the things left unsaid.
I’ve known Larry Searles all my life; he even held me as an infant. Larry and my father worked together as electricians and mechanics all over Connecticut when I was a kid. Growing up, he seemed more like a close uncle then a friend of the family. I found out he had served in Vietnam as an aviation electric mechanic (AE4) on the *U.S.S. Oriskany* from 1964-1967 off the coast of Vietnam in a combat zone. Reconnecting with him meant discovering an entirely different Larry.

On my 19th birthday I gathered myself and planned for the future. I thought school would be my major priority and figured work would help pass the time. But I had not factored in rent or others bills, so I had to nudge school from my first priority down to number four as I took up three part-time jobs. I became a shoe salesman at The Sports Authority, stock-boy at American Eagle and a cashier for a Halloween/Christmas store. “It could be worse” became the mantra that kept me going on a busy day. On a bad day it turned into “Man, my life sucks.”

When Larry turned 19 enlisting became priority number one. Larry graduated high school and looked to join in the Black Shoe
Navy. Having two older brothers that did the same it only made sense for him to follow their lead. To Larry, his older brothers transformed from the guys that used to tease him around the neighborhood into men with a sense of duty. When he saw them off with their duffle bags over their shoulders getting on a bus to basic training, he felt he saw a window into his own future.

“I volunteered for my brothers and my family. Hell, our future was the most important reason to enlist.” He hoped to be an aviation machinist aboard a carrier since he graduated high-school as machinist. He had been sent all over the country to take test after test in order to gauge his strengths and weaknesses.

7:00 A.M. 2009

Assaulting the snooze button with my palm just prevents the inevitable start of a very long day.

“Get outta’ bed Sean. Get-out-of-bed. Right now!” I say to myself still lying in bed. I mentally prepare myself as the thought of the outside world’s responsibilities and demands keep me under the covers for a few extra minutes. With the second alarm I begin to move. Zombie like I drag myself to the shower, then to my closet, then to
the kitchen table for food.

“What does your day look like Sean?” my mom asks as she sips what could be her third cup of coffee.

“What-class-*groan*-work-*groan*-home work.” My reply is even too tired to be classified as a grammatically correct sentence. A full six hours worth of classes blend into one long tedious cycle of dread.

WAKE-UP CALL 1967

Larry’s morning routine had nothing in common with my own. With a wakeup call he leapt out of his bed located a few decks under the carrier’s catapult. Kept in tight quarters with the rest of the crew, Larry dressed shoulder-to-shoulder with his crewmates and began his day. Left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot. He repeated this in his head as he walked across unarmed bombs in order to get to the mess hall. He ate a quick breakfast that few enjoyed except for him and made his way topside.

“You might hear stories about guys who hated the food, but I loved it. Our cooks knew what they were doing.”

On the deck Larry looked in marvel at the U.S.S. Oriskany, an Essex class carrier. Its sheer size gave credit to the engineers who designed her. Standing on deck Larry directed his gaze to a few technological marvels: the control tower, the elevators designed to carry airplanes (weighing on average 14,000 pounds) up from the belly of the ship and catapults that sent airplanes rocketing off.

“Every time I stood on that deck I was in awe! Everything about
it just took me away.”

Larry belonged to a squadron responsible for taking photographs of targets before and after a mission. He gave the four F-8s in his squadron a thorough evaluation then started his shipboard duties: running diagnostics on power supplies, performing maintenance if needed, fabricate and repair connections and cables, troubleshoot antennas and transmission lines. Almost everything related to the electronics of the airplanes fell under Larry’s duty.

“Jeez, I loved shipboard duties. Checking wires, you name it and I did it. Working for 16 hours with an eight-hour break became typical. It’s just what we had to do.”

3:35 P.M. 2009

Standing in a bathroom stall inside the student center I switch clothes and put on my name badge that tells customers to ask me questions in order to help them achieve their shopping needs.

“What do you have these in a 9 ½?”

“Does the gel in the arch really provide support?”

“I love how they feel but I hate the color. Do they come in pink? I really love pink.”

Starting this job I told myself it’s going to be awesome. A shoe-salesman sounds like a classic job. A job I’ll tell my grandkids about.

“Ya’ know I supported myself through college by selling shoes. You name it and I bet you I sold it!” What a pipe dream this is; I never sell shoes. People come ask me about shoes, try on shoes and make me climb up ladders to get them shoes but seldom buy the
damn shoes. Dealing with the constant barrage of customers all day becomes typical of an afternoon.

Larry’s afternoon made mine look like a quiet day with a book. There was no time given for slow movements or laziness. Every task is completed with swift hands and expert minds. The Oriskany’s deck produces a constant noise as airplanes flew off and returned. Similar to a bees nest, there was a constant motion that needed to be maintained. Orders are shouted and then immediately executed. Larry dragging his feet meant someone else behind him would have to do the same. He set a turbine and SHOOOM!—one airplane was off. With quick feet and precise movements, he’s off to the next one. Larry operated at full capacity like everyone else. “Carelessness would get you killed. I had a buddy fall off the edge of the ship and die because of it. Hell, I remember I almost fell of the ship. If there were a feather floating near ya’ you’re sure as shit going to grab on to it.”

10:35 P.M. 2009

After what I believe is a long grueling day, I walk into my room and see a stack of books demanding my attention.

“Sell any shoes today?” my dad asks with an innocent grin. I shoot a look of rage in his direction and close the door.

1:24 A.M. 2009

I shut my last book. With my eyes closed and head on my pillow, I sleep. During my dreams I must’ve reached for the repeat
button on my life because the next day is a mirror image of the last with a slight change of vocation. I’ll be working at American Eagle instead.

