

# FRONT LINES

Soldiers' writings from Vietnam



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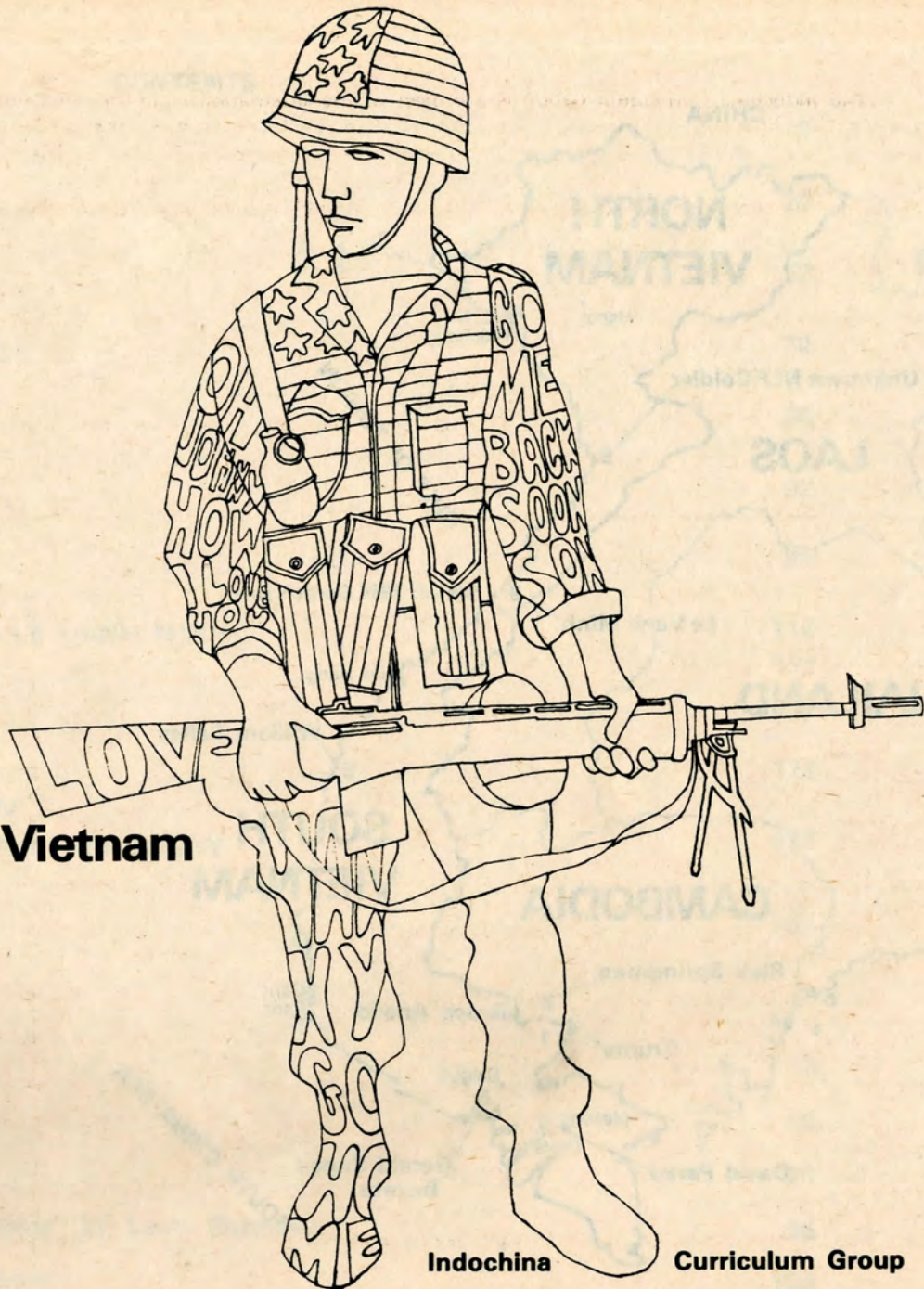
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Indochina

Curriculum Group



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## PHOTO AND ART CREDITS

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## INTRODUCTION

One place to learn the lessons of the Indochina war is in the words of the soldiers who fought in it. This book is a collection of personal accounts by American and Vietnamese soldiers. Their words come out of the immediacy of war and the dilemmas it raises for them.

In each of these accounts the soldiers are confronted with a situation which demands a choice involving their basic beliefs and sometimes their lives. War presents these dilemmas in their most dramatic form, but the questions are ones we all face in our own lives.

### To help you understand the reading:

A number of names and initials are used to refer to two opposing groups of Vietnamese:

1. The ARVN is the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. Its government is based in the south of Vietnam, mainly in the city of Saigon. ARVN is fighting with the aid of the United States military forces and is financed by the United States.

2. The NLF, or National Liberation Front, is a coalition of groups in the south fighting against foreign control of South Vietnam and for the reunification of Vietnam. The United States military and the press refer to its armed forces as VIETCONG, VC, CHARLIE, or COMMUNISTS.

The NVA, or North Vietnamese Army, is the army of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the government in the north of Vietnam. They support the National Liberation Front.

GOOK, SLANT, and DINK are terms used by some Americans to describe Vietnamese people. Some of these words, which express contempt for the Vietnamese, are based on physical differences between Vietnamese and Americans: "slant" refers to eye shape; "dink" (from "dinky") refers to size.

As some of the soldiers explain in their stories, they were encouraged by the military to look down on the Vietnamese people as inferior.

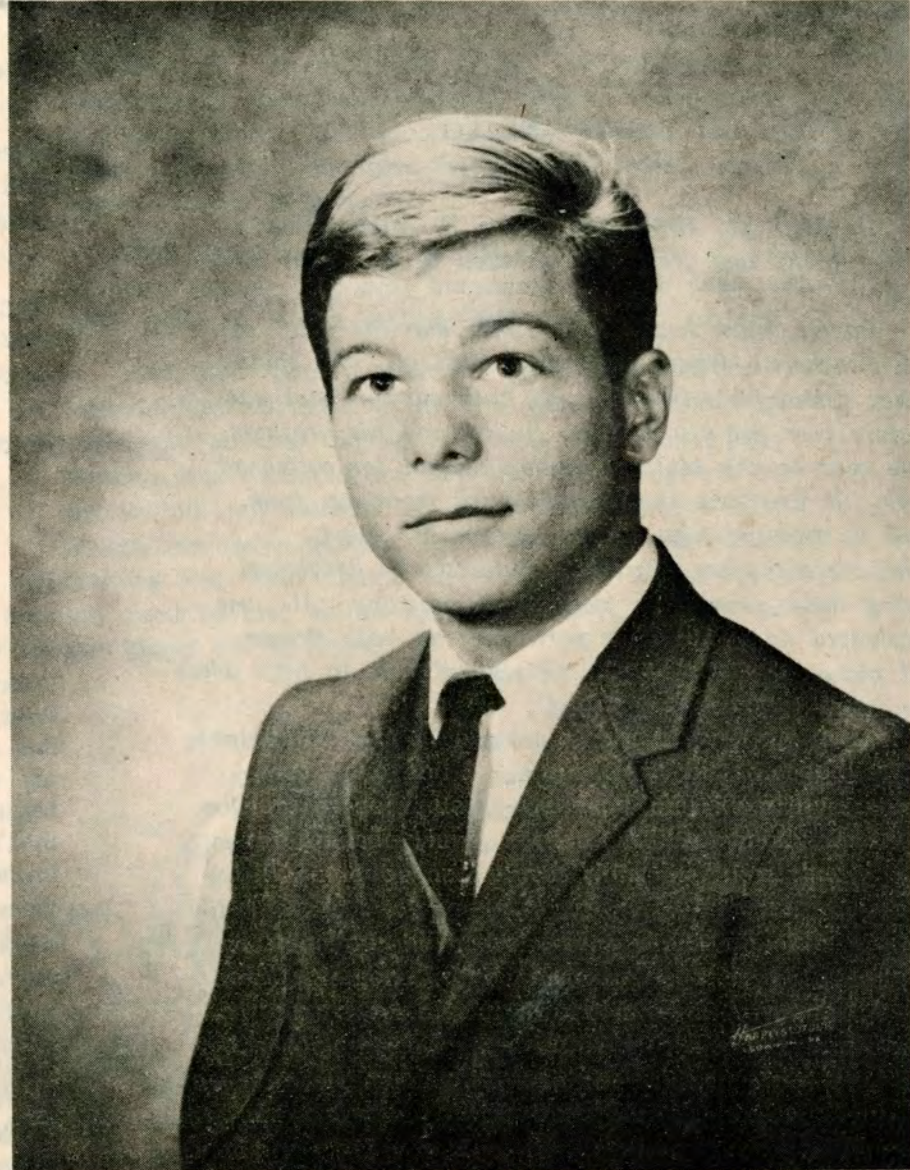
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The Indochina Curriculum Group is a collective of Boston-area high school teachers and scholars developing materials for high schools on Southeast Asia. This book is one of a series on the Indochina War.



Bruce Anello, a young sergeant in the Army, wonders if he has become a "pawn in the game," trapped in a vast process over which he has no control. Afraid that the brutality of the war is numbing his feelings, he puts his confusion and pain into the words of his diary. His thoughts raise questions for us all: What are our options when caught in a situation where playing the game by the rules means denying our feelings and beliefs?

## Bruce Anello



Bruce Anello

## BRUCE ANELLO

*On May 31, 1968, Sgt. Bruce F. Anello—Buddy, to his family and friends—was killed in action in Vietnam.*

*Buddy, born August 24, 1947, was the third of four brothers. When his mother died in 1951 Buddy's father found himself unable to both support and adequately care for his sons, so Buddy and his brothers were sent to the Milton Hershey School for orphaned boys. It was here that Buddy lived from age four until he finished high school, except for short vacations at home. Particular interests he developed during these years were music and wrestling. He was considered an outstanding performer on both drums and piano, but in Vietnam he seemed able to play whatever instrument came to hand.*

*After graduation Buddy worked for the Philadelphia Electric Company for a year, then spent three happy months in San Francisco visiting his eldest brother Don. In Haight Ashbury, his first real taste of independence, he met a girl he hoped to return to. When his father sent word an induction notice had come, Buddy obediently returned to Philadelphia.*

*Dave Lang was inducted the same day as Buddy. They became close friends and remained together throughout basic training at Ft. Hood, Texas, and in Vietnam. Dave read much of the diary as Buddy was*

*writing it. Dave is sure we have here the complete text of the diary. He points out that Buddy was writing constantly—poems, letters, things for the diary.*

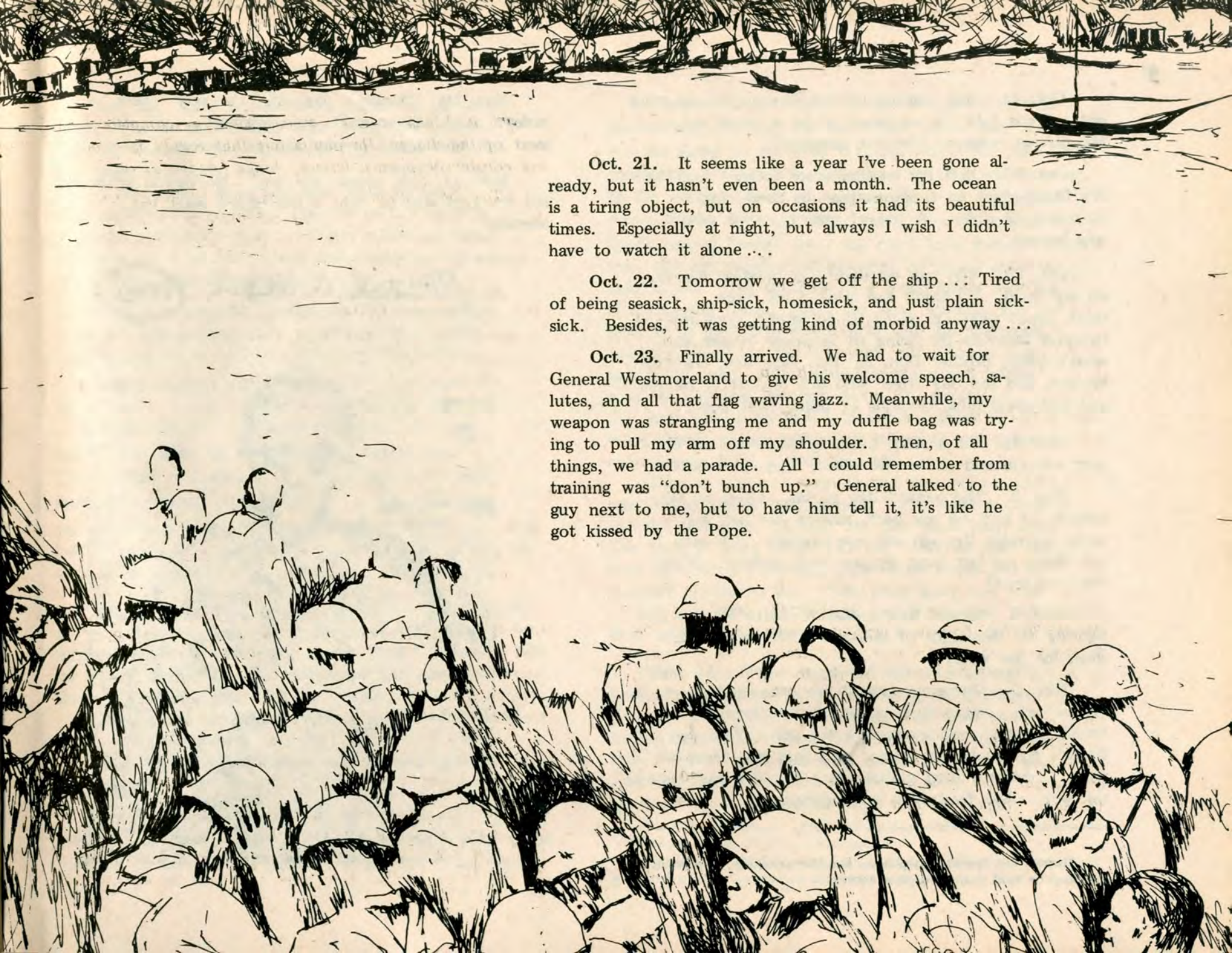
*The diary stops several weeks before Buddy was killed. Following the text of the diary is an interview with Dave Lang, filling in those final weeks, plus other reminiscences of Buddy.*

*Buddy was awarded the Purple Heart, the Silver Star, the Military Merit Medal and a marksmanship citation. He was also given a medal from the Army of South Vietnam.*

*When he died in Dragon Valley, Vietnam, Sgt. Bruce Anello was twenty years old.*

*Oct. 16, 1967. It all starts in the San Francisco Bay. Feelings are the color of the ship. Gray. I look at the night and the city lights and remember all the beautiful things I've done there—and I have to turn. I look at the bridge with the many people traveling their happy way, but not knowing the ship below carries a load of deep thought. And the lights play on my mind. So I have to turn. Just three miles away, behind the old smoke stack. You can't see it. But that's where I live. I know it's there, but they don't know I'm here, and I have to turn. I turn to the faces whose thoughts are just like mine and only seem to make the ship grayer. And the stars offer me no help 'cause now I look at them alone. So I turn for the last time and walk away with my eyes to the ground.*

*Oct. 18. Tomorrow we pass the Golden Gate Bridge and everyone will say, "Isn't it beautiful," and I'll say, "Yes, wasn't it." But hopes are always there, for it's not a terrible long time. It's just an eternity.*



Oct. 21. It seems like a year I've been gone already, but it hasn't even been a month. The ocean is a tiring object, but on occasions it had its beautiful times. Especially at night, but always I wish I didn't have to watch it alone...