After 16 hours of constant moving, taking orders and intense labor, Larry takes his leave down the elevator. He could spend some time in the wreck room huddled around the only television set with his crewmates or even play a card game but more often than not decides against it. Left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot, across the sleeping munitions and to his bed, Larry sleeps.

One of the few things Larry and I had in common--at some point we were 19. At that age, he joined the Navy; I continued my college education. He spent hours aboard a naval carrier preserving our nation’s ideals while I spent them in school work. He worked towards a future that held hope of being better than his present. I lived in that future.
By Conor Moran

The Introduction

Amanda met Eric when he was fighting over in Afghanistan. She’d set up an account on the free dating website OkCupid. Her first few encounters with potential boyfriends had proven disastrous and she was just about ready to delete her account and write the whole thing off as a gigantic waste of time.

“You should see some of the freaks that have responded to me,” she told Alicia, Jessica and I over lunch in late September. Amanda had spent the summer in shambles over a boy that had been her best friend since middle school, slept with her, then told her he never wanted to speak to her again.

Then she found Eric. Or, more precisely, he found her.

“He messaged me the other night,” Amanda said as she slathered wasabi on to her spicy salmon roll. “He’s stationed over in Afghanistan. He’s in the Army. Obviously, time to Skype is limited but we’re planning on doing it sometime soon.”

For the next five weeks, Amanda fought off fatigue to stay awake until four in the morning so she could Skype with Eric. She’d come to class the next day, eyes red from exhaustion and hair crazed from neglect, practically floating on air.
“I can’t explain it, he just makes me happy. Crazy, *stupid* happy!”

I’d smile and tell her how happy I was for her and how much she deserved it. Inside, I felt conflicted.

“I mean he’s over in Afghanistan,” I told Alicia as we drank ourselves into oblivion one Friday night. “Who knows what he’s had to do over there and how it’s messed him up!”

I had a very basic, primitively immature concept on what the hell was happening over in Iraq and Afghanistan. There’s an image the ignorant have about anyone who fights in a war: they all go in one way and magically come out another, as a shell of the person they were before. I thought that everyone who returned from battle came back as the Manchurian Candidate, an empty vessel for political big shots to carry out their secret plans for self promotion. I was dating a man seven years my senior and when I told him about my concerns for Amanda he rolled his eyes and told me that I was one of the most politically juvenile human beings he’d ever come across.

The bubble that encompassed the world I lived in was allergic to any type of political turmoil. Ironically, my boyfriend seemed to attend every anti-war rally ever uploaded to Facebook. In an attempt to cure me of my political complacency, he instructed me to read packets of information he’d Xeroxed regarding our premature invasion into Iraq and begged me to tag along with him to protests at every state capital from Rhode Island to Missouri. I invented mandatory school functions that would keep me from going to rallies and discarded the articles he would leave in my book bag; I felt secure
being totally and blissfully ignorant.

Amanda texted me at 3:30 early one morning in November: “HE’S COMING 2 C ME!! HE’S COMING 2 C ME!!!” Apparently, Eric had a two-week leave from Afghanistan and made plans to come and spend part of his R&R with Amanda. “He’s so excited to meet all of you,” she beamed when I finally saw her in person the next day.

I faked a smile, like I had every other time Eric’s name had been announced and forced out, “Not nearly as excited as I am to meet him.”

Amanda planned a party for the night that Eric was to arrive in Connecticut. She took time to perfect what was going to be both a homecoming and a first meeting. If I had any reservations about her relationship to a man whom she’d never formally met in person, a man who might be scarred and disturbed because of what he saw over in Afghanistan, I kept them to myself, not wanting to spoil her newly found ecstasy.

The night arrived gradually, like clouds converging over a dark blue sky. I arrived late to Amanda’s apartment, which reverberated with techno music and sounds of drunken college students shouting over each other. I poured myself a Solo cup filled with Absolut Vodka and a thimble of cranberry juice and started to walk towards the living room.

Amanda sat on the couch, talking to another one of our friends. I didn’t see anyone who could be Eric. She turned and screamed a shrill cry of drunken joy when she saw me. She pulled me into a hug and whispered in my ear, “He is so much better than I could have
ever imagined! He just stepped out for a minute.”

I pulled back from her embrace and forged another smile.

“Great,” I said, “I’m so happy for you.”

I started drinking until I felt numb and slowly melted into a swarm of dancing students. We became a blob that pulsated with the base of the music pouring out of the speakers. The booze kept flowing and I continued to fill my cup and drink until my head felt as though it was carrying the weight of a teenaged bodybuilder. I needed air.

I stumbled out of the apartment and made my way out of the building. I fell against the door and burst into the chilly December night. A man stood alone in the darkness and turned his attention to me. He was tall and his muscles bulged under the black t-shirt he wore. He seemed to have been just standing in the freezing cold, no coat on, staring out at the streets of New Britain.

“Not much of a view,” I slurred as I fell to the ground. My world was spinning and I needed to rediscover my sense of center.

“Looks fine to me.” A smile stretched across his face, showing a toothy grin that strangely put me at ease. I usually avoid talking to people I don’t know, especially when vodka has a strong hold on me, but there was something about this person, this particular stranger that made me feel like I was safe. He walked over and sat beside me. “When you stare at nothing but sand and desert all day, a residential neighborhood is a pretty hot sight.”

I laughed like someone who’s the only one of his friends not in on the joke laughs. I had no idea why he was talking about a desert
when we were in the midst of winter in New England. He asked where I’d come from and I pointed into the building. “Amanda’s apartment. Great party. Lots of booze. You should come over.”

He shook his head and extended his hand. “Well then, I should probably introduce myself.” He took a strong grip of my hand, and we began to shake. “I’m Eric, Amanda’s boyfriend.”

I stopped. I took him in. This was the man who was dating my best friend. This was the man whom she met online. But at that moment, despite my drunken state, what stuck out to me most vividly was that this was the man who was fighting for me over in Afghanistan. But he didn’t fit my previous perception of a soldier. His warmth reached out to me through the chilly night air and there was something about the tone of his voice that made him seem gentle despite his massive build. I tried picturing him with two M15 rifles in each hand and a grenade hanging out of his pocket. I couldn’t.

I resumed shaking his hand. “It’s nice to meet you, too,” I replied. He picked up a beer that I hadn’t noticed until just then and brought it to his lips. A car passed. He smiled.

I was at a loss. It finally hit me what this man did, all that he sacrificed on a daily basis. I suddenly felt ashamed. I was sitting beside a man who risked his own life for mine, and for what: so I could drink every Thursday, Friday and Saturday? I wondered if he knew just how much I took everything he did for granted. I felt horrendously guilty. I didn’t deserve his bravery. My eyes began to sting and my throat stretched. I knew I couldn’t stop what was going to happen.
I cried. I tried, futilely, to hold back but a cry burst through my sealed lips and I began to shake. Eric rested his hand on my back and asked what was wrong. I shook my head but I couldn’t gain enough control to form a coherent sentence.

Eric kept his hand on my back and said in a low voice, “It’s okay. Whatever’s the matter, it’s gonna be okay.”

I hoped, for Eric’s sake, that he was right. I sent a silent prayer out into the night.
Looking on the U.S. Marine Corp website, “Honoring our Communities” in bold white is the first thing that pops up. Under the subheading it states, “Where I’m From.” The page is very straightforward and all the men that flash across the screen appear serious and focused. Each snapshot displays a different heading that represents what it takes to be a Marine.

Clicking on the “Explore Honoring our Communities” I find a map that shows a huge variety of individuals. A 1st Lt. from Coatesville, Pennsylvania, briefly describes how she learned her skills for success from her mom. She mentions that a lot of African Americans do not know much about the military, but once she took a look into it she liked it. “People that look like me can see that there are achievable success stories.”

I move the cursor around some more and click on a link for contacting a recruiter that’s right next to an image of President Obama acknowledging soldiers. I find a basic information contact sheet that will help the Marine Corp locate a recruiter for you. I think to myself what would happen if I really decided to join the Marines. My mother may have taught me a lot of skills I use every day to succeed,
but I don’t think she could ever embrace the idea of having me in the military. In fact, she’d probably kill me if I enlisted.

But my thoughts do go back to the First Lt. from Coatesville. I am African American and I feel that I have a lot of the same qualities that these different members of the Marines share in their online profiles.

Like many Americans, my mother lost her job in the economic downturn of 2009. She went from sitting in a work chair all day working with numbers to sitting in a library chair looking for job postings. Watching my mother go through such a tough time in her life felt like watching a loved one suffer from cancer.

From that moment on, there was a sense of urgency inside of me “to be all that I could be.” I started college, because I felt getting an education would help make me competitive with the best.

Sitting through five classes a day, I never really questioned why. I just did it. I treated each course as an enemy I was destined to honor my community and my family.

When I took on outside responsibilities, such as working two part-times jobs, it abruptly became a wound to my battleship. I thought sometimes I would end up losing and there was no hope. But just like a Marine, there is an Initial Strength Test (IST) one must pass in order to be considered. The IST consists of three tests: crunches, timed run, and pull-ups flex arm hang. Every Marine must maintain a high level of physical fitness regardless of their age. I had come too far in my studies to let anything come in the way of me graduating and being able to help my mother. As a young African
American woman, higher education is my war. Among blacks ages 25 and older, less than 20 percent have a bachelor’s degree or higher. I did not want to be a statistic.

Back on the Marine website, I could see that in many of the stories, the Marines talk about working hard, being dedicated to their goals, and being a leader. The sense of accomplishment these Marines feel after serving for their country is astounding. I hope to have the same sort of pride in myself as I complete school and find a career and can help myself and my family.

Listening to all these different stories about the military I never thought about joining the U.S. Marine Corps. No one in my family or people I grew up with has ever been in the military. There seems to be a lot more of a reward from the military then just getting your student loans paid for. Being debt free would be great, but having a sense of accomplishment and tangible experience that you can take back to your community is even more vital. I thought that attending college was the next best thing for me, but enlisting in the Marines seems to be exactly what I need to do in order to make an impact.

My life would definitely change for the better if I was to ever enlist. The direction I am headed right now in life could make that a possibility.

Before I exit the website, I revisited the recruiter link and filled out the basic information sheet. I am interested in learning how I can better serve my community as a whole.
extend my hand to introduce myself to Vietnam Veteran Joseph Godenzi. He returns the gesture with a hand that is only part of its original self. During an attack from the North Vietnamese in 1968, a grenade was thrown into his foxhole. In an act of valor, Joseph grabbed the grenade to throw it back, protecting his comrades. Unfortunately, the grenade exploded before he could release it.

After coming back to America from 61 days of action in Ple Ku, a village near the Cambodian boarder, Joseph was greeted by his friends at the VA hospital. Unsure of how to share his graphic wound, he pulled his hand out for all his friends to see.

“Here it is,” he told them, “This is what happened.”

Their faces, he remembers clearly, showed shock and disgust.