Oct. 22. Tomorrow we get off the ship... Tired of being seasick, ship-sick, homesick, and just plain sick-sick. Besides, it was getting kind of morbid anyway...

Oct. 23. Finally arrived. We had to wait for General Westmoreland to give his welcome speech, salutes, and all that flag waving jazz. Meanwhile, my weapon was strangling me and my duffle bag was trying to pull my arm off my shoulder. Then, of all things, we had a parade. All I could remember from training was "don't bunch up." General talked to the guy next to me, but to have him tell it, it's like he got kissed by the Pope.

Oct. 24. Still waiting for supplies before we move out. I was told I'm supposed to be a tunnel rat.\* My platoon sergeant likes me (sarcasm).

Oct. 27. Left for another place today. Duc-Pho. It's finally back to C-rations [canned food] again... It rained all night. A trio of misery: cold, scared, and hungry.

Oct. 28. Why are we here? A question always on my mind... I think and stink a lot more... I think about what I'm going to do after I serve my two-year sentence for being an American citizen and what's Mary, Brother Don, Al, Bill, Papa Joe, Gwynne, Moreen, and the bus driver who left me off in Harlem and said good luck, thinking or doing right now...

Oct. 31. At 6 A.M. I get up and read the obituary column and if I'm not listed, I go eat breakfast.

Nov. 2. The hardest day so far. Close to 80 pounds of junk on my back, raining like hell and we're tramping through the rice paddies... A man got blown up last night by our own artillery. Who can you trust?

Nov. 5. Should have gotten a combat medal for fighting off thousands of mosquitos last night. No sleep for the weary.

Nov. 9. Our ambush—with the rain beating on my helmet. Not a drop coming in, so it trickles round my neck and soaks into my skin. While my finger's on the trigger frozen with fear and from the wind... haven't fired a shot yet. Nor has one come my way. Just frustration and harassment.

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\*tunnel rat: soldier assigned to search for hidden supplies of weapons or food in underground tunnels.

Nov. 10. Finally a day off. I'm very lonely today. And still no mail, no newspaper... I'll sit here and smoke and ponder and get lonelier...

Nov. 11. No bullets my way. No bullets returned. It's the best way to fight a war—that's what I've learned.



Nov. 21. Lost respect for a bunch of people today. For no reason they tore down this hootch,\* burnt it, tramped down their garden, ripped out their trees and there wasn't even any suspected enemy. I told him I hope someone kicks in his TV tube while he's over here. Like he said: "Just to let them know we're here." Really made me sick, but what am I to do? Stand and watch and forget. The last may never happen.

Nov. 25. Back to hoofing and humping again. Froze last night. But how do you write it? It's hard to explain the cold to someone who's warm...

Dec. 6. When will it ever end? You can't fight what you can't see, yet we walk like we're in a shooting gallery. You ask, "How can we find them?" and they say, "When he shoots at you." Yet we walk and walk. The major sits at his desk smelling of starch, saying, "There's a lost regiment out there somewhere. Search till you find them." And I ask, "How do we find them?" and he says, "Wait till they shoot at you."

Dec. 8. I'm so tired. Is it real? Yes, but why be sad, when nothing will change your sorrows; why be angry, for there's nothing to release your anger on. Why be happy when it's nothing really to be happy about. So I exist.

Feelings are void, emotions are gone, reactions are numb. Am I wrong for this?

I'm just tired, and hate to fall asleep, only to wake up to it all again.

Dec. 10. How can I describe an ambush? Through poem it may sound pretty. In conversation it may sound exciting; in thought it's undescrivable. But I will try:

Darkness comes, and the clouds turn black with threatening rain, and the moon can barely seep through. It's the signal to move to the trail where the man died yesterday. An eerie feeling creeps in your whole being as the beautiful trees of daytime turn into laughing demons from the cold night wind. You lie on the damp ground hungry from the day's long march. Eight men and eight individual thoughts of home and how it used to be. One thinking of a quiet sunny morning at a deserted beach. With the sand warming his bare feet, as he goes into the sunrise with his surfboard. Another playing in the backyard with his son that he's never seen. And another laughing and loving with his girl, just grooving down the streets.

And among my many thoughts I think of a warm fireplace with reflections of peace and quietness thrown from a flickering light...

Then it starts to sprinkle and you pray it don't rain, 'cause you're cold already. You need a cigarette and the mosquitos are hell but you must keep quiet. You look at your watch and the luminous dials say only an hour has passed. Nine more hours and a thousand deaths to go. Then once again you walk all day, eat little, get wearier, and thank God you're alive, and that it didn't rain.

Dec. 18. These search-and-destroy missions† are really getting quite boring. Climbing hills, going through rice paddies, hacking away at vines and thorns, crawling in holes (tunnels). Hell, a hole's a hole. You've seen one hole, you've seen them all. And I've seen a lot of holes in the army.

\*hootch: slang used by GI's to describe their living quarters  
Vietnamese homes in the countryside.

†search-and-destroy missions: United States military operations intended to clear an area of all people and buildings.

**Dec. 24.** Christmas Eve—Ho ho! Today I fought a war. Instead of the Yule tide burning, it was a village. Instead of Christmas lights it was artillery. Instead of the white snow, it was rain. Instead of warm smiles, it was a weary frown. Instead of bells ringing out, it was bullets. Instead of laughter, it was mothers crying. Instead of presents, it was a booby trap. Instead of pain, it was a man saying, "I'm going home." Instead of peace and good will, it was war and sorrow. But be still, for today Christ was born.

**Dec. 29.** We've been trying to get in out of the field for three days now. So far we've had sniper fire for the whole time out. Plus two booby traps, killing one and wounding some... It's been cold and wet and bloody. So the major comes out in his chopper and says, "I'm sorry, but the weather's too bad to send in any choppers to get you out." Then he flies away, leaving us with a new mission. He's got to get back before his coffee gets cold and his cookies go stale.

**Jan. 7, 1968.** Sgt. Taylor—platoon sergeant. A hypocrite, more so than an egotist. It's hard to decipher whether he's serious or not. He talks just for the sake of giving a command. But like all high ranking men, well, not all but most, he keeps his opinion to himself in order not to be busted. In other words—him first. You know, it's really boring to even talk about them. So the hell with it.

**Jan. 10.** The people don't stand a chance. On patrol we came across a hut with a big pole and one wire on it which he showed us was connected to his transistor radio for better reception.

The colonel came in his chopper and said, "Rip it down 'cause it looks like a transmitting place for the enemy." Plus the people were taken as suspects.

Then the colonel said a couple huts had too much rice so we had to bag it and send it in. The lady started taking a fit when we started. Meanwhile the colonel left. So the lady was dying and all the people crying... We sent word to take the woman on a medevac. But the colonel said, "It's not our problem. Can't spare the gas." And this is a friendly village. Or was a friendly village.

**Jan. 12.** Even here they hound me about a haircut. Like they don't have nothing else to worry about. A guy in our platoon shot a civilian today. He personally was sorry. But the platoon sarge said we should have burnt his I.D. and put a grenade in his pocket. The squad leader put a note on him when the chopper took him away, saying he didn't have an I.D. and he ran. I'm tired of living with these sadists.

**Jan. 13.** Even I've become kind of hard myself. Screaming on little kids. In general, giving the Vietnamese people a hard time. So be it—you just get the feeling that you don't care any more. Let it all hang out.

I look at things no longer as beauty but just as objects. I walk among the objects, seeing no color.

**Jan. 14.** A letter came—from Mary even.

Today, January 14, declared as a new holiday. It was so beautiful I cried. I can't even express how it made me feel. A lot of words wouldn't mean half enough of how good I feel. I was gonna read the envelope for three days, then open it, read the heading for the next three days, and one sentence per 3 days. It should last me until the next letter.

**Jan. 24.** Today I got the idiot badge pinned on me. I am now sergeant Anello. I must have qualified in the heights of stupidity. To me it means I'm still a pfc [Private First Class], I'm just making more money...

Jan. 31. Our company's been blessed. The last area we left, "A" company took over and the very next day, the V.C. hit them hard. We left the bridge yesterday, which was a whole month there. Again "A" company took over. Just today the V.C. attacked the bridge with a good size force.

Feb. 3. It's funny how the less time you have here, the more scared you get. It gets harder to sleep at nights. Every little noise wakes you up. Smoking cigarettes under your poncho almost chokes you. It would be nice to look at the stars while smoking, but you got to watch the light.

Monsoon season's just about over and the mosquitos are coming back full force. At night you have to cover your head with the poncho linen—which is sheer hell, 'cause your poncho linen smells like the condensing of 80 million locker rooms.

Feb. 6. I am but a mule, carrying the load of two camels. Then again, I'm more of an ass for doing it. Why couldn't I have been a clerk? Another week of this and I'll turn into one huge back muscle and two big calves.

Feb. 10. One day in hell.

A broken mirror  
shows my reflection,  
but not as it really is.  
Past—one day of blood  
coming—a continuing flood  
of fools such as I,  
caught in

the eyes of destruction.  
For each felled man  
death brings peace.  
I wonder if it's as  
cold and ugly as here.  
It's just a thought for a moment  
in the middle of an explosion.

Passing quickly through the mind  
shaking the body with fear.

Retreat to the road  
and rest for a spell,

light up a cigarette  
and enjoy the smell  
of the grass not yet burnt  
with gun powder.

Try not to think of the dead  
left behind.

'Tis not nearly all.

I have to tell of the feelings I felt  
in one day of hell.

The rest remains in terrified eyes  
and in the hollows

of each man's mind.

Feb. 12. This battle probably hit the news. Enough people died to satisfy the press. It's a sickening thought as I watch the helicopters carry the bodies... But I admire the spirit of the V.C. But who wouldn't have spirit? They have a cause to die for, it's their country. We have nothing to gain. We don't even want the country. So what is to win—when we have nothing to win?

Feb. 13. Escalate—escalate—escalate.  
We're not ahead of the game. Numbers is not going to win. I'm supposed to switch companies after this mission. Replacements have come in and they need some old hands to help out...

Feb. 15. Been without my boots for two days. Got some sort of jungle rot or swamp disease. Medics told me to keep it air cleaned. All this clean country air. It's like sticking my feet in a glue factory.

It's a bad way to start in a new company though. First impression—shammer. But I care less sometimes. I'm tired of this place and all its silly military war games. Are you a hero or are you not a hero? Medals don't buy more bread or clear a conscience.

Feb. 19.

I play the part  
of the fool patriot  
without a cause.  
A clear conscience,  
a closed mind,  
this ignorant patriot  
sees, but is blind  
to what really is,  
and now was.  
I hate not these people,  
I hate not the land,  
I hate but the person  
with his peace waving hand  
starts a war and wants  
everyone else to fight it.



Bruce with some of his army buddies.

Feb. 24. Seems every other thought is of being home. Yet, it's still a long time to go. It only depresses me. But it's hard not to think about it. You wake up in the morning, thinking what it would be like in a warm bed. You start cooking some cans and you wonder what it would be like to sit at a table with a cup of coffee. You brush the dirt off your clothes and you wonder how a warm shower would feel... Then the man tells you to pack up and sling it all on your back. And you wonder what it would be like to be free, instead of always fighting for it.

Feb. 26.

Too much blood.  
The days get longer,  
the sun gets stronger.  
As I get weaker,  
things look bleaker.  
The truth fades,  
my mind evades.  
Reason  
'tis treason.  
No longer for peace,  
insanities increase.  
I kill for no reason!

Mar. 1. The captain has no faith in his men whatsoever. The lieutenant said, "If you have any opinions, keep them to yourself." A self-made God. The captain is even higher than God. He told us: "Don't ask me why I tell you something to do, if you don't you'll die."

I got to get out of here. The man drives you insane. I no longer am fighting the enemy. My mind just seems to be fighting the army. Both is too much. The morale is so low that fights are breaking out among the troops. Because of being pushed and on edge. It's time for us to take a turn—mutiny.



Mar. 2. And so continues the same harassment. Things that we've been doing the whole time in VN are wrong to the captain. Excuse me, the dictator. The captain also is a fast talker, so it would take a pretty good statesman or a pile of fists to change things. But the last would only make things worse. Though it would be a hell of a lot of fun doing it. The whole platoon put in 1049's [Army forms] to get out of the company. It would be impossible to get out but at least there will be an investigation.

Mar. 3. I'm carrying so much junk that I could go out to the boondocks and win the war myself. Or at least raise some hell. Two grenades, a claymore—100 machine gun rounds. Two gas grenades, two smoke. Armor jacket, gas mask, 300 rifle rounds. That's not counting sleeping equipment or "C" rations which is 4 meals. Then there's the sun. A girl from Berkeley wrote me this blessing, "May the sun kiss you on the head." I don't think she knows her own power. It keeps beating down on my head all right. Right through the steel pot.

Mar. 5. Another ambush—each one is a little different, that's why I write about them. Each is scary in its own way. Took 2 new cruits with me last night. They kept waking me up on their guard. Hearing sounds. So I told them what I've learned to build their confidence. "If the sound you hear is an animal, it's no problem. If it shoots at you, you know it wasn't an animal..."

Mar. 6. The captain is kill crazy. It brings more glory to him if we get any kills. Yet, he doesn't do the dirty work. He sleeps with a perimeter all around him. Sends out 5 men ambushes and prays for a kill. I came in this morning and he asked me if I heard anything. I said: "Ya!" and he got all excited. "What was it? What was it?" I said the wind, crickets, and a few imaginary animals. He said: "Better luck next time, maybe you'll get something."

I told him it's o.k. I like it just the way it was. Where I can come walking in the morning with all my limbs and no extra holes. I gained no points with him. Hell, I'm no scorekeeper.

Mar. 10. I'm really digging this new company. Digging foxholes every night. Digging rice out of crocks. Digging a place to sleep. As god, our captain, says, it's better to be digging foxholes than for us to dig your grave. A morbid sense of humor. I've turned into a true slave. Every day seems like two and every week seems like a month. And every month...

Mar. 11. I'm writing by the light of the moon. It's full tonight, along with my mind. Everything is full, except my stomach. Another day of taking rice. He's trying to get the rice record. It's either break the record or break our backs. And there's nothing we can do.

Only when I go out on patrols I don't even look with my squad. Never found any myself. So the captain has us looking all day. I go out, find a creek, a shady spot, and hang it up for a while.