He returned back to his hometown, Winsted, after a year recovering in a VA hospital in Washington D.C. His roommate in the clinic, a fresh faced 19-year-old, suffered severe injuries from the war. He lost both of his arms and legs. This man could have cursed God, cursed the country, and cursed the North Vietnamese; if the roommate had, nobody would have argued. Instead, he kept a light attitude.
“This guy had me in stitches. We were constantly laughing. A lot of guys came back from the war with PTS [Post Traumatic Stress]. I guess I could have gone down that route. But then here’s this guy. He’s missing his limbs and he’s not complaining. What do I have to complain about? Being with him kept me from falling into any type of stress. Looking at him, I realized that I don’t have it that bad.”

It wasn’t easy for Joseph to cope with the disfigurement at first. He was a high school athlete. A natural baseball, basketball, and football player, Joe’s greatest lament was losing the ability to participate in sports. Job opportunities were taken away from him; he couldn’t follow his father in the construction business, and any job requiring manual labor was out of the question.

Although given full disability for his injury, he still needed to find a career. He chose to become a mail carrier. He delivered the mail on foot throughout Winsted. This was complicated not only because of the injury to his hand, but also a foot wound sustained the same day of the attack that day in Ple Ku. His feet would suffer horrendous calluses, for which he would constantly have to seek medical attention.

When he recalls working in post-Vietnam America, he remembers a different type of Connecticut. Back then he held personal relationships with the people he delivered the mail to. They knew him by his first name, and he knew theirs as well. Many would stop him for polite conversation. Some would ask him into their homes for coffee or lunch. The people of Winsted made him feel part of the community.
Though his body beat, his hand destroyed and his feet sore, Joseph worked for the Post Office for over 30 years. It was there that he also met his second wife, whom he now has two children with.

It’s hard to imagine how he could maintain a job, though not strenuous, still physically demanding on a daily basis. How many miles had he walked up and down the same streets in downtown Winsted? How many hills had he climbed in his beaten down body, steadfast in his work? The American postal service is one of the most reliable postal systems in the world. I’d like to think Joseph is in part responsible for that credit.

We sit together in his living room talking about Vietnam and the years that followed. The sounds of his daughter’s toys ring in the background: a warm reminder that Joe’s lived a good life despite his difficulties. She runs in the room, holding a hand held Nintendo device, and she’s shy to introduce herself. Instead she holds on to her father and only tells me her name after her father asks her to. Joe proudly smiles.

So we get past the calluses on his feet. We skip talking about all the shrapnel he’s pulled out his body-- and the shrapnel he still pulls out to this day. It’s truly inspiring; here’s a man who nearly died, has had his body disfigured, and was able to work himself into a life respectable and desirable by any honest man.

Joseph tells me about his golf game. Although he lost his thumb in the grenade explosion, doctors were able to implant cartilage into the area his thumb used to be, which gave him the ability to loosely grip objects. When he shows me the flexibility, he exclaims how per-
fect it fits a golf club. He loosens his tongue, and tells me how he’s out-driving the young guys on the green. He tells me how he’s an ace on the putting green and that when people size him up, they take him for less than he is because of his injury. He’s not being boastful; he’s giving himself credit for something that could have stopped him long ago.

I give in. I pump him up. “You shot in the low 80s? Incredible,” I say. It’s a great score, or at least that’s what I’ve been told by my friends that play golf. What’s incredible is a man who took an injury and stared it down and told it that it wasn’t going to get the best of him. He never wanted pity for his wounds, only an opportunity to prove to himself that he was better than the sum of his body.

When we’re done with our two-hour interview, as I’m putting on my coat to leave his house, I extend my left hand. He looks at me confusedly, like he half understands why I’m doing this. I tell him that I’m not sure if he’s comfortable shaking with his right hand. I think for a beat, and then extend my right hand so that when we shake, he nods his head in agreement.
As a 21-year-old female growing up in the Entitlement Generation, I am far removed from the Vietnam War in every aspect of my life. My parents and grandparents lived under Communist rule in Poland. My father and his brothers never joined the military; my mother never participated in any political protests. None of the guys I dated ever considered enlisting. The only images of war I have come from the special effects in motion pictures. And, although American troops just pulled out of Iraq a couple of months ago, I know only one current American soldier and we’ve only spoken once. The day I spoke with David Tazzara, a Vietnam Veteran who has seen war first-hand, became the first connection I made to what being an American soldier is really like.

I meet with him on a pleasant afternoon in January, a few weeks before the 44th anniversary of the day he received his draft notice. He speaks timidly yet possesses the intimidation of a man with wisdom that expands almost three of my lifetimes. I sit across from him. Between us lays a photograph of him and his two best friends from 1968—three 19-year-old boys dressed in uniform and staring blankly at the camera with the idiosyncratic cockiness of young men. They
were about to leave for Vietnam.

I am in Dave’s living room to ask questions about his year in-country as a soldier during the Vietnam War. First, I learn the basics: voluntarily drafted in February of 1968, Dave and his two best friends, Paul and Joe, left their hometown of Winsted to begin basic training. Five months later, they found themselves in the 100 degree jungle weather of Vietnam. Separated into different infantries, they began active duty in Vietnam together, but alone.

I ask Dave if he has any keepsakes from his time in Vietnam. He begins by showing me a Zippo lighter. The silvery shine on the two flat sides is worn from what looks like years of thumb-rubbing against the smooth metal. It holds a delicate weight in my palm as I flip the top open to an invisible flame. My boyfriend had recently lost one just like it, except it was shinier and engraved where Dave’s is worn dull from use.

“It was given to me by my Aunt and Uncle,” he says, “and I had actually lost it while camping in a hillside—we were camping out, sleeping one night—and it just happened to be raining, raining, several days of rain, and there was just a big mud puddle that I was sleeping in.”