Mar. 15. I can trip and twist my ankle, but not enough to get me out of the field, just enough to make it more miserable. Today a plank broke when I was going across an 8-foot deep crater. The lieutenant, the medic, and a couple other people were yelling down at me. "Are you hurt?" "Are you all right?" I looked up and said, "I hope not." I was hoping I broke a limb or something. But no, they all worked. They lifted me out. Nothing but gashes and bruises. More pain, but nothing to get me out of the field. I wish my guardian angel would just let up a little bit and cut me a break.

Mar. 16. For the last week now, we've been getting in a fire fight. I don't mind the fire fight so much, 'cause both the lieutenant and the captain are hiding somewhere. And it's about the only time they're

not yelling at you. But after it's all over: "All right—let's get it on line, get your steel pots back on. Get down in that hole. How many rounds were you carrying? That's not enough. Don't let it happen again. Spread it out, spread it out, damnit." But where were they five minutes before? Build your ego with a loud mouth . . .

Mar. 18. It's like I have to start from last week and rewrite the same this week. A rerun. It's getting quite hot. It's not the malnutrition I need worry about anymore, it's evaporation. As far as the day goes, it's the same. Search and destroy. Or destroy, then search. Either way the farmers hate us.

Mar. 19. This morning I vowed that no matter what the lieutenant told me, I wouldn't make a nasty remark and get angry. That lasted about a half hour, which is an accomplishment. The man just wants to violate your mind. He's a puppet and wants me to be his puppet. He's been pulling the wrong strings though. So now, I'm no longer squad leader but a team leader, where I wanted to be anyway, with the responsibility of handing out malaria pills and candy.

Mar. 20. Looking back through the pages, I can now make a statement on all the facts I have thus far collected:

With a clear mind and, may I add, a clear conscience, I have inevitably conceived, through sub-dividing the greater portions of the days with extreme interest which I have faithfully and truthfully written, a conclusion to my many journeys and frightful experiences in this country, the Republic of Vietnam or whatever name it goes under by now. That is, I've been here 6 months and still don't know what the hell we're fighting for.

Mar. 21. Experience has taught me to keep my head down. It also has taught me to hold a leg up.

A shrapnel wound can get you out of the field for two weeks. Two purple hearts get you out of the field permanently.

It's a hell of a way to go, but lately during fire-fights I seem to see a lot more arms and legs in the air. It's all nonchalant. But the people who work back at support and never get out to the field must be more frustrated. Just the other day, a guy shot himself in the head with a 45. Those first sergeants can really harass people.

Mar. 27. Captain Price and I never were on good terms. But I finally saw him today.

"How you doing, Bruce?" (shakes my hand)

"Fine, thank you sir." (shock wears off)

He looks up at me with his kill crazy grin.

"Heard you did an outstanding job, my boy. Real proud of you."

"Just self-defense, sir."

"That's not the way I heard it. Put you in for a Silver Star. How's that?"

"Can I trade it in for another Purple Heart?"

"Ha! Ha! You're a funny man."

Yeah! I know—I laugh a lot.

Mar. 29. The more I fill, the longer it is I've been here and that much shorter to go. If the last page meant home, I'd start tonight and fill the rest by morning. Throw away my steel pot, hang up my jock, catch a plane, wave at the turmoil below, and cry with joy as I breathe in a breath of freedom . . .

Mar. 30. I live on the love of life and the edge of death. And I feel the agony of both.

Mar. 31. I've experienced—all I've wanted to experience. Not a want, but more or less what there is for where I am—and it's all enough. But I have to go on. There is no other place to go, but on, and wait out my time . . .

April 1. I no longer care why it's happening. I just want to stop it, or it to stop...

I don't even know if this is for peace or not. Fighting in the name of peace. Every time I say that it gets more ridiculous. And I walk away laughing, watching I don't tramp on any trip wire. He who laughs last—laughs best.

April 4. It seems that the latest fad is to build up a kill record. Since our platoon got in that battle, we killed 45 V.C. The other platoons are jealous so now they kill any body—just to match our record. I've seen—skip it. I'll write about that later. I can say I've seen brutality to the utmost. Grossness, ridiculous and senseless killing. And no conscience whatsoever. I get the usual statement handed down since from the cav-

alry and Indians. "The only good gook is a dead gook."

April 6. Now back to what I've seen. The grossness of character. One guy walked up to this old man, asked him for an I.D. card. The old man didn't pull it out fast enough for him. So he blew him away. Then to add to it, he lit a cigarette and put it in the bullet hole in his head. People out in the fields running, so they mowed them down. When they went to check, it was an old woman and children. "They should know better than to run" was their excuse.

Another old man asked for a cigarette. They gave him one, put it in his mouth then busted his jaw. Rat patrol at night—things I've heard. Rape by bayonet point. Walk into a hootch and just blow them all down. Record it as a kill.



And they wonder why the war is taking so long. Why should anybody want to be V.C.? Yea America—we have power, we have strength. We fight for freedom, the name of peace, the name of God. And to me it's all in vain.

April 8. The early hour of the morn. A stillness, peace and tranquillity. The funky wild birds echo their caws across the valley. A slight mist covers the ground. The sun begins to filter through the fading clouds. A new day, new trials. It feels so beautiful. But it usually ends nowhere. Just for these few hours I feel the freedom of thought, and the closeness of nature. But also I feel the loss of having no one to share it with. The early hours of the morn, these few hours, it's all I've got—the rest of the day belongs to the war lords.

April 11. Received enemy fire, mortar fire, last night. You just sit there and hope it doesn't come in close. You can't fight it.

April 12. Get it all in 'cause I'm getting out.

Shades of blue  
chain of fools  
pull the strings  
the war lords rule.  
Pawns of flesh  
manpower sign  
self-made Gods  
violate the mind.  
Tools of battle  
die for glory  
the coward leaders  
tell the story.  
Political circus

clowns of wisdom  
rights and wrongs  
draft-age confusion...  
Losers win  
winners lose  
foreign country  
brand new shoes.  
Lousy dollar  
makes enemies friends  
forgotten dead  
makes no sense...  
Run in circles  
blow my mind  
five more months  
of useless time.

April 14. I always seem to get to know the colonel through something that went wrong. Our hill was supposedly surrounded last night. So they took me and five guys to go out as observation post. We got to the location around 9:00. At 3:30 A.M. my man on guard went to sleep. So battalion headquarters couldn't contact us. They sent in a mortar round which woke me up. 6:30 we came in and I had a big lecture by the silver leaf. I didn't want to rat on the man. So I kept quiet.

April 19. First feelings of patrol is here we go again. Closer to the destination, the feeling is fear. But by the time you get there, you're so tired and frustrated, you just don't care what you hit. That's why they take you the longest and hardest route to get from point A to point B. Psychological warfare.

Finding a lot more propaganda sheets telling me to go home. Save enough of them up and I'm going to trade them in for a ticket...

**April 24.** The sweat runs down my forehead, as I lie in my mud hole. Ants crawling up my legs. Mosquitos buzzing around my ears. It's so dark the bushes take odd shapes and play on the imagination. Every fiber in my body feels like a leech. Every breeze blows the branches and my heart beats loud. I feel helpless. I'm not supposed to show my fear. So I whisper ridiculous comments that come to my head. But God, I'm in pain. I wish they would give me a break. Can't hold a cigarette straight—I swallow hard and put down my pen—and tomorrow go through it again.

**April 28.** Been using scout dogs on point lately. Two donut dollies (Red Cross) were flying with the scout and dog. And the dolly was asking questions about the animal. "Does the dog have to stay out in the fields? What a shame!"

Here the dog only comes out for four days. Gets five off. Not only that, it doesn't have to carry a rucksack. Oh, to live a dog's life—I'd be happy.

**April 29.** Getting mortared regularly now. Just get done digging your hole, it starts to rain, the sun goes down, and the mortars come in. It shakes you up quite a bit. If the war was like it has been for the last week, all the time there would be quite a few nervous breakdowns.

**May 2.** Walking on point today. Saw a man about 20 years old, so I yelled "La day" (meaning come here). He turned and saw me. His eyes went big—and he tore off running—so I shot him. He ran a hundred yards down some trails with his guts in his hand... The thought of what I did made me sick... I'm not proud of what I did.

**May 3.** I am what I am or what's left is what I am, and what I am is strung up—wound up, beat up, put up,—Ahh! Shut up. What I really am is nervous due to my leave coming up in a few days. Been wearing my steel pot lower and my flak jacket tighter. And the rounds keep coming in.



May 4. Mortared again last night. After the shells stopped I walked over to White (our machine gunner) and said, "Wow! It's a happening!" He thought it was funny so I wrote it down.

Though in actual fact, a few minutes back I heard his prayers from my foxhole. Nerves of steel don't beat bits of shrapnel. Quite a few wounded. Nobody killed. But what bothers me is the guy who gets it the worst has the shortest time left in the country. It's a terrible thought—but it's true.

May 5. Came in from the field for an award ceremony (Purple Heart). The colonel didn't know what words to use to congratulate the wounded. I mean, "It gives me great pleasure to know you got shot," or "I'm proud to know that we have such brave individuals among my battalion who for their country had their leg in the wrong place at the wrong time." So instead he told us the history of the Purple Heart and we all saluted George Washington.

May 6. I felt great man, wow, finally being back at base camp—Ahhh! No more mortar fire—and what happens? Base camp gets mortared for the first time in 10 months and the V.C. tried to sneak in on the perimeter.

May 7. Why is it that the base camp warriors always give you a difficult time when you get a break to come in. Like getting wounded. They think you're shamming—so they put you on details. But also it's the little harassment, like we're different types of humans. The Negroes call it prejudice.

May 8. I feel kind of funny, knowing I'm going on leave and all my buddies are stuck in Dragon Valley. I'd be a fool to turn it down. But I just can't

get over the feeling that I'm letting them down. Of course if I was there and some dude cancelled his leave just to help out—I'd be calling him a fool too. I only hope nothing happens while I'm gone. It's a strong wish—due to circumstances. But I wish!

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		TELEGRAM		DL - Day Letter NL - Night Letter LT - International Letter Telegram	
The filing time shown in the date section denotes the LOCAL TIME at point of origin. Time of receipt is LOCAL TIME at point of destination.					
820P EDT JAN 3 68 PA350					
SSG350 P WA516 BX GOVT PD FAX WASHINGTON DC 3 198P EDT					
RE JOSEPH W ANELLO CARE MRS RAY JONES, DONT PHONE (DONT DLVR					
BTWN 10PM & 6 AM) GET SIGNATURE					
3216 WEST VILLARD ST PHILA					
THE SECRETARY OF THE ARMY HAS ASKED ME TO EXPRESS HIS DEEP					
REGRET THAT YOUR SON SERGEANT BRUCE F ANELLO DIED IN VIETNAM					
ON 31 MAY 1968 AS THE RESULT OF WOUND RECEIVED WHEN ENGAGED					
HOSTILE FORCE IN FIREFIGHT WHILE IN NIGHT DEFENSIVE PERIMETER					
POSITION. PLEASE ACCEPT MY DEEPEST SYMPATHY, THIS CONFIRMS PERSONAL					
NOTIFICATION MADE BY A REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SECRETARY OF THE					
ARMY					
KENNETH G WICKHAM MAJOR GENERAL USA F 21 THE ADJUTANT GENERAL					
(AG)					

*Dave Lang, who was with Bruce in Vietnam, was interviewed by staff members of WIN Magazine.*

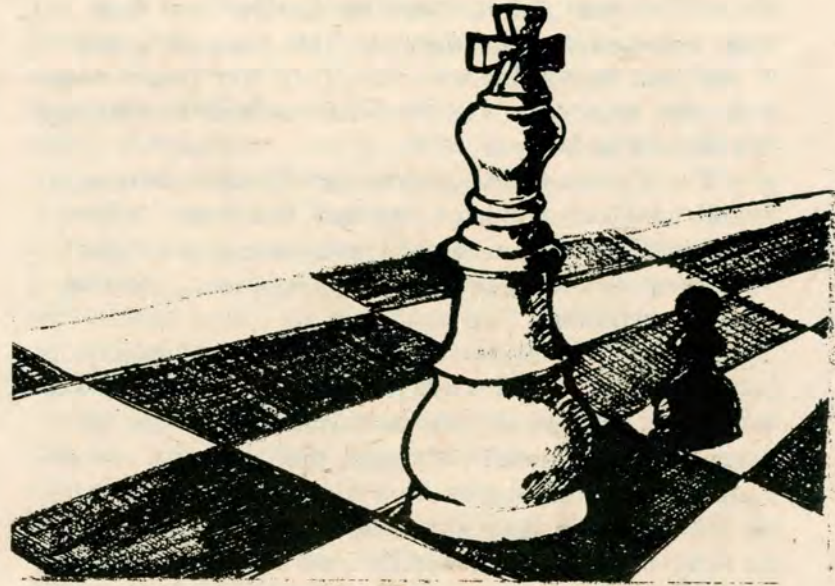
Buddy used to wear—I don't know where he got it, but somewhere he picked up a white Ramar of the Jungle hat. He used to tromp around with that. And his girl sent him red suspenders. You're supposed to wear these jungle fatigues, but he didn't like them, so he dug up a pair of the GI fatigues you wear in the States and he wore them—cut off jaggedy. You're supposed to tuck them in your boots but he just cut them off and they'd just flop around with his red suspenders and his Ramar of the Jungle hat. He had these little round glasses. That's the way he used to walk around—without a care in the world.

He was a big fan of Bob Dylan [popular singer]. He had a record, "A Pawn in the Game." That's the way Buddy used to figure the war. When you think about it, it's true. He was just the pawn and the kings and queens were moving him around.

Being a sergeant he had access to the maps that the common foot soldier doesn't get. In his capacity as a squad leader he would bring this map over and say, "All right, here we are now. And the Big King is going to bring helicopters in and pick us up and put us over in this spot." Buddy saw it as a big chess game.

He didn't think as a sergeant, otherwise he'd have to call himself a rook or something. Even though he was a sergeant he still considered himself just a pawn—the lowest—a pawn in the game.

He used to wear the pawn on the side of his helmet. He also took his flak jacket and on the entire side of the back he drew a gigantic pawn in all different colors. He put a shield on it—a shield with a design sort of like a coat of arms—and in the center it



said, PEACE.

On the boat over, he had this cross. A gigantic Italian or German cross. It had nothing on it. It was brass. He got a pawn. He was going to fill the inside with glue or plaster of Paris and then somehow hook it onto his cross. Because he went under no preference. You'd say, "Why do you have a cross?" and he'd say, "Well, I don't know who to put on it because I don't know what religion I am and so I just have a cross." And then he came up with this idea to put a pawn there. And then he decided to put a black pawn. A black pawn rather than a white pawn because it signified it was bad. Everything had a symbol. Everything had a meaning behind it. He never got around to doing it. He got as far as cutting it in half.

Buddy mentions more or less in the beginning of the diary about a woman in whose house they found rice. They trampled through her gardens and they were supposed to take the rice. He protested against it and said he wouldn't do it. They had to get somebody else to do it. He absolutely refused to take any rice from this lady.

The United States government figures one woman should have one crock of rice and that's all. Any more than that means she's a sympathizer with the Viet Cong and she's probably feeding them. So they destroy everything.

Buddy couldn't see this because his philosophy is that people in Vietnam are humans and they have the same ways as anybody else and some people are food savers and some aren't. Perhaps this lady was one of those people that like to have a lot of food around. He also admitted that she could have been giving it to the Viet Cong but you couldn't tell one way or the other so why destroy it just on the idea that she might be giving it to the V.C. So he refused and they had another squad come in and take the rice. He tried his best to change the whole policy...

If he was so obstinate, how did he get to be a sergeant?

On the way to the battle, he'd be his usual self, griping to the sergeants, but when it actually came to the battle—where it really counts—he'd shrug all this off and he'd be a soldier. One time he was a squad leader and he took over in the middle of the battle. He took it upon himself to take ten men and say, "Follow me, we're going to charge in there." It wasn't his place to do this. It was supposed to be somebody else's job.

Our officers knew this. They knew he was unmilitary but when it came to the battle he was the best one to lead the men. He knew what he was doing. It was like they said, "All right, we're going to make you sergeant and we're going to forget all the things you do when we're not fighting."

Were you ever in situations where there was the killing of Vietnamese civilians?

Yes. I didn't see any of that myself but it went on.

I used the M-79 grenade launcher. That's what Buddy carried too, only later on he switched over to a rifle. We both started out with grenade launchers. We both started out tunnel rats. The grenade launcher was good because—we talked about this—even though people are getting killed by what you're firing it's not a direct thing. It's not a bullet per bullet. You didn't have to put your eye on a particular person and shoot him and kill him. You pulled the trigger and the grenade went out there and blew up. If it hit somebody they got hurt or got killed. He liked that idea—the fact that the grenade launcher didn't kill somebody directly. It would be an indirect thing—he liked that idea.

As a tunnel rat he had the idea which I picked off of him: it's good if you have to be there but don't want to do destructful things and kill. A tunnel rat was good because—you come into a village and everyone else is searching through the village, taking civilians, doing this and doing that, burning hooches. And the only thing you have to do while you're in that village is to go into the tunnels and search them out. It's like everybody else is going around—not



everybody and not all the time—but things are occurring—atrocities—you're down in some hole just searching around and you come up and say, "There's tobacco down there," or "There's weapons," and you pull them out. So there again you don't have to be really connected in with the terrible things that do happen.

Do you think he ever entertained the idea of rebelling against the whole thing?

No. Here again it's like a lot of things—it's just me and him—things you can feel when you're with the person. He never said it as such, but you could just tell by the way he was that he wouldn't desert. Because he wouldn't be deserting his country, he'd be deserting his friends. He probably thought a thousand times, "I'd like to desert the military, but I can't leave Mike and Joe and Bill and everybody else there." So that's why.

As far as his awards, his medals—the colonels and captains and everyone said, "You did a real good job, over and beyond the call of duty. You saved that guy. You blew up the bunker. It was really terrific." He would say things like, "Well, you can never call saving a friend over and beyond the call of duty. It's what you have to do. You have to make an effort."

I wasn't supposed to see him after his r&r [rest and rehabilitation]. I wasn't scheduled to see him. It was just a freak accident. Now with all the circumstances I can look back on I'd say it was meant to be. I was supposed to bump into him then. It just seemed like circumstances to me at the time.

His father told me that when Buddy left his father said to his brothers, "That's the last time you're going to see your brother alive." And then he took off in a plane.

You can see at the end of the diary he's starting to get scared. He pulls his steel pot down. He's changed from his Ramar of the Jungle hat back to the steel pot and he's pulling it down lower. And he was pulling his flak jacket tighter. Also, after his r&r, he took off the pawn. He got it off his flak jacket because it was all in colors. Up until then it didn't bother him. As a soldier something like that does stand out walking through a green jungle. You're a perfect target. He became more of a soldier. He started working on Noise Discipline. Noise Discipline is keeping quiet at night and no lights—so they don't see or hear you. At nighttime he'd huddle under a poncho to smoke a cigarette, the way you're supposed to do it. He was really nervous.

He said the last three nights of his r&r, he had dreams. He said they were nightmares. He told me this a week or two before he was killed. He said, "Toward the end I really didn't want to go back." And he told me it was really hard getting on the plane. And he threw in a comment about an MP when he was getting on the plane saying, "Hey, trooper, your hair's a little bit too long." And he said, "Forget it, pal, I'm not even going to listen to you."

He said he had these three nightmares. He was walking up a hill. It was green elephant grass. He was the only one there. He was walking by himself. And he said he kept walking and walking and walking. And he just couldn't get out of Vietnam. He was trying to walk out of Vietnam and he said he just couldn't do it. He said, "There I was left. I couldn't get out of Vietnam. For the rest of my life that's where I'll have to stay, just trying to walk." He said he had this dream three nights in a row. This was his premonition of dying.

I told this story to his father and his father said, "That sounds true to me." His father said he was at work one day and he got violently sick. He doubled up. He had to go home he was so sick. And he didn't know what from. And four or five days later he got the death notice. And then he counted back on the calendar and he figured out that the day he was sick was the day that Buddy got killed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bruce also told the story—we stayed up to about six o'clock in the morning one night just talking—and he told me, "Up until now the scenery in Vietnam has been nice. The trees talked to me. And the green. And the winds blow and everything's pretty nice. But since I've been back from r&r, everything's dead. Everything I look at. No birds. No wind blowing. All the trees look brown and dead."

He said he had a daydream. It wasn't at night. A daydream that he and a Viet Cong were standing on the top of a hill. They were both just looking at the scenery on the top of a mountain, looking out over the land, looking at the other hills and the blue sky and stuff. Buddy was saying to the Viet Cong, "You have a really beautiful country here." And the V.C. said, "Well, thank you. I think it's pretty nice too." He said they both turned around and looked at each other and they both realized that they were enemies. He said, "We shot each other because we were enemies."

And this is the way he talked all throughout these three days. Things like this to go along with the three nightmares he had. He never would have come out and said, "Oh, by the way, I'm going to be killed." That would be too simple. He had to go into these descriptive things.

When I heard he'd gotten killed, the first thing I asked was, "Where was it?" Then it started hitting me. Maybe this was what his dream was all about. And I was told by the lieutenant—he came up to me and said, "Buddy got killed three days ago." And I asked where and how and all this stuff. Now, how reliable he was it's hard to say, but he told me Buddy was going up a hill. He was taking his men up the hill. There was, I believe, a grenade factory. You know, they have their hospitals underground. And grenade factories underground and stuff. On top of this hill in a cave and he was going up there. I asked him if up the hill there was a lot of tall green grass. And he said, "Yeah, I think so." But he couldn't remember for sure. So it kind of fell into place.

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#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What does the expression, "A Pawn in the Game," mean to you? In the game of chess, what is the relationship between the pawn and the other pieces? If Anello was the pawn, who was the king, the queen, the rook and so on?
2. "I hate not these people/I hate not the land..." Feeling this way, why did Bruce Anello continue participating in the war?
3. What do you think Bruce would be doing today if he were still alive?
4. Do you know anyone who came back from Vietnam? Did they appear to change? If so, how? How do you think they would react to reading Bruce's diary? What are the vets you know doing now?

## A Bummer

We were going single file  
Through his rice paddies  
And the farmer  
Started hitting the lead track  
With a rake  
He wouldn't stop  
The TC went to talk to him  
And the farmer  
Tried to hit him too  
So the tracks went sideways  
Side by side  
Through the guy's fields  
Instead of single file  
Hard On, Proud Mary  
Bummer, Wallace, Rosemary's Baby  
The Rutgers Road Runner  
And  
Go Get Em—Done Got Em  
Went side by side  
Through the fields  
If you have a farm in Vietnam  
And a house in hell  
Sell the farm  
And go home

—Michael Casey

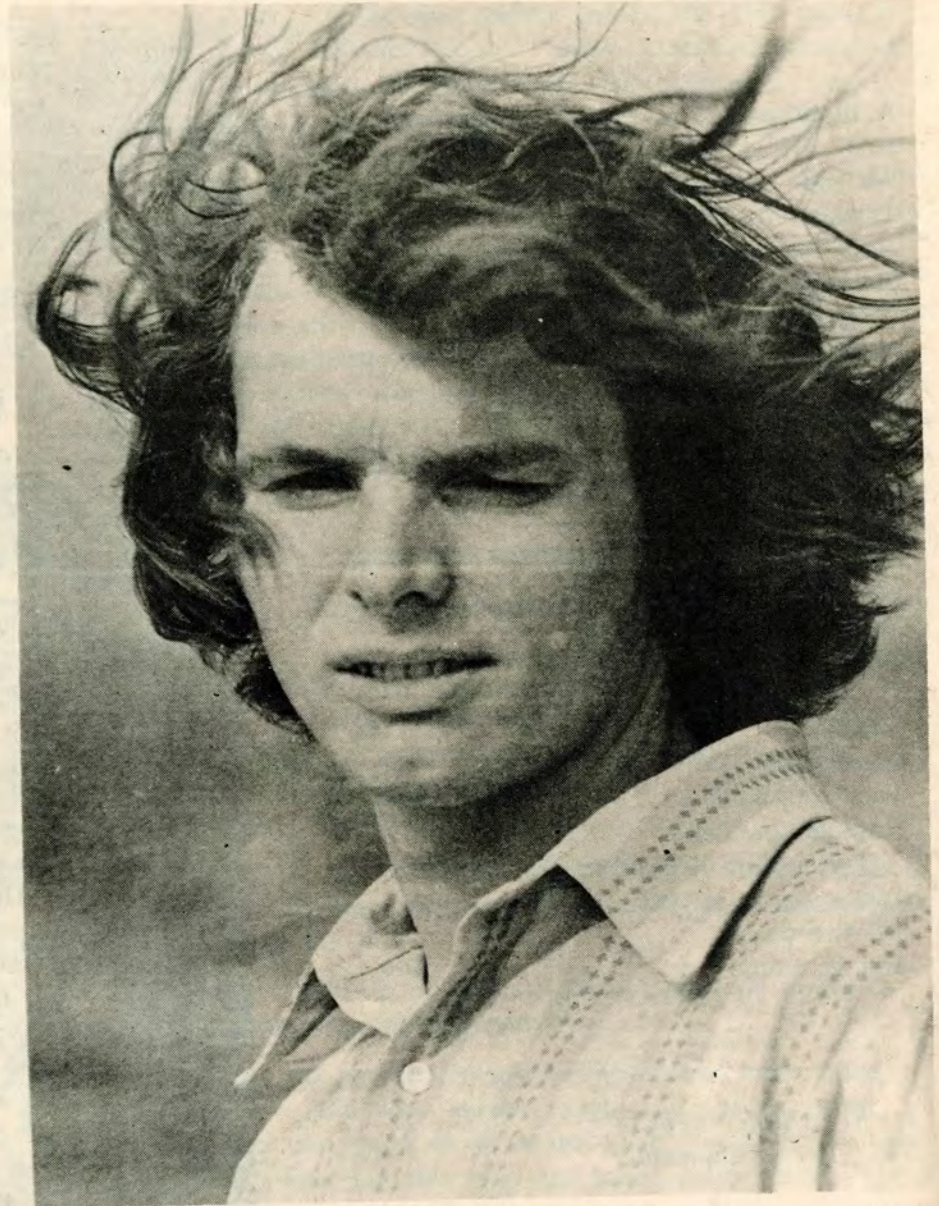
*track: tracked vehicle*

*TC: track commander*



Rick Springman decides that he can no longer fight in a war that he cannot justify. At the same time he believes that he cannot run away from the commitment he has made to the Army. His solution is an individual one: to remain in Vietnam as part of the Army but to lay down his gun and refuse to fight. What can one person do when the demands of a powerful institution conflict with his or her strong beliefs?

## Rick Springman



Rick Springman

## RICK SPRINGMAN

*Rick Springman came home in February, 1973, after 33 months as a prisoner of war. One of 566 military prisoners, he got off the plane with his fist clenched in a power salute and a bamboo peace sign hanging from his neck. He is the only GI known to have been captured without a weapon in his hands, gunless in the jungle, because he refused to fight. For a time before his release, the Army classified Sp4 Richard Herald Springman as a deserter.*

*His Vietnamese captors called him "Ree". . . a ray of sunlight.*

We bounced around so much when I was a kid that you might say the place where I really grew up was Vegas. At the Desert Inn, the Dunes, the Fremont, the Tropicana, the Silver Nugget. I was a busboy.

In my sophomore year of high school we were living in Henderson, right outside Vegas, and I started working 40 hours a week, sometimes more, bringing home as much as \$200.

We moved to Whittier, California, the next year and I dropped out halfway through the year and started looking for a job.

---

from Joe Eszterhas, "The Prisons of War," Rolling Stone, March-April, 1974.

Sooner or later I knew Sam would get me anyway, so I figured I might as well get it over with. My life was going no place. No purpose. No direction. Nothing.

I didn't have any strong feelings about the war. I believed that those dirty communists up North were coming down invading the poor South and my general attitude was to look at political issues and say—"Yeah, right, wow!"

So I quit my job and volunteered for the Army. On March 4, 1969, I was at Fort Ord for my basic . . .

I guess I was somewhat rebellious even then because I couldn't go with their "Spirit of the Bayonet" thing. I wouldn't yell "Blood and Guts! Blood and Guts!" and "Kill! Kill! Kill!" when I was supposed to. If they were watching me, though, I'd move my lips.

They kept trying to inbreed the idea that we'd be better off dead than captured. They told us how the VC put bamboo splinters under your fingernails and put you through different kinds of water torture. They kept saying the VC were gooks. Savages. They were subhuman.

I had 14 days' leave before I went to Nam with my infantry orders. My family took me down to the bus station at six o'clock in the morning. I had to get up to Fort Lewis in Washington and leave for Nam from there. It was a beautiful sunny day in late August and the whole family was there—my granma, my brother Randy. There used to be a lot of distance between Randy and I when we were kids because I was older and always the boss. But that morning we were really brothers. He gave me a cross. It had five sides with different pictures of Jesus and was done in silver.

Shortly after I got there I was assigned to a Night Defense Perimeter on Highway 13. Out on the fringes there was a massive VC ground attack one night. The VC hurled themselves at the concertina wire trying to get in. I went out to the fringe the next morning to see what had happened. Sixty or 70 VC had been stacked up in the wire. Only one of our guys was killed.

Bits and pieces of VC bodies were in the wire. Arms. Legs. Tissues. Skin. They had one big pile of bodies laying there they'd kind of swept together. And some charred bodies that already smelled bad because we'd used some flamethrowers.

A group of our infantry was out there by the wire having a party. Celebrating. Proud of what they'd done. A lot of our guys stood around taking pictures. Souvenirs of the war. You'd hear some of them say things like: "Yeah, I hit him once and I seen his shoulder and his arms fly off and I hit him again and I seen him split in half."

Real early, about sunup, there was a sergeant out there carving one of the bodies up. Just carving, playing with his guts and stuff.