I try to imagine sleeping in a Vietnamese hillside during a rainstorm at 19: the dampness, the humidity, the earthy smell. I feel a sudden appreciation for my down comforter as Dave continues.

“And the cigarette lighter had fallen out of my pocket and I had lost it. So about a month later—which we never do—we came back to the same spot. We never slept in the same spot before at any time.
And just for the heck of it I had decided to see if I could find that spot and find my lighter. It was partially overgrown and the mud was all covered up, but I did find the location where I had slept and I actually dug that out of the mud and found my lighter back again.

Forty-four years later, here it is in my palm.

I came to realize the importance of the “little things” during this time in Dave’s life. His only connection to home or to his two friends stationed elsewhere in Vietnam was through writing letters. Today it seems almost a lost form of communication, with e-mail and web chatting available to our troops overseas, but to Dave and his fellow soldiers, receiving letters from loved ones was many times the highlight of their day. Dave only spoke to his family once over the phone for a rushed three minutes during his entire year in-country. Hearing this really puts in perspective the anxiety I feel when I can’t respond to a text message during class.

Everyday things that are so easily in reach for us today, Dave considered luxuries. He tells me about the giddiness he’d feel over a rarely found room temperature can of soda. When Dave’s unit ran out of water for three days, he secretly shared a Hershey’s chocolate bar and the half a canteen of water he had left with his buddy.

“We had our own little party with a chocolate bar and the last of our water,” he says, chuckling nostalgically.

The differences between Dave’s young adulthood and mine are staggering. He spent his 19th year fighting against Charlie Company while I spent mine battling my parents, college papers, and heartbreak. While Dave reminisces of partying by drinking warm water
and savoring a chocolate bar, the parties I go to are held in dorm rooms with shelves lined with empty liquor bottles as trophies. I have a closet full of clothes and still have nothing to wear; Dave once spent 45 days in the jungle without a single change of clothes. I face the arduous task of choosing a meal from a seemingly endless restaurant menu; Dave faced the choice between the slightly better tasting C-rations and the much lighter-to-carry packs of dehydrated food.

“It was the worst of times,” he said slowly toward the end of the interview. “But it was the best of times too. I mean, we lived each day like it could be our last. We didn’t take anything for granted.”

I couldn’t help but be a little envious.

Weeks after my interview with Dave, I sat in my car at a traffic light sipping an ice cold soda when I saw the glint of metal shining in the rearview mirror. Looking behind me, I saw the tip of my boyfriend’s lost Zippo wedged between the seats. I reached back to pull it out and an image crossed my mind; the much younger Dave in his Army fatigues, sweating from the thick, humid air, cutting through overgrown brush to see the sun reflecting off the steel Zippo lighter stuck in hardened mud. Rubbing the dirt from the metal, he flips the top open to an orange flame. And he smiles.
My 7th Grade history teacher, in all of her pit-stained glory, had a tendency to divert our aimless young minds back to the subject at hand using a less than subtle tactic. THWACK! The sound of the pointer against the large map breaks my wandering thoughts. “Vietnam,” she says. Lunch, I think.

As I daydream out the window, her pointer stick assaults the colorful splotches strewn about the pull cord maps above our blackboard. These weathered representatives of faraway lands, and the corruption that has befallen them, I never decipher.

But as part of my assignment for this magazine, I had to sit face-to-face with a Vietnam Veteran and the world behind the map. I feel honored, yet inept.

I feel lucky. Steve, my sister’s father-in-law, is a Vietnam Veteran and has agreed to speak with me, which allows me to dodge the additional anxiety of interrogating a complete stranger. We decide to meet on Sunday at my sister’s house, after he and my brother-in-law return home from the shooting range. Never thinking twice about this Sunday hobby of theirs, I now wonder to myself if this does not elicit vivid memories. Nonetheless, I do not plan to ask.
Steve is a boisterous personality. “Ha!” he begins and ends most everything he says with this high-pitched chuckle. Everyone feels content in his presence; I find a solace in knowing that he considers me part of his family.

Sunday rolls around and I have been pretty lax in my interview preparation. I am saddled somewhere between the professional and casual sit down. I mull bringing a bottle of red wine, which we both favor. I decide, as unexpected nerves emerge, that this conversation is more substantial than our dining room banter so I leave the wine behind.

Steve arrives about an hour after I do. We all engage in idle conversation and I anxiously search the moments in between for an opportunity to segue into our interview. Sensing this angst, my sister offers us the living room for privacy. “Alright let’s get this over with,” Steve quips as he rises, and I sense sincerity in his wit.

We take a seat on the couch. I begin this new conversation by thanking him for meeting with me, as “I’m glad to be speaking with someone I know.” His abrupt response, “You don’t know me,” stifles me. I cannot tell if this is the same wit as before.

Steve sits with his arms crossed over his broad chest as he leans back, staring out the adjacent picture window. I feel as if I am trespassing upon his private property, and at any moment he might ask me to remove myself from it. I resolve that he is simply preparing himself for the return to something he knows I will never fully understand, and that maybe he is right, I don’t know him. I can’t. There is more than he is even willing to share with me that he has come
through to be here, sitting inches away, spilling guts that had been decidedly unspilled until now.

There is a quiet somberness throughout the house, as both my sister and her husband have retreated to separate areas as if to lend more space to the room that his words will fill up. I clumsily fumble with my borrowed voice recorder. He begins his story even before I can properly address my first question.

His ‘Nam is 1970, 45 miles east of Saigon on a logistic support base in Nhe’ Bê. As a Naval Advisor to a crew of four Vietnamese, Steve spends his days teaching them proper patrol techniques and protocol on a riverboat that floats along the capillaries that run from two rivers. I try to imagine this world and I smile to myself at its stark contrast. This young and agile, 21-year-old Steve, leader of a naval riverboat crew, to the humbled and retired Steve before me, that enjoys shooting the shit with the boys in the deli he works part time in.