Is this it? I thought. Is this war? Is this Vietnam? . . . *When I was in basic they showed us a movie one night about the military history of America. How we always stood up for what was right and just. How the American soldier was an honorable man. The movie climaxed with Vietnam. How, because of our history of believing in what's right, we had to be in Vietnam. I believed that stuff. It made me feel proud . . .*

I started thinking more and more about the war. A lot of guys sat around stoned rapping about the war, some guys had it figured that we had no business in Nam. We heard a few of the Radio Hanoi broadcasts, too. In the villages I'd go out of my way to talk to the kids and people we suspected were VC sympathizers. A lot of what some of these Vietnamese said made

sense: "You're invading our country. You're on our soil. We are not on yours." When I first got there, I thought the Vietnamese loved us because I saw little kids lined up getting C-rations from GIs. But I knew now that wasn't true.



There was a village nearby us that was supposed to be a VC village. The VC were supposedly getting their supplies there and various units had run into sniper fire around there. My CO [commanding officer] was telling the sgt. major that if they burned it down, that would solve 90% of their problems. Then one day there was an "accidental bombing" and the village was napalmed.

The next day I had to go into the village with a unit and saw that two-thirds of it was destroyed. Charred bodies were lying by the side of the road. Women and children. I saw at least two children. I heard from one of the guys that most everybody in the village was killed. Napalm is a jellified gas that burns slowly and also sucks all the oxygen from the area for a period of time. So that if the fire doesn't kill you, you'll choke to death.



Nguyen Hong Tam, burned by an incendiary bomb (such as napalm) in 1965.

I noticed that the CO and the other officers were very quiet about what had happened. I saw the hate in the eyes of the few survivors as we were going through there. I wondered if my dad saw things like that in his war.

When I got assigned to Alpha Company, I realized a lot of my feelings about the war had changed. We escorted convoys and went out on patrols. I wasn't

too concerned before that about what I was doing in Nam, but when I got to Alpha Company I noticed myself doing things—like sometimes I wouldn't fire at the VC when we spotted them. Or I'd fire way over their heads or at their feet. I was concerned about what I was doing with my rounds.

Who I was hitting, who I would be killing, and why.



I kept feeling like life was purposely driving me crazy. One day I was standing around and a trip flare went off accidentally in a box of Claymore mines and my commanding officer and a buddy got killed. They were standing there in front of me and they blew up. A big pop and they were dead. The explosion tore about half their heads off.

After a couple weeks I got transferred to the 25th Infantry Division in Tay Ninh. At that time the area was one of the hottest in Nam. A no man's land. When you flew over it in a chopper [helicopter], it looked like the moon. Craters all over the place.

The unit was totally demoralized. The guys in the 25th were messed up on reds ["downs"]. So messed up they couldn't even fire a weapon. A lot of smack [heroin] and opium was going around, too.

One time a bunch of them ripped through this watermelon patch. They busted through a mamasan's\* watermelon patch and she came around the next day holding her busted melons. They didn't even realize what they'd done.

At the end of April I had my R&R [rest and rehabilitation] coming up and I was supposed to go to Hawaii. But I hopped another plane in Honolulu and flew back to Long Beach. It was illegal in the Army's eyes to do that, but I figured after everything I'd seen and gone through that's the least they owed me. To let me get back home for a few days.

I noticed that things had changed. When I was in the States ten months before, people would talk about the war and some of them would call it a bummer, but most people seemed to shuck it off. When I got back this time everybody seemed more serious about it.

I got together a lot with my older brother Bob. We were sitting around the house watching the set one day—I had just a few days left—and I heard that the National Guard had killed four kids at Kent State because they were protesting against the war. I sat in front of the set, stunned, holding my head, trying to make sense of what the hell was happening.



I was shocked. I had seen how insane the war was over there and had come back to rest and it was like the insanity was taking over here, too, with kids getting shot. And our big move into Cambodia. I felt the National Guard didn't have any business there in the first place and then when they came out with that stuff about being fired on by a sniper, I could relate to it. I'd heard that kind of excuse given in Vietnam. And of course I could relate to those dead kids because I'd seen people die in Nam.

And I thought—Well, we're killing our own kids here and now I'm supposed to go back into the boonies all rested up and start killing them over there. For what?

\*mamasan: slang used by GI's referring to older Asian women.



A friend of Bob's was involved in draft resistance and getting soldiers to Canada and I talked to him. He was telling me I should forget it, not go back, go to Canada, be free.

But I couldn't do that because it would've been a copout. I mean, I got myself into the Army and it seemed like I had to go back over there and settle this in my own head. It was something between the Army and me and between me and me.

I thought about my own role and about those kids getting gunned down by the Guard and about the things I'd seen over there. I realized I had to stop and look at my own morality and say—Now, really, where's it at, man? And what's the best thing you can do in this situation? And I figured out what I'd do.

I wouldn't carry a gun. I'd never carry a gun again. I would eliminate myself from the conflict. I'd go back to the zone and see my commander and say—"OK, I'm here, but I'm not gonna get involved in your war. I'm not gonna take the chance of shooting anybody."

I'd try to spread it around a little to my friends. If everybody eliminated themselves from the conflict, there would be no more war. I figured they'd probably send me to jail.

I told my mother about what I'd do and she shook her head, gave me a look. My dad didn't say much but I knew a lot of heavy thoughts were shooting through his head. He finally said to me—"Watch yourself. Come on back here in one piece." My dad's a great guy.

Around the 19th of May I was ordered to go into Cambodia with the rest of the invasion force. I asked to see my battalion executive officer. He was

a lifer [professional soldier] in his mid-40's with a high whitewall haircut. I told him I wouldn't carry a gun because of political and philosophical reasons. The way I felt about the war, I said, I couldn't take a human life.

We talked for about a half-hour in his office. He realized he wasn't going to change my mind. He said he could understand my feelings to a certain extent, but I got the impression he thought we were morally right and that's all there was to it.

His general attitude was kind of understanding. He told me to go into Cambodia and try to settle it on the company level. If I couldn't settle it on the company level, he said, he'd settle it. He implied that if my CO gave me any trouble out there about it, he'd instruct him to give me a rear position where I wouldn't have to use a gun in any way.

I told some of my buddies about what I was doing but I didn't get any real support. If you don't have a gun, they said, you'll get killed. Some of them understood why I was doing it, and agreed, but they sure as hell weren't going to do it. "You don't push the Army around like that," they said.

So on the 20th of May I took a chopper into Cambodia. I left my gun behind in the arms room. I just never picked it up after I got back from R&R. The fact that I was walking around without a weapon when I got to Cambodia didn't bother any of the GIs. A lot of guys never carried guns except when they were involved in some kind of action.

I went to see my CO. He was involved in an operation out in the field. Up until then, I kind of liked the guy.

I told him I wouldn't carry a gun. He got a black angry look on his face. He banged his fist on

the little desk he was sitting by and he said—"I don't want to hear any more! Get out of here! Go see the first sergeant! He'll take care of you!"

So I went to see the first sergeant. He was an old guy, a super-lifer wearing ribbons from World War II or something. Wrinkled and with a third of an inch of hair sticking out on top.

Right off he said—"What's this I hear you don't want to carry a gun? And what are you doing out here without a weapon?" He had a really belligerent attitude. His attitude said—"What kind of scum are you coming in here without a weapon? What good are you going to do us out here? I'll fix you up! I'll make sure you do some good!"

From what he said I figured he was going to make me clean weapons and pull dirty details until I changed my mind.

"You'll stay here for two or three weeks," he said, "pull weapons details and KP to earn your C-rations."

I told him I wanted to see the Inspector General, who was 20 miles away in Tay Ninh. (*According to Army regulations, every soldier has the right to take a grievance to the Inspector General.—Ed.*)

"Don't tell me what to do!" he said, "don't tell me how to run my company!"

I said, "I want to see the IG. I know I've got a right to see the IG. I want transportation out of the field." I needed a chopper ride to travel the 20 miles. He shook his head and told me to get the hell out of his office.

So I figured I'd see the Inspector General somehow and started off by foot through the jungle. I was a little nervous about walking 20 miles through the jungle, but I felt clean inside. I knew nobody could make me do a thing in the war any more. I knew nobody could make me kill. I was on a high.

I went waltzing into the jungle, carrying a paper bag with a pound of dope I'd bought in Nam before I choppered into Cambodia. I also had a radio, a lighter, some underwear, some civilian clothes, some beads, a pen, a watch, the cross Randy gave me, and no gun.

The first day I only got 500 yards from the camp. I was staying stoned. I had a joint every two hours. I was trying to figure out what I should do. I was running a bunch of things through my mind, trying to get organized.

I was thinking about spending 60 days in the jungle—all the time I had left in Nam—and then going back to them just before my time was up and saying I'd been captured. And I was thinking about telling them I got caught up in some action and couldn't get through an enemy area back to them. I was trying to figure out some way I could sky out of the country.

The second day I stayed in the same spot. I was thirsty and saw some rainwater puddle up in APC [Armed Personnel Carrier] tracks. I skimmed the surface and tried to drink some clean water.

That afternoon I started gathering sticks and bamboo to make myself a shack. The GIs were only 500 yards away but for some reason I wasn't even afraid they'd spot me. They weren't even on my mind. But they sure got on my mind that night!

I was sitting out there smoking my weed and M-79 rounds started exploding around me. A 79 is a grenade launcher. They hit the tree I was sitting under and the shrapnel blasted the sticks I'd gathered. I figured they were using those heat-sensing devices\* back at the camp and the devices had picked me up. The idiots thought I was the VC. They were lowering rounds right on top of me.

\*heat-sensing devices: part of the "electronic battlefield," a system of computers and sensors used to locate targets ("people") in remote areas.

On the third day I saw some Cambodians picking mushrooms not far from me. I was hungry and decided I'd get some of those wild mushrooms myself.

One of the Cambodians came up to me and he put his hand up in a peace sign. I put my hand up too. I had some beads around my neck that I'd bought from a Vietnamese mamasan and I gave him some of the beads.

The fifth day I ran into two little Cambodian kids. I'd stopped going towards the mountain. I stayed at the plantation where all the food was at. The kids were picking wild squash and a jungle vegetable that was like spinach. They had a whole bagful of it. I tried to talk to the kids with sign language. Like I'd get two fingers up and one finger would bump the other and that finger would get a little mad, so it nudges the other finger and pretty soon you've got a war going. Then I'd point to myself and point that I didn't have a gun. The kids gave me some vegetables and I gave them some cigarettes.

On the sixth day I walked three or four miles and came to the outskirts of a village, where I spotted some VC tracks. You could tell they were VC from the footprints. Some of them wore plastic sandals and others wore shoes made out of tires. They were easy to spot.

I got into the village about ten in the morning. I waved at all the people. I felt safe. They waved back and were friendly.

I went through the village and on the other side I ate some green fruit about the size of grapefruits. It was puke sour and it made me sick. I needed some water. I had seen a well in the village and I started back.

I was drinking water from the well and I'd taken my boots off and set them down. A young Cambodian guy came up to me and picked the boots up. He was

smiling and waving and he motioned to me to go with him. He took the boots to a hut that belonged to like—the high priest of the village. He set them down outside the hut and went inside. I waited to see what would happen.

I was sitting there when the high priest finally came down and asked with his hands if I was hungry. I said yeah. We were trying to communicate in sign language and we both spoke a little Vietnamese. He was curious about what I was doing there without a gun and I went through my finger-talk again about war.

He fed me pineapple and the kids went out and picked sugar cane. They brought me a clump of straw to lay on and the kids kept bringing more and more sugar cane. Then they brought me a full course dinner, fish and rice.



I was stuffed with all that food and I was comfortable on the straw and I guess I dozed off. Something jerked me awake and I saw there were 15 bayonets around me on AK-47s—VC guns. I got a big rush of adrenaline and my first thought was that they were going to kill me. I flashed on all that stuff in basic about it being better to be dead than captured. That was bull. I didn't want to die.

They were dressed in green, black and blue pajamas. They were businesslike. One of them came out of the group with a rope in his hands. He was going to tie me up. I busted his grip without thinking and I felt a bayonet hit the back of my neck.

"Dip? Dip?" the guy said, which means "You understand?" I felt the bayonet prick the skin a little.

I understood all right and nodded my head.

I told myself that I wanted to stay alive. I knew that if these guys took me prisoner and didn't kill me, the Army would just put me down as a deserter.

"Forget the Army," I thought. At least getting captured solved that problem. I wouldn't have the Army to worry about.

They were VC infantry, Cambodian and Vietnamese infantry, about my own age, 18 to 25 years old. They surrounded me, tied my hands and told me to start running. We ran fast for a mile out of the village until we got to a trail in the jungle and then we walked.

They were really happy, like they'd accomplished something great. They sat me down once we got deeper into the jungle and they took all my things. They were like kids in a candy store. They took everything except my weed and the cross Randy gave me. They were acting kind of friendly. I figured they let me keep the weed because they thought I'd need it to get over the shock of what happened.

They were looking all around for my gun and I was trying to explain that I had laid down my weapon. They'd point to their guns and then point to me. I don't think they understood what I was trying to tell them.

After about the first 30 minutes, I knew they weren't going to kill me. Getting captured did solve my problems as far as not being involved in the war was concerned, but it also created another problem because I only had 60 days to go in Nam.

Once they divvied up my stuff, we started on a road march. My hands were still tied, but other than that they didn't hassle me. We'd go through their base camp areas in the jungle. They knew where their bunkers were and they'd stomp their feet three times as they went over them to let other VC know they weren't GIs. They taught me how to stomp my feet. They'd kick the ground three times and then kick me in the shins lightly and make me kick three times.

We marched for about four hours. We got to the camp around midnight. I don't exactly know where it was because they ran me around in circles to get me screwed up. The jungle was so thick you couldn't tell direction by the stars.

The camp was at the end of a small trail beat out through the jungle. Bunkers were dug out and they had trenches built with logs. There were about 25 people there. They sat me down, gave me cigarettes, and fed me pork fat boiled in water.

A woman came over to interrogate me. She was a VC major in her late 30's. She spoke very broken English that I had a hard time understanding.

"Where is your plane?" she asked. "Where is your unit? Where is your gun?"

I told her I had no plane, no unit, no weapon. I tried to tell her in Vietnamese that I had laid my weapon down because I didn't want to kill their people. I was trying to make her understand, though, that I didn't want to kill GIs either.

She gave me a look when I told her that. I could feel a lot of compassion in her eyes. She stopped questioning me after about 15 minutes and they put a chain around my ankles. The chain had large links and a Chinese lock. They put a piece of plastic into a hole in the ground and told me to sleep on that.



The next morning they brought me some rice and little pieces of meat. They took me out of the hole, put me into a bunker, and let me talk to two ARVNs they had captured. I'd never had much use for the ARVN. The times I'd worked with them on an action they weren't worth anything. The times when my unit was on the ground in front of an ARVN support unit, I'd never trust them. Every so often they'd do something like fire on their own people or on GIs.

That afternoon the interpreter came down and he asked—"Do you eat cat?" No way, I said, I don't eat cat. He said: "Okay."

That night they brought me a leg. Well, I looked at it and the interpreter looked at me looking at it and he smiled and said—"Rabbit good. Eat rabbit." I ate it, but I'd bet money it was cat.

They kept me there for a few days, feeding me more cat and some dog. If I were to give you dog in a steak and you didn't know what you were eating, you'd probably think it was beef. Dog tastes good even though it doesn't quite have the texture of beef.

One afternoon the camp commander, a major, came down and told me we were going on a road march. We would be going by American units. "Do not yell out or you will be shot," he said. There were about seven or eight VC with us. They had me tied and the major was right behind me with an automatic in his holster. The holster was unbuckled.

I saw a GI unit about 2000 yards away. I could see their flares. We had to crouch behind foliage as we passed them. I was scared like hell because I figured if their unit was that close, they'd send out some ambushes. I could see getting killed in an American ambush. Later I found out I shouldn't have been worried because the VC always sent out scouts when they moved prisoners.

The VC amazed me with their knowledge of the jungle. When I used to go out on ambushes with Alpha Company, we would very rarely spot a flashlight. Now I saw why. They kept lanterns over their flashlights. They made the lanterns out of milk and C-ration cans. The light would be blocked so it wouldn't glow. That way they could move around with it easily and not have anybody spot it.

The C-ration cans the GIs threw away were a treasure for them. They used them as bowls to eat out of, as soap dishes, tobacco cans. They were ingenious. They'd even take bomb shells and make combs out of them.

Every so often they gave me a cigarette. Vietnamese roll-your-owns. It's black tobacco. When I first tried to smoke the stuff it was like inhaling orange peels. I could only take little hits.

We got to another jungle camp and they gave me a hammock and a mosquito net. They put two poles in the ground and strung the hammock up. They put a piece of plastic over the top to protect me from the rain and they put a chain around my leg and strung it around the tree.

I couldn't eat the food. They kept bringing eel—the head and the guts. They'd keep the body for themselves. And they brought pig fat and lizard and snake. There were pigs and chickens in the area and each day I'd take the food and when the guard left or looked the other way I'd throw it to the pigs.

The camp commander came down once and questioned me. I told him about not wanting to carry a gun against them, but he didn't really want to hear it. He told me that while I didn't want to kill their people, I would still have supported the American War Effort behind the lines. He considered me an enemy just like all the other GIs. "You will be treated like all prisoners of war," he said.

They finally picked up on the fact that I wasn't eating, probably because I was so wobbly. They came down one day and gave me a shot of this pink stuff. I don't know what it was but they had a big syringe and shot it straight into the vein. That made me feel a little better.

A couple of American choppers came over and fired a few rounds and they figured they had to get me out of there. It was raining, it was the beginning of the monsoon, and I hadn't eaten anything in 15 days. And now I had to go on another road march. They took my things and put them in a pack and lifted it on my back. I collapsed and they lifted me up again. For the first time I thought I was going to die.

The Springmans got the first letter the third of July, 1970.

Department of the Army  
Company C  
4th Battalion (23rd Infantry)  
25th Infantry Division  
APO San Francisco, Cal.

Dear Mr. Springman:

On 25 May SP4 Richard H. Springman absented himself without leave from his unit's location in Cambodia. He has been unable to locate (sic) since that date. His squad leader mentioned that on 25 May 1970 SP4 Springman stated he was going to ride the aerial re-supply helicopter back to Tay Ninh, even without authorization. If you have communicate (sic) with SP4 Springman, please advise him it would be in his best interest to return to our unit.

Sincerely yours,  
Robert Szabo  
1 Lieutenant, Infantry

She replied on July 6th.

Commanding Officer  
Company C, 4th Battalion  
23rd Infantry, 25th Infantry Division  
APO San Francisco, Cal.

Dear Sir:

Enclosed please find an exact copy of a letter I received on July 3, 1970, from the supposedly executive office of your company. It was poorly written, not upon official stationery, and indeed I wonder if it is not some kind of hoax. Our son wrote us once warning us we might receive a hoax letter referring to his being missing in action or dead. And also against phone calls. I am keeping the original in case this should ever be brought up in some kind of proceedings. I am very agitated and deeply concerned about the implication that my son has gone AWOL and indeed I am most anxious to get to the bottom of this matter. As I have not heard from my son for over a month, I was getting pretty worried and was going to write his company anyway and now you see this letter has come to us at a most distressing time. Ricky indicated to us that if anything ever happened to him there would be an official to call on us at home and explain the details. This lieutenant it seems to me has picked a poor way to inform us of our son's disappearance. If I can believe him at all! It seems reasonable enough to me to assume that information of this nature should come through the company commander's office and be written upon official stationery and be verified by the company commander's signature. If my son is missing then I want

a full investigation to rule out all possibility as to his being missing or even killed! Please reply as soon as you can obtain whatever information you must have or I shall have to go to even higher authorities.

Sincerely,  
Mrs. Lois Springman

She received the second letter in mid-August, 1970.

Department of the Army  
Company C  
4th Battalion (23rd Infantry)  
25th Infantry Division  
APO San Francisco, Cal.

Dear Mrs. Springman:

In reference to your letter postmarked 6 July we'd like to explain the whole matter in greater detail. As far as we know your son has not been located by the Army, nor has he communicated with anyone in his company. According to standard procedure, SP4 Springman has been dropped from the company as of 25 July (30 days after being reported AWOL). A Commander's Inquiry was made of the circumstances of your son's disappearance. On 25 May your son stated to his squad leader that he was going to the rear via helicopter to speak to the Inspector General but he had no permission or authorization to leave the forward area. No one actually saw him get on a helicopter but he was never again seen after he said he was leaving that morning. There is no evidence whatsoever that he was missing in action or that any foul play was involved. The company itself has neither the capabilities or the

responsibility to search for a man who has gone AWOL so we were not able to actively pursue the matter. If you are in contact with your son, it would be in his best interest that you encourage him to turn himself in and terminate his absence as soon as possible.

Terence E. O'Hara  
Captain Commanding

### Rick

We were heading through a swamp. I was waist-deep in water, trying to keep one foot in front of the other, but I kept falling. And they were picking me up and dragging me by my legs. My head was in the water and every now and then they'd hold me up by the arms so I could cough the water up.

They finally got tired of dragging me. We got to an ant hill and they used it like a mound. They laid me out on top of it. The commander came over and said—"This is a very heavily bombed area. You must move out!" I was about half conscious. He told me to get on my feet and I couldn't. "Under these circumstances," he said, "if you do not move, we will shoot you!" I couldn't move. He left.

A half-hour later he came back with a log and a hammock. They strung the hammock to the log, put me into it, and carried me the rest of the way—six or seven miles. Two guys would carry me a mile and then two others would take over.

When we got to the new camp, they threw me face down into a mudhole. I lay in that mud for a few hours, crying and kicking myself for getting into this. But then I figured circumstances did it. I didn't want to be captured, but I didn't want to be carrying

a gun doing Sam's killing, either.

A few hours later they came along with my hammock and things. The guards stood me up, poured water over me, and gave me clean pajamas. They brought some sweet canned milk with rice and it was the first thing I was able to eat. I even had to force myself to eat that, but I was at the point where if I didn't force myself, I knew I'd die. After four days I worked myself up to three meals a day. I couldn't believe they were giving me three meals since in the other places I got one or two.

I asked them if I could write a letter home to my parents to let them know I was alive. They smiled and brought me a pen and paper. I wrote the letter carefully and gave it to them and they promised it would get back to the States. The next day they gave me some cigarettes made with paper that had my handwriting on it. They'd taken my letter and wrapped tobacco in it. I showed the cigarette to a guard and screamed at him. He laughed at me.

They had me isolated, but I could see other POWs there in underground cages. They dug a hole in the ground and put you in it, put bars made out of logs on top with a door on it. They chained the door and they chained you inside your bunker. The bunker was about six-by-eight feet. You could barely stand. You had to stoop down a little bit all the time.

We weren't supposed to talk or communicate in any way, but we'd yell to each other. They were yelling out the names of their units. They asked me where I was captured. The guards would hear us talking and they'd freak. They'd start shaking their rifles at us. I never saw them hit anybody, but I saw them threaten a lot of the guys.



The camp commander came down to the cages and started praising me for laying down my weapon. He called me "Ree," which means sunlight. "Your attitude about the war is like a ray of sunlight," he said. He wanted me to make a tape. I was supposed to say how well I was being treated and how bad the war was. I refused to do the tape because I was angry about getting the letter to my parents back in my cigarettes.

They gave me special privileges. They let me off my chain during the day and I could walk around the camp area. That was my freedom for being a good kid and laying down my gun.

One night they took us out of our cages and said we were going on another forced march, back into Cambodia. There were about a dozen of us prisoners. I didn't know then that we'd be together for more than two years.

Nobody tried any funny stuff. I found out that before I was captured, there was a black guy among them who tried to take off running into the jungle. The guards shot him in the back. So nobody was going to take any chances.

We went through thick jungle terrain and early in the morning got to a place we'd call Monkey Hill. We strung hammocks up and they chained us. We spent more than a month there. We called it Monkey Hill because we ate a lot of monkey there.

They were blue-faced monkeys with hands and fingers, very similar to humanoid. They brought a big pot of boiled monkey down for us. Some of it was raw, red and bloody. We could see heads, eyeballs, brains, parts of the skull, paws.

We ate the monkey because we were starving. And we all got sicker than dogs, came down with ptomaine or something. The place smelled so bad. Barf-

ing up your guts constantly. And they didn't give us any medical care. They looked at us coldly. Their attitude was—"You damn Americans, you deserve to go through this."

There was no command among us, no military discipline. Nothing. Even though we had a major there, he never bothered with trying to be in charge. All of us were against the war and hoped it would end soon. We were always thinking that the war would certainly be over in six months.

We spent most of our time on Monkey Hill rapping. The other guys wanted to know about me. They wanted to know what was happening in the States. How the war was really going. When I told them about laying my weapon down, there wasn't much reaction. Not even from the major. I was doing my thing—that was that. There were some far-out dudes among them.

Bobby Anderson was the only black. He was from Detroit. He'd been a truck driver and his unit had been ambushed in a village. The whole unit was wiped out. He kept to himself a lot and had been good friends with the black guy who'd been shot in the back.



John Bailey was a lawyer from Kansas, a staunch Republican who had a top-secret clearance. He was an adviser and he'd worked with the CIA. He wouldn't even talk to the VC for the first year and a half after his capture. Just name, rank and serial number. I heard he'd really had it rough back then and they were still making it rough on him at Monkey Hill. They'd bring him lousy chow. Not let him take baths. Make him dig holes or cut wood.

Dan Kaminski was a big Polish guy from Chicago. He was a helicopter pilot. On his first flight in Vietnam, his chopper crashed. The second flight he was shot down and captured. He kept calling himself the unluckiest man in the world.

There wasn't anything to do on Monkey Hill except talk and listen to the VC about the war. Like they gave us a bunch of photos of dead kids. Kids who'd been killed by American bombings. They handed out these information pamphlets in English all about the torture tactics the Saigon government was using. They gave us a whole rundown, pictures and details, about My Lai. We all felt My Lai was a terrible tragedy of war. We'd all heard stories like that. Kaminski said he knew a guy that had run down a papasan with an APC because the old man had irritated him somehow. Wheland said he knew some guys who pushed prisoners out of choppers.

One night they moved us out on another road march deeper into Cambodia. We saw a black dude wearing pajamas in the lead party with the VC. He was carrying an AK-47. He was a crossover. One of the guards told us the dude had been in the infantry and had fragged\* his commanding officer and switched sides. He had a Vietnamese woman and a kid with him. The VC treated him like he was one of their

own. He ignored us, treated us like we weren't there. The guard told us about another crossover who was a legend among the VC. He gave them a lot of intelligence about the Army and took a Vietnamese wife and was living in North Vietnam, teaching villagers about sanitation and building houses. He was supposed to be the greatest fisherman and hunter in North Vietnam.

Then Feldman got a bad case of beriberi and you could hear him moaning all night. His legs got bigger than my waist. He tried to keep his spirits up, but it wasn't easy. They put him on a special diet, gave him meat, and started giving him B-1 shots.

It was strange. When a guy got that sick, the morale among all of us went to hell. Other people started getting sick. The mental attitude got real bad and we knew that the mental attitude was 90% of staying alive. We were constantly trying to think of something good. Something that would give us hope. Trying to talk positive. What we'd do back in the States, how much money we'd get. Up thoughts.

I had a lot of time to think and I guess I learned to like myself in that time more than ever before. Multiple hours on top of multiple hours and nothing to do but think. You really become aware of yourself in that kind of situation and you understand what makes you tick.

I decided I was going to do a tape for them. I was angry at the war still going on, at Nixon, at us being there. I was still angry at the VC about getting the letters back in cigarette paper all the time, but that didn't seem so important any more.

So when they asked me about the tape they'd play on Radio Hanoi, I said fine. I didn't have to lie or anything. I wrote this essay. I wrote about American exploitation of the natural resources in Vietnam and the

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\*fragged: refers to attacks on officers by their own men, using a fragmentation grenade.

fact that the war was due in large part to the money-people exploiting those resources. That's what the war was about. They took me into a kind of open shack and turned a tape on. Doing the tape was no big thing with the other guys. Practically every prisoner did a tape at one time or another. The guards rewarded me by bringing extra cigarettes and bananas.

We were getting to know some of the guards. We had nicknames for them—Snagglepuss, Goldie, Barbarian, Cyclops, Doofus. Barbarian was always shaking his rifle at someone.

Cyclops was all right. He'd lost one eye in a B-52 raid. He spoke very broken English and he used to talk to us for an hour or so sometimes. About how messed up the Americans were for being there. Considering the fact we shot one of his eyes out, Cyclops was very nice to us.

They moved us about a mile from that spot into these cages they'd built. They'd put four of us into one hole in the ground and put cages around the holes. Then they had us build granite bunkers so we'd be protected from shelling.

That hurt a lot mentally. It seemed so permanent. It looked like we were moving in for good, like building a house.

The only time we got a little up was when they brought the radio down and let us listen to Radio Hanoi. We heard about the McGovern-Hatfield Bill\* and hoped maybe that would end the war.

We had just finished eating lunch one day and I lit a cigarette off another guy's butt that was already burning. That was a no-no. Because you were supposed to ask the guard every time you wanted to light a cigarette. The guard started screaming at me

and yelling for me to get in my cage. I got into the cage and I guess I didn't move fast enough because he slammed the door on my foot. It hurt like hell and I flicked the cigarette butt at him. After that they kept me on a chain all the time. No special privileges for old Ree.

It might sound funny, but we looked forward to Christmas coming. The other guys told me that the Christmas before they'd actually brought them boiled chicken. They said it tasted almost like stateside chicken. This Christmas they brought us a big pan of water buffalo with about 30 bite-sized pieces in it, poured over rice. That was a super-steak dinner to us. We tried not to think about turkey and what our families were doing.

The camp commander gave a speech for us—"Due to the humane treatment policy of the National Front for Liberation, we are giving you this meal and wishing you a very merry Christmas. We hope that by next Christmas your country will realize its mistake and end the oppression of our people."

"Far out," we said, "bring on more food." They did, too. They gave us two or three candy balls apiece and a quart of tea.

I passed my weed around and we smoked the last of it. All my dope was gone and, man, that really scared me! I talked to the camp commander and asked him if instead of giving me cigarettes, they would give me weed. "You smoke tobacco or you smoke nothing!" he said.