He does not sleep. For the full year he is there, he does not ever receive a full nights rest. He is kept awake by the sounds of warfare in the near distance, the aftermath of which he must trudge through on walks to the the dunk or mainland, this “forest of assassins” as he calls it. He remains alert at all times for fear of what he cannot see on either side of the thick brush that surrounds his narrow waterways. I ask him if he was scared and unreservedly he attests, “Yes, and anyone who tells you any different is full of shit. Nobody wants to go to war,” he continues, “you weren’t fighting to save your country, you were fighting to save the guy next to you.”
Vulnerable and susceptible, as he was, to the worst of what this war had to offer, I ask him how or why he thinks he survived? “Boys Scouts,” he chuckles. I laugh with him; it is good to hear his sarcasm again. But in the next breath he says “destiny,” with no trace of humor. The profound philosophy feels especially honest, given the circumstances of the war where he tells me more than 10,000 Navy personnel were killed, and 8,000 others injured.

“And here you are,” I say with a smile, wanting to remind him how far his destiny has brought him. He takes a minute, nods, and smiles back.

After our conversation I decide it has not been ignorance that has kept me from knowing Steve or the war or even where Vietnam is on the map. I still don’t know. But I can tell you that I am not thinking about lunch.
When college didn’t prove to be the first step on the road to personal fulfillment I imagined, I found myself in an Army recruiting office after finishing my sophomore year. I wanted the respect and purpose that came with a uniform – a decent wage and benefits didn’t hurt, either. If I stuck it out for two more years and earned my Bachelor’s degree, the Army might give me a commission, making me an officer. Lieutenant, maybe even Captain Baker – I loved the ring to it. When my friends moved back in with their parents or started slumming it in seedy apartments, I’d be traveling the world, walking the banks of the Tigris and the Euphrates one day, or sliding down the grand staircase of Saddam Hussein’s palace the next. They’d pin medals on my chest, strangers would thank me for my service, and I’d be a man of character and distinction, a veteran. I’d never pay for a drink again.

I pulled up to the Middletown recruiting office in my busted old Buick LeSabre. My grungy long hair, patchy beard and Pearl Jam t-shirt never stuck out as badly as they did in that office of clean-cut men in combat fatigues–discipline was the style here.
“Looking for somebody, kid?”

A bald guy asked, barely looking up from his computer. Working every summer on a construction crew with men twice my age, I got used to being addressed as “kid.” This guy barely looked five minutes older than me, only there was a confidence and self-assurance about him I clearly lacked. Pictures of him with his unit in Iraq hung on the wall. Ranging from a formal standstill of his entire company, to candid shots of him and his buddies on patrol or enjoying downtime, these photos told me he lived more in his early twenties than I hoped to in a lifetime. He saw places I read about in books, forged friendships I’d never understand, and etched a small signature on history. He was right to call me “kid.”

I inched towards his desk and extended a hand.

“How’s it goin’? My name’s Dave, I have a few questions about enlisting if you got a second.”

“Alright Dave, I’m Staff Sergeant—”

I didn’t catch his name. He jutted up from his seat and crushed my hand with a thunder grip handshake. Thirty seconds into my military career and I already had to conceal how weak I was. Making me ARMY STRONG would definitely be a project. Towering above six foot, his fatigues formed to his ripped-up frame. He looked ideal for a role as an extra in any remake of Rambo.

“So, thinkin’ about joining up?”

“A bit. I’m at Central right now and I wanna finish school before I make any decisions.”

“College kid, huh? Yeah, I got a cousin at Central, but she’s kind
of a loser; parties a lot, drinks, smokes pot, I’m sure you know the type…”

That type sat right in front of him.

“Look, I can respect finishing school, but let me tell you what you’d gain by signing on now.”

The sales pitch went into full effect. SSgt. Rambo bombarded me from every angle with money, incentives, bonuses and benefits. “Ninety-five percent of the military is made up of support units. The chances you’d see combat are slim to none,” led into “You can stay in for three years, then finish school on the Army’s tab,” and was driven home by, “If you sign on within the next month, we can give you a $20,000 signing bonus. A check right up front. You know you could use the money.” SSgt. Rambo went on to explain the process of qualifying for Officer Candidate School, [OCS] one that included a lot of acronyms and jargon, while I hunched forward in my chair. Nervously thumbing my cell phone, my eyes fell to the floor, a slow panic built in me. SSgt. Rambo was a soldier and signing recruits was his mission. The anxiety of facing a recession job market and the discontent of partying my twenties away brought me there, but SSgt. Rambo didn’t care. Today, I was another potential recruit; I was his mission.

“Why don’t you take a practice OCS exam?”

“What? Now?”

“You’ll do alright.”

He set me up with the exam, a bubble sheet, and some number two pencils, things I hoped to not see for at least two more months.
I skimmed the test, answering some questions on a whim, thinking more about what kind of soldier I’d make. Basic training would be the first step. I didn’t want to see my hair scattered on a barbershop floor and snapping to my feet for reveille at dawn struck me as impossible. And I was in terrible shape. I’d be the last through every obstacle, the slowest on every run, and the first to groan about push-ups. I didn’t have a reputation as much of a fighter, and the destructive power of firearms intimidated me; I have never fired a single shot, let alone out of anger or fear.