Then the dry season came and that was almost unbearable. It was dusty. You'd get but one quart of water a day and that was for brushing your teeth, drinking, washing. You'd go 12 or 14 days without a bath. Your skin would get dry and crinkly and it would crack and break. You'd have a split lip all the time. And you stunk. We all stunk.

\*McGovern-Hatfield Bill: legislation in the Congress to cut off funding for the Vietnam war.

### Lois, Rick's mother

Oh, God, where is he? That's all we kept thinking about. We wouldn't let ourselves think that he'd been killed without his dogtags. That nobody would ever find his body. We thought that if we believed he'd make it, that would help him come back home.

Rumors were going around that a bunch of guys who didn't want to fight in the war had left their companies and had gotten together and were living in the jungle. We hoped maybe Ricky had joined up with them.

We didn't know where he was and what was happening to him and nobody would help us. One day I called the Red Cross and told them he was missing and begged them to help me try to find out something. They said they would.

But when they called back their attitude had changed. "The only thing we can find out is that your son has been dropped as a deserter from his unit," they said. "There's nothing more we can do." From their tone what they were telling me was—"Your son is rotten and we don't want to be bothered with him."

Another time I called the Pentagon and begged them to help, but they kept putting me on hold and switching me around to various offices. Some sergeant finally talked to me and with a snicker in his voice said—"Our information says your son is a deserter and there's nothing more we can do."

Sometimes not knowing anything drove me hysterical. I just wanted to hear something. Anything at all. Sometimes I'd go into the bedroom and cry and cry and not be able to pull myself out of it. And sometimes I wished that I was dead because then I wouldn't have had to put up with the pain and the worry. And the nightmares.

I kept dreaming that I was asleep in an old castle. Suddenly I would wake up in the dream and hear a noise downstairs and I'd wonder—Now who can that be at this hour? There was a winding staircase and I'd start walking down it and hear sobbing. Somebody was crawling up the stairs. And suddenly I knew it was Ricky.

I'd start running down the stairs and Ricky was lying there screaming—"Mother, I'm blind, I'm blind." I'd turn him over and his eyes were staring and vacant and he was bloody and messed up.

I'd wake up from the dream and go into the bathroom and still hear him calling—"Mother, Mother, help me!"

### Rick

We were in the cage bunkers about five months and then American bombers started hitting us again. They must have spotted the bunkers. Choppers started coming over and one night they hit the camp with gas and made some runs on the bunkers.

We were scared to death. Our own guys seemed determined to blow us away. We were so mad that I think if the guards would have given us guns, any one of us would have tried to shoot those choppers down.

The guards would come up after a bombing or a run and laugh at us and say—"Now you know how we feel."

They were planning to move us out of there so we wouldn't get killed when I caught malaria. You get the super-chills and you lay there and shake hard enough that you practically shake the whole bunker. Then all of a sudden you stop shaking and break out in a fantastic sweat. Water comes pouring out of you. Then you lie there hot, sticky and smelly for a while and then the chills start again.

I was really weak and we had to walk to the new cages. I hadn't eaten for about a week and I was stumbling, falling down. I couldn't keep on my feet. And they'd drag me by the hair. Being dragged was worse than walking so after about a mile of being dragged I'd get to my feet again. But they'd have to drive the pain in me enough for me to concentrate all my effort and energy into forcing myself to walk again.

Around two o'clock in the afternoon we heard a terrible roar in the sky—B-r-r-r-r-r-r!—and the guards started screaming “Ba-Nam-Hi! Ba-Nam-Hi!” . . . B-52s overhead! Everybody started running around for cover.

Nothing ever scared me while I was a prisoner like the B-52s. When the bombs came through the air they made a horrifying sound, the spinning and air motion created an endless whooooooooooooooooo! It was like a high-pitched witch's voice, loud and eerie.

When the bombs were falling, you had to start screaming to get air going through you because they sucked the air up. You wanted your mouth open, your nose open, your ears open. So you screamed. You yowled. You went ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! at the top of your lungs. Then you were banging and shaking around in the bunker because of the concussion. If it hit a hundred yards away, it picked you up like a tornado and tossed you. Staying alive depended on how far away the bombs hit. You were powerless to do anything about it.

First the roar, then that eerie sound, then the explosions and screams. Some guys started screaming already when they heard the roar out of reflex.

And if the B-52s got too close, like ten yards away, you were a goner. Before I got captured our company passed through the edge of a village that had been hit by B-52s. The village had been reduced to craters 30 feet deep, 40 feet across. I kept flashing back on those craters as the B-52s were hitting us.



A flight of B-52 bombers drops 1,000— and 750—pound bombs over Vietnam.

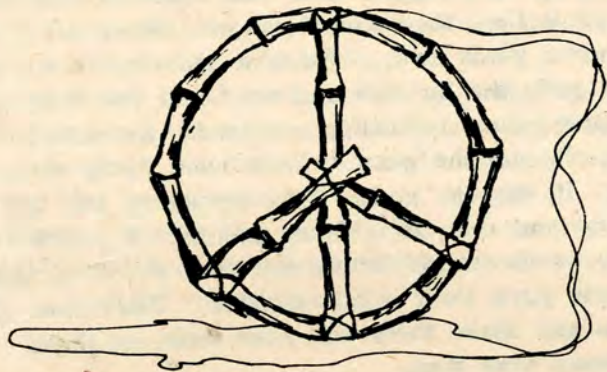
We were really sweating it because the B-52s were hitting closer and closer. The next morning they came again. This time they almost got us. They hit a couple hundred yards away. We were getting thrown into the air inside the bunkers and we heard the shrapnel ricocheting around, whistling overhead. Everything was crashing all over the place. Trees were flying through the air. It was too much. The screaming and the explosions and everything flying around. I couldn't hold my hands straight afterwards they shook so much. With some guys, their minds snapped. *You'd have to hit them and shake them and pour water on them. Their nerves were shot.*

They moved us farther into the jungle right after that into a bunker-camp area. We left Sommers behind at the dugouts because he had a bad case of malaria. In August we found out they'd released him.

We couldn't believe it. We found out they took him to a main trail and gave him a Vietnamese flag and an official document from the National Liberation Front and he walked out by himself. It didn't make any sense. Sommers had tried to escape twice and he was a general smart-alec and they'd let him go!

We celebrated our second Christmas there. They brought us tea and peanut candy and tailor-made cigarettes. They let us get together for half an hour at a table and talk. We talked about the turkey dinner they must be having at home and the Christmas tree. Wow! Wouldn't it be great to be sitting by the tree looking at all those lights! Bright beautiful lights all different colors! We never saw real colors in the jungle. Every time we saw wild flowers, we stopped to pick them up just to have colors.

We gave each other presents. Soap dishes and bags, little cups, bowls we'd carved out of rocks with fishbones. Kaminski gave me a peace symbol he made out of bamboo. I loved that peace symbol. It was the nicest gift I'd ever gotten.



Kaminski could whistle like you never heard anybody whistle and we spent Christmas night sitting in our cages singing "Jingle Bells" and "Silent Night" as Kaminski whistled away.

#### Vern, Rick's father

One day two Army guys showed up at the door and said they'd come down from Washington, D.C., to talk to us. A couple of our kids were there and they said the kids would have to leave the house before they'd talk. The kids left and Lois said—"Well, is it good news?" And then they made her show them her driver's license and they made me show my driver's license and one of them finally said—"Well, I guess you could say it's good news."

This Sommers who'd been released told them Rick was a prisoner. Right away they said we couldn't tell anybody Rick was a prisoner and that we couldn't talk to any newsmen. They said they wouldn't even change Rick's status from "missing" to "captured" because then the VC would find out that Sommers had told them.

They didn't want the VC to find out because they said they were afraid they'd hurt the other prisoners. That didn't make any sense to me. I figured that they wanted to keep the parents of POWs simmered down and not talking about the damn war.

We were happy that we knew he was officially alive, although we even had reason to worry about that. The Army guys kept saying—"As of August 15th we know he was alive." But this was September already and there was nothing that said he hadn't been killed in the month's time. It scared us that he was a VC prisoner because we'd heard stories that VC prisoners were being starved and hauled around in cages.

They assigned us a family assistance officer from the Pentagon. He was some kind of an intelligence officer and he'd come down now and then to make

sure we weren't blowing our cool about the war, pat us on the head. He kept saying how much he believed in the Army and believed in the war. When we asked him about Rick being considered AWOL he'd say—"I don't think anything will happen to him because of it. Regardless of how he disappeared, the price he's paying is enough."

Lois and I went down to a meeting of POW parents in Los Angeles once. They had a flock of big brass there and each of them got up and kicked a little pitch about how the war would end soon and our boys would be released. They told us how they'd have a lot of problems even once they got back. They'd have 20-25% weight loss, malaria, worms, be messed up psychologically. They wouldn't be able to make decisions for themselves because they'd been told for so long what to do. "When he comes back," they said to us, "if you have vanilla and chocolate ice cream, don't ask him which one he wants. Give him one because he won't be able to make the decision."

The trouble with all of that thinking was that the damn war didn't seem like it was going to end. Nixon just kept it up.

Just before Christmas two Army guys brought us a little plaque. It said—"Happy Holiday Season. The United States Army honors the gallant families of the brave Americans captured and missing in Southeast Asia. May courage sustain you and faith enrich you during this sacred time of year. God be with you." It was signed by General Creighton Abrams, commander of all Army personnel in Vietnam. Lois looked at that thing and at those Army guys and said she felt like hitting them over the head with it.

And if that wasn't enough, a few days later we got a Christmas card from Nixon. Here's this card from Nixon and at the same time he's bombing hell out of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. And there was no telling if Rick was under any of those bombs.

## Rick

About March of '72 they told us they were launching a big offensive that would win them the war. It was going to be total victory for the National Liberation Front. We didn't feel there'd ever be any type of military victory in that country, but we went along with them. "Great," we said, "then we can go home."

They overran firebase Cam Maryann, not too far away from us, and killed a lot of ARVN and some GIs. They overran another support base in the area and things started getting hot again. Some Cobras [helicopter gunships] came in on the camp with rockets one night and the next day they told us we were moving out.

This was going to be the all-time Great March. We'd be moved north into Laos. It was well over a hundred miles away. We were supposed to cover 12 miles a day.

We started out each day when it got dark and marched till dawn. We had nothing to eat but rice balls and salt. Our blisters got so bad there were big holes in our feet and we had to wrap them up in rags.

One night they put us in a truck. The VC really knew that jungle. We'd roar down narrow trails at 40 or 50 miles an hour without lights, barely missing trees. The area we were going through looked like it'd been shelled. Twenty or 25 burned-out tracks and tanks. We also saw an elephant some VC were using to drag logs.

We stopped at a barn and found out we'd start marching again the next day. Wheland was barely conscious and wouldn't eat. We knew if he didn't eat he'd die. We decided to force some food down his throat. Some of the guys thought—"Why go through this? If he doesn't want to eat, forget him!"



National Liberation Front forces marching at night.

We got into the area that was going to be our camp for a while the next day. Major Stokes came in two hours after the rest of us. His legs gave out on him and he had to take baby steps the last couple miles. His guards took baby steps along with him.

We were somewhere in the southern tip of Laos. The guards told us we'd have to build our own camp and our own cages. Thick bamboo lay all over the place and the terrain was hilly in spots. It kept raining and raining.

We started building. Digging trenches. Laying logs. Building these cages with little sticks and logs. Wheland looked at the cages and said—"They treat you like birds, feed you like birds. Now we gotta build damn dinky bird cages." So we called the place the Bird Cages from then on.

The Bird Cages were living hell. Two-foot-long viper snakes crawled all over. They were known as "two-step snakes." They got you and you took two steps and died. If you saw somebody get hit by a viper, the only way to save him would be to take a machete and chop the arm or leg off the guy before a minute had passed. I was sitting on a log one day and a viper came out under my legs. I froze, but it kept going for some reason and left me alone.

We got a lot of boiled rat to eat. Not the body, which we'd eaten before, but ratskulls. Eyeballs, jawbones, brains. It was stringy, mushy and putrid, but we ate it. The rice we got came from a 20-year-old French cache. It was green and moldy with worms and black bugs in it. At first I tried to pick the bugs out of it but that was impossible. So I just ate the bugs too and hoped it was protein or something.

They brought in a new crew of guards and the new ones hated us. No talking to each other, ask permission for everything. They had a cute trick of taking you out into the jungle all by yourself if you did something wrong and leaving you there. A guard was nearby to make sure you kept standing all the time—for seven or eight hours.

And sometimes they'd fool you and make you believe you'd be released. They'd separate you and give you good food and imply with their attitude or with little comments that you'd be released soon. It'd keep up for a day maybe or ten days. Then it'd be back to the ratskulls.



They were trying to make it as hellish as possible. A few of us started talking about trying to escape, but most of the guys didn't even want to hear it—no matter how bad it was. Their attitude was—"I'm not about to get myself killed now after all this that I've gone through. I've survived and I'm not about to chance losing it all now. I'm going to make it back home."

The guards came in and said we'd spend the day making punji-stakes. They had the material with them. No way, we said, we aren't going to do it.

Punji-stakes are weapons. You take bamboo sticks and sharpen the ends of them. You dip them into urine and let them dry out and get brittle. You stick them into the ground and whoever steps on them gets poisoned.

Major Stokes said he wasn't going to make any weapons that were going to hurt or kill other GIs. I said I wasn't going to make a weapon supporting the war effort for either side. I said I'd laid down my gun so I wouldn't hurt their side and I wasn't going to do anything now to hurt our side, either.

*... When I was with Alpha Company, I was working a unit that was setting up mousetraps. They were little traps attached to a blasting cap. The VC would step on them in the jungle and the traps would blow the VC to smithereens. Spread their bodies around in the treetops. The unit was doing a good job with those mousetraps, averaging 200 kills a month...*

The guards said there were a lot of spies and agents in the area and the punji-stakes would be for our own protection. "But setting those stakes up around the camp would help keep us in," we said. They answered—"All security measures are for your protection."

Some of the guys weren't too strong about it in the beginning, but when some of us started saying—"They can't make me do it!" then all the guys

picked it up and said—"Hell, they can't make me do it, either." That way we got unanimous agreement.

The guards got flustered and went to the commander. They came back after a while and said we wouldn't get any food until we agreed to make the stakes. This was during a tense time anyway. Relations between the guards and prisoners were worse than ever before. So we didn't get any food that night and we didn't get breakfast the next morning.

The interpreter came down at lunch the next day and said—"Whoever of you wishes to make punji-stakes shall eat." Nobody answered. So nobody ate. This went on for another day. The interpreter kept asking and nobody answered.

But then some of the guys started saying they were sick and were going to have to eat. Wheland said—"You know how screwed up I am. I can't go without eating much longer. If I have to make punji-stakes or whatever I have to do to keep myself alive, I'm going to do it."

So Wheland gave in and Hector Cruz, who had malaria, gave in too. What really made me angry, though, was that other guys started giving in. Jesus, who was all right, and Bobby Anderson. There was nothing wrong with either of them.

Then, gradually, almost all the other guys gave in and started eating, even John Bailey, our Republican conservative.