Those worries over Basic were superficial. Millions went in green and came out soldiers, but I often heard stories of the military changing people to the very core, breaking them down and remolding them in Uncle Sam’s image. I’d be thrust into the fray and forced to change and adapt with every second the Drill Instructors spent screaming in my face. I held a strong sense of individuality, one of the few things in life I prided myself on. It would be impossible to maintain that, standing at attention among a sea of green-clad, bald-headed young men. Pvt. David J. Baker would never be Dave Baker.

Basic only made up the first 10 weeks of my would-be military career. Then what? SSgt. Rambo emphasized that most Army units served in non-combat roles. Operation Iraqi Freedom saw heavy participation from Reservists and National Guard units, leaving little doubt that the war might find me. A childhood friend’s father fought in the Vietnam War. He never talked about it, but his failed marriage, raging alcoholism, and shut-in lifestyle spoke volumes about Vietnam’s hold over him. I didn’t want the desert to have that same grasp
on me.

I left the recruiting office with a few cards listing recruiters in my area, some paperwork, and a dose of reality—I had no business in the Army. SSgt. Rambo most likely stayed in that office a few more hours, met some recent high school graduates, and said something that swayed them into serving their country. He probably grabbed a workout then relaxed for the evening before returning to the office and meeting more Army hopefuls the next day. I planned on meeting a few friends for happy hour, nursing a couple beers, then waking up the next morning to spend eight hours hammering vinyl siding. When the fall arrived, I returned to the classroom to count the days until graduation, where I belonged. SSgt. Rambo belonged in the military—that was his contribution. One day, I’ll figure out a way to make mine.
By Casey Coughlin

Coughlin’s Way

The outdoor furniture sags and cigarette butts overflow the ash tray. My brother doesn’t notice or care as he sits reclined with his feet slung over the deck’s railing. He loves this broken down bar and every time he’s home he visits it every night. He takes a drag off his Marlboro and lets the smoke escape his lungs. Usually, I wouldn’t come here. The small town feel does nothing for me. But tonight I came for him. It’s his going back ritual.

His grey eyes lurch and jump from ceiling to floor and when the group erupts in laughter only a quiet smile forms on his lips. He sips his jack and Coke without enjoyment. All his favorite people are here tonight, except his complicated girl Emily. We are all here and he is somewhere else. We collectively let it slide, holding up his side of the conversation and replacing his drink whenever it is nursed dry.

Around midnight the group dwindles to a handful. The others wander inside to refill drinks and we are left for one of the first times in years, alone. We both look out beyond the patio railing in our usual form of communication—mutual staring. He has been a Marine now for somewhere around three years and the only reason he...
is home now is because of his extra leave time he earned after a six month tour in Afghanistan.

Eyes still stagnant, his lips launch into motion.

“When I was in the desert we had to all take turns going out to get supplies. Everyone hated it. But this kid who had just been dropped in the night before, he was stupid and desperate to see whatever he thought was out there. It was my turn to go and we were loading into the Humvee when he caught me and begged for me to switch spots with him, I figured what the hell and let ’em. I hated that shit. Case, he literally took the seat I was sitting in.”

He stops, looks to me. I swirl the ice in my cup.

“They got ambushed. The kid I traded seats with died.”

Tears roll loosely down my cheeks, uninhibited. I drag my chair closer and lay my head on his shoulder, he lights another cigarette and breaths in. He tells me about the guilt he lives with everyday,
about how it should have been his family that felt that pain, not theirs. He tells me it was his turn to die, and now he feels like he cheated death.

“You want to know why I keep going back to Emily? Because last weekend when I drove up to see her, she held me all night long and all I did was cry. Case, she is the only person in the whole world who can make me feel better. I love the hell out of her.”

***

“Tell me something bad that you have done, but not like bad bad, just like sorta bad.”

He shakes his head and looks at his feet; he runs the corner of his sneakers along the wet wood and peeling paint of our front steps. It’s raining out.

“C’mon… Just one thing, like not if you shot someone, I don’t want to know that… just something interesting.”

He is home for the first time after being assigned permanently to Okinawa. And for the first time in years, he’s acting more like my old brother than a Marine drone. He has already told us all the exciting stories: bottle feeding baby Tigers in Thailand, scuba diving off the coast of Japan, the prostitutes who surround him whenever he steps foot off base. He pulls a drag from his cigarette and I settle down on the porch floor cross legged. I want a real story.

“Okay, fine. Remember awhile back, when there was that big flood in the Philippines? Well I had to go there for emergency relief and for two weeks you know what my job was? To dig dead bodies out of mud slides.” He laughs to himself and holds his hand out into
the heavy rain. “When Em comes down, don’t tell her about that, okay?”

I nod.

“Or the prostitutes.”

***

We sat huddling in blankets on metal bleachers. Before us lay an empty field paved in grey ground-up stone. Beyond that: brick buildings, parking lots, and manicured groupings of lawn. I share my fleece blanket with Emily. The mixture of nerves, excitement and chilly South Carolina air forces us together. My mom sits a few benches down with her hands shoved in her pockets, her shoulders round, leaning away from my dad who sits next to her. His body like ours is cold and rigid but more in a natural state. This trip is the first time in my life that we have travelled as a family.

We all wait and the sun starts to rise. We are here extra early because Mom insisted we be present for the flag raising ceremony. More strangers drift in all around us. Mom talks to another mom sitting next to us from Pennsylvania, usually her chattiness annoys me, but listening to them exchange stories, the same story, is comforting.

They, like us, are here to retrieve their son from boot.

Three months ago my newly 18-year-old brother left us as he followed his recruiter into the back of a Ford sedan. We followed him out of the house and onto the porch watching his gangly body and shoulder length hair bobbing away. He desperately clutched Emily under his arm until he reached the end of the driveway. Their kiss, hard and long. His recruiter cleared his throat and he got in the car.
and was gone. Emily backed a few steps and folded into herself. Her hands covered her face as the car drove away. She remained sitting on the lawn ripping handfuls of grass from the earth – ripping – dropping – ripping – dropping.

None of us had wanted him to go.

By the time we got the first glimpse of our new Marine he marched out unrecognizable amidst hundreds of other men. A sea of green sweaters swayed in waves of calculated movements. Mom cried as she searched for her own son’s face. Dad looked down at the program book, trying to figure out what platoon was standing where. Emily looked at me and I tried not to look at her.

It took awhile, but eventually the Marine Corps let us have him back. In the most powerful explosion of energy, families fled their seats and desperately searched for their boy. Emily bound ahead of me, certain she spotted him from the bleachers and I followed her loose bun as she maneuvered the crowd. When she found him she leapt into his arms, forcing their bodies as close as they could physically be. He stood inches taller then I remembered and slowly patted the back of the foreign object that clung to his front side. Gone was his long hair and attempted beard. Gone was his goofy slumped back and skinny forearms. Gone were all his hippy romantic ideas. Instead, a Marine in shined shoes. His face smiled but his eyes were quiet. He bent towards her, forcing her feet to hit the ground and shrugged the rest of her off of him. He kissed her cheek and took a step back.

We ignored his changed vocabulary and participated in all the
following formalities required before taking leave of the island. Walked through his bunk house during check out, shopped in the commissary, wandered under trees cloaked in moss. Emily, desperate to feel the softness, climbed one of those trees; she sat straddling a thick branch and grabbed handfuls of Spanish moss while Sean quietly begged her to get down.

“Come up here and get me,” she teased back.

He turned his back and walked away.
A MEMORIAL TO THE CONNECTICUT
MEN WHO DIED IN VIETNAM

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A MEMORIAL TO THE CONNECTICUT MEN WHO DIED IN VIETNAM

Robert Charles Sedgwick
Ramon Aurelio Servera-Baez
Angelo Joseph Sferrazza
George Arthur Shavies
Thomas William Shay
Daniel John Shea
John Francis Shea
Ronald J Sheehy
David Lawrence Sheehy
Jerold Jerome Shelton
John Brooks Sherman
John Reginald Shoneck
Stephen Adams Shortall
Lawrence Jay Silver
Sheldon Silverman
James Walter Sincere
Peter Elmer Sipp
Steven George Slack
Albert Peter Smeriglio
Alan Ivan Smith
Michael David Smith
Howard Bruce Smith
Clinton Arnold Smith
James Gordon Smith
Arthur Albert Smith
David Paul Speath
Norman Joseph Geo Spenard
Anthony Joseph Spirito Jr
William Luke St John
Robert Francis Stevens
Gerald Hiland Stewart
Norman R Stoddard Jr
Richard Raymond Stolarun
James Clinton Strano

Stephen S Strycharz Jr
Jay Webster Stull
Donald Frederic Sturgeon
Raymond Suarez Jr
Francis Jordan Sullivan
Norman Roger Surprenant
David Martin Swan
William James Tarsi
Dennis Gilbert Taylor
John Stewart Taylor
Irving Burr Tchakirides
Walter Alexander Terlecki
Richard Carl Tessman
Gilbert Thibeault
Bruce Maynard Thomas
Robert James Thompson
Paul Thorik Jr
Larry Alan Thorne
Brian Edward Tierney
Thomas Daniel Tighe
Jeffrey Sanders Tigner
Robert Arnold Tillquist
Thomas James Tingley
John Francis Tino Jr
Peter Clark Towne
Peter Leadbetter Tripp
Thomas Judd Tyrell
Edward Michael Tyszka
Richard Edward Urban
William Normand Ursin
Michael John Vagnone
James Ray Van Cedarfield
Daniel Varela
Raymond Walter Vaughan Jr

David Vautour
Juan Antonio Velez
Lawrence Guy Visconti
John Sargeant Voegli
Philipp R Vollhardt
Warren Demarest Vought Jr
Donald Kevin Walsh
Francis Anthony Walsh Jr
Bruce Byerly Warner
Donald Michael Wayman
John Henry Welch III
William Edward West
Norman Philip Westwood Jr
Henry Lee Whaley
Robert James White
Douglas Edward White
John Dennis Whorff
Junior Wilkerson
Stephen David Wilkinson
Donald Morris Willey
James Joseph Williams
Malcolm George Williams
Frankie Ross Williams
Charles J Wisniewski Jr
John B Woble
Richard John Wolcheski
Lawrence Dane Woods
Jonathan P Works
Herman W O Wright Jr
John F Young
Douglas Whiting Young
William John Zaborowski
Joseph Paul Zale
Bernard Anthony Zambrano
Donald John Zastowsky
Front Row (left to right): Mary Collins (professor), Ron Farina, Casey Coughlin, Candace Catlin Hall, Adrian Riley, Keya Hatfield, Dominika Cwalina, Nadege Francois; Back Row (L-R): Dave Baker, Jesse Duthrie, Conor Moran, Sean Fenwick, Jacey Bradshaw

PHOTO INFORMATION

Page 11: “Smalls on patrol, Vietnam, Fall, 1968” Donated by Paul Vaccari
Page 35: Letter from SP4 David E. Tazzara to Mr. and Mrs. Tazzara, written on the 160th day of his 1968-1969 tour of duty.
Page 45: Dogtags belonging to Robert J. Weisel, United States Marine Corps Reserve (retired).
Page 48: Bracelet worn by Robert J. Weisel during his 1966 tour of duty.
Page 55: Prayer card carried by Gerry Winn during his 1968 tour. It was on his person when he was wounded in action.
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