The guards played it smart. They'd bring super-massive amounts of food to the people who were eating and make those few of us who still refused watch them gobble. And the guys who were eating could take baths and get their medicine. Those of us who refused to make the stakes were starting to smell and we were getting weak from missing our medication.

The guards would come down to us each day with big plates of food.

"Would you like to make punji-stakes?" they'd ask.

"No punji-stakes."

"We have very good food for you tonight."

"No stakes."

"We bring bananas for you to go with your rice.

Help you eat. You will not make punji-stakes?"

"No punji-stakes."

After nine days, when we were so weak we could hardly walk, the major said we couldn't carry it any further. We were getting too weak. He said he'd make a deal with the commander. So he went to the commander and said he'd make the stakes for everybody if the rest of us didn't have to make them. The commander agreed.

One morning they brought the punji-stakes down, the bamboo and the urine. They handed the major a machete. He went up to the bamboo and started cutting and sharpening the stakes. The guards watched for a while and then one of them took the machete away from the major. The guard had a smile on his face.

"You agree to make the stakes," he said.

We figured out that they didn't actually want us to *make* the stakes. They just wanted us to *agree* to make them. Playing games with us.

Nobody liked Nixon. The guards gave us copies of the Ellsberg papers\* and that made us realize how the whole scheme began with Eisenhower. We figured after that the American people would have to be insane

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\*Ellsberg papers: Daniel Ellsberg was a government employee who released documents in 1971 which revealed information about the war previously kept secret. These government documents, published as "The Pentagon Papers," contradicted the information that the government had given to the American public.

to vote for Nixon. We figured he was carrying on the war for the natural resources in Vietnam and for our investments there. Not solely for his personal gain but for the gain of his cult, the fat cats. I had no trust in the man at all.

We were hearing propaganda stuff from Radio Hanoi that gave us hope. McGovern got a standing ovation from so many thousand people in such-and-such a place. He'd win it hands down. People were hip to Nixon. People were waking up, getting on the ball. The country was changing.

Bailey was the only guy who kept saying—"Don't count your chickens before they hatch." But even he thought McGovern would win.

I bet Bailey that McGovern would win by a landslide. Bailey agreed he'd win but said it'd be close.

We counted the days before the election. We knew the exact day. We'd sit around and twirl our thumbs, not talk as much. If you heard somebody say something, you'd hear—"McGovern better win!"

The guards said—"It matters not who will win, we will surely defeat your army."

Election Day passed and we didn't know who'd won. The guards wouldn't tell us. We were going crazy. There were a lot of hassles, tensions. Three days later we were listening to the radio. We heard the words—"The president." At the same time the camp commander showed up and said—"Mr. Nixon has been elected again to be your president." It blew us out! Nixon by a landslide! Four more years! It completely destroyed my frame of mind and everybody else's. We had to accept the fact that Nixon was still the president and that the country was more messed up than we thought. We couldn't believe how stupid the American people were. We were down on the whole country.



The day before we found out, we were all in pretty good shape. But the day after the commander came down, everybody got sick. Six people had malaria and two or three people started swelling up with beriberi. Unbelievable rashes were breaking out—open sores, yellow, green, orange.

They brought a Cambodian doctor into the camp and he put Bailey and I on intravenous. They gave us milk, oranges, bananas, quinine. Started pumping us with vitamins.

We figured that we'd stay prisoners until we were old men with white hair.

... We started hearing on Radio Hanoi about secret meetings that were taking place between Kissinger [Secretary of State] and the North. We didn't want to get our hopes up because we were afraid we'd get sick again like after Nixon won.

And we thought Kissinger was no good anyway. Because of the way he'd helped smooth public opinion during critical times in the past. And as far as we were concerned, public opinion was the only thing that could end the war.

Early in January weird things started happening. We kept hearing about secret negotiations and the guards started feeding us up. Bringing us purple sweet potatoes, lots of pork and vegetables. We got good tobacco, enough toothpaste to brush twice a day, towels. They even brought us new pajamas and a guy came in with a tape measure to fit us.

The guards wouldn't be specific about anything, but once in a while one of them would say something like—"We feel the war may be over soon." We put everything together and it added up, but we were still afraid to think we'd be released. Hanoi was still down on Kissinger over the radio, saying he was trying to drag out everything.

Then one day they told us we could write a ten-line letter home. This time it didn't seem like a lie because they showed us a diagram of the kind of letter they wanted us to write. The heading was "A prisoner of war from the National Front for Liberation."

They gave us haircuts and a real shave with a razor. Before that they'd just used the clippers to snip the main part of our beards off, but this time they used razors. Those razors were a heavy clue.

They moved us about a mile to another camp and brought us together with nine other prisoners. One of the guys there had been a prisoner for seven years. They were a rowdy bunch, a lot of them still gung ho, still hating the Vietnamese. They said things like—"The only good gook is a dead gook."

We noticed the guards were easing up a bit. They kept a close eye on us, but didn't harass or

punish us for little things. When they saw us talking, some of them looked the other way. By this time, too, our diet was great. Meat and vegetables once a day, decent rice.

Of course we knew that no matter what happened we could still get killed any minute, that the jungle still wanted to kill us. I was carrying logs down a trail with some of the others and we heard sounds in the jungle, sticks breaking and crackling. It was a python. It hit the trail about 50 feet in front of us. Dark green, about 14 feet long, thicker than my waist, the head bigger than mine. We froze and watched it slither into the bush.

One day the camp commander came down and said—"I have something of great importance to tell you. It seems at last your country has decided to sign the document." He said the signing of the treaty was only two days away.

Man, those two days were full of tension. Some guys still said it was phoney. That they'd get down to the table and Kissinger would refuse to sign. Somebody said—"I can dig on it anyhow because we're getting all this good chow."

Two days later, around six o'clock at night, when we'd just finished eating, we heard 15 or 20 guards running down the trail laughing and shouting. "The war is over!" one of them said, "the document has been signed! You are all going home!"

A big roar filled the camp. We were jumping up and down, yelling and screaming, hugging and shaking on each other, leaping up on each others' backs.

We didn't sleep at all that night. Stayed up whooping and jiving.

The guards brought us chocolate peanut candy, raw cocoa, and then partied hard all night themselves. All the VC in camp held a meeting. A speaker was

up there and all the VC listened without making a sound. The speaker would stop and the audience would clap twice. Just twice, no more. Clap, clap. Even their celebrations were militarily organized.

The camp commander told us officially that since the treaty had been signed our chains would be taken off during the day. We'd be allowed to have our supper meal together. We didn't have to ask permission to go to the john or smoke any more.

But after they took the chains off you could tell the guards began to resent it. I think they resented the fact we were happy and had some freedom. And maybe they were thinking about us going back to the States and living well and them staying in the jungle.

A political officer came to camp and talked to us about our captivity. He was an older, well-fed Vietnamese who spoke perfect English.

First he talked to us in a group and asked us our feelings about our captivity. I told him I felt I'd been treated unfairly because I was captured after I refused to carry a gun.

"Unjust things happen in war," the political officer said.

He came to me afterwards and said—"We understand, Ree, that you were a very good man and that you did not want to kill our people. But we also understand that you would have supported the American War Effort in the rear."

He asked us how we felt about the Vietnamese people. Some prisoners laughed sarcastically and I heard one guy say—"Gooks!" But some of us said we felt we understood the Vietnamese people better after our captivity. That we understood now about the struggles of their people and the problems of their country.

The political officer said that one day there would be a final revolution. That one day the whole world

would live under one form of government. "Some of you will hate us," he said. "Some of you will go back and have bad things to say about us. Others of you are our brothers and will stand by our side during the final revolution."

In the next few days they held a couple lectures about the history of their country and the great victory the National Liberation Front had won. The guys laughed a lot when they heard that. Wore big grins.

I was getting worried about what the Army would do to me. Like I knew they had for sure put me down as having gone AWOL and I knew that after a guy's absent for 30 days they put him down as a deserter. I knew they couldn't prove anything. I didn't intend to go back. I figured my best chance would be to find a chaplain as soon as I got back and have myself declared a conscientious objector. That would make it a little easier.

It seemed like I was just getting out of one big problem, getting out of VC captivity, and I was heading right into another one—the Army hassling me. I hoped that they wouldn't do anything crazy like try to put me in jail for laying my gun down. But I didn't know what they'd do because Nixon had won the election and I was thinking maybe the whole country had gone nuts.

The VC brought a group of photographers into camp and started staging all these phoney pictures. We were wearing brand-new, tailor-made green pajamas and plastic sandals so we'd look nice. They lined us up one day with the photographers there and had us walk up to a VC general and shake his hand. That was something I'd never seen before—VC shaking an American's hand.

One night they told us we'd be released the next day. Nobody slept. There was incredible excitement. It was February 14th, 1973.

We were rolling toward the strip. Almost home. The truck went through the village and the villagers stood on the sides of the road and waved. No animosity. No sarcasm. The way it should be when a war is over.

We saw the American choppers there. The pilots even had the blades going. Walk up to them and get on and you're home free. That's what we thought.

There were six or seven hundred ARVN prisoners sitting there in a group. They'd all been captured by the VC. We were told by a guard that while the helicopters were there to take us home, we couldn't go until the ARVN released a bunch of VC prisoners. The ARVN transport with the VC aboard hadn't arrived yet. So we'd have to wait.

The airstrip was jammed with big shots. Chinese officers, VC political officers, ARVN wigs, a full-bird colonel. Reporters from all over the place. The reporters were asking us a million silly questions so fast we couldn't even understand them.

I went over and talked to a couple of Red Chinese political people. I told them the truth. That, under the circumstances, I'd been treated fairly. That I had no animosity against the Vietnamese people. They smiled and we shook hands.

We got the word that they were ready to load us and we started walking toward the choppers. Each step was like a thousand miles.

The chopper pilot shook my hand and said—"It was a helluva haul, but you're out of it now." He gave me a Pepsi. That Pepsi was home. I didn't believe I was free until I took my last step. Up and into the chopper. Home free.

We didn't say very much to the pilots. You couldn't hear very well in there and we were so spaced, so flabbergasted by what was happening to us, that we probably couldn't have said anything that made any

sense anyway. We were flashing through the darkness with those lights and after a while we could see Saigon down there. Lights. Beautiful lights all under us. Even Saigon looked beautiful to me right then. They walked us off the chopper and straight over to an airplane headed for the Philippines.

The plane was a civilian job with a military crew. Plainclothes guys were keeping an eye on us—somebody said they were CIA.\* We had female officers for stewardesses. We loved seeing those women—American women—though nobody made any moves on them. We had our muddy pajamas on and some of us smelled pretty funky too. And some of the guys were so broken up they were crying.

I had the bamboo peace symbol around my neck that Kaminski gave me for Christmas in the camp. I was the only one wearing anything like that. I noticed some of the other guys staring, but nobody said anything about it. I figured that if somebody else didn't like what I wore, that was their problem. The peace symbol was important to me. As a symbol of the mistake that we made in Vietnam and as a symbol of hope for better things to come. The flight to Clark Air Force Base took about six hours and when I got off with my peace symbol around my neck I lifted my hand in the power fist. Thousands of people were waiting for us, cheering.

A whole row of high-ranking generals was waiting for us at the airport. We had to go down the line and shake hands with them and at the end of the line they had the flag set up. We were supposed to walk up to the colors and salute. Nobody saluted. Not one of us. I could see some of the officers whispering to each other. The reason nobody saluted was that we were so excited to be free we didn't think about the flag.

They piled us onto a bus and took off for the hospital. Philippine people were lined up all along the sidewalks. The bus had to stop for traffic a few times and once when it stopped a girl came running up to it. She had long dark shiny hair. I thought she was the most beautiful girl in the world. She ran up to my window with a bouquet of yellow and purple wild flowers and gave it to me. That made me feel so good I almost started crying.

When we got to the hospital they had robes and towels ready. We threw our pajamas away and climbed into hot showers. I loved that hot shower so much I must have been in there for an hour. They took us down to the mess hall and fed us roast beef and turkey. I noticed that some guys were still crying off and on.

The next day they put us through a million tests. Electrocardiograms, dental exams, everything. One guy had gangrene and they told him they'd have to take his foot off. I had a big blister on one foot that looked like gangrene but they told me they could clear it up with shots. Most of us had mild cases of beriberi, weak kidneys, vitamin deficiencies. Both my eyesight and hearing were bad. I had infections of the bladder and prostate. We were told we'd stay there for three days and wing on to Hawaii.

I called home. The conversation was unreal. We couldn't really say anything to each other because the minute I said something, they said something too. We were talking at the same time. I thought there would be all these tears over the phone, but there weren't. They didn't cry. I figured that with all the worrying they'd done, they were probably all cried out by then.

On the morning of the fourth day they had us dress up in our nice shiny new uniforms with all the medals on them and took us out to the airport. We

\*CIA: agents of the Central Intelligence Agency.

were heading for Hawaii. I noticed my escort officer getting up all the time to talk to a colonel in charge and didn't find out till afterwards what was going on.

I'd freaked them out. I was wearing my bamboo peace symbol over my medals and uniform and the colonel didn't know whether they could let me get off the plane like that. They were trying to raise General Abram's office before the plane landed to find out whether I could wear it. About three minutes before we landed the colonel was told that it was OK.

So I got off the plane all decked out in my uniform and medals and ribbons and my bamboo peace symbol. There were crowds of people down there. Photographers. Flower girls even. When I stepped off the plane I put my hand up and gave the world the power fist again. I wanted the whole world to see where this GI was at.

We were only in Hawaii for a few hours and took off again for Travis Air Force Base. From there on I was going to go to the hospital at the Presidio of San Francisco. I slept most of the way and woke up as we were landing. When the plane got over the States, there was a big cheer and everybody pushed up to the windows to look down at the cars and homes. It felt great being back, but looking down from the plane it didn't seem like much had changed.

I got off at Travis with my peace symbol still around my neck and made the power fist again. The brass had some of the other prisoners make speeches. "God Bless America and God Bless Richard Nixon," they said. They didn't ask me to give any speeches but if they would have, I wouldn't have said that. I would have said—"I hope the American people have learned something from this war."



Bob, Carol, Rick, Lois and Vern Springman

They drove me to the hospital and the next day my parents came in. We cried and held each other. I grabbed my brother, Randy, and kicked him. He was back from the Army in Germany. I looked at my family and saw the years. My mom and dad looked a lot older and the difference in my sister Carol was terrific. I last saw her when she was 12 and now she was 15 and there was an awful lot of difference there.

We had lobster dinner on the top floor with a view overlooking the whole city. I ate 22 bowls of ice cream for dessert—strawberry, vanilla, chocolate, whatever they had.

My sister was taking pictures and some of the guards went up to her and demanded her film. Well, that was too much! She wouldn't give them the pictures. "He's my brother and they're my pictures," she said. They got some brass down there and told her they didn't want any pictures of me getting out

because "they would jeopardize the other prisoners still in Vietnam."

"We've got to have that film," they told her.

"We can't let that film get out of this building."

The next day I talked to a chaplain and told him I wanted to become a conscientious objector. I told him I didn't feel like I had the right to take another life. He asked me what I'd do if my family was attacked and I told him I would shoot to wound. I filled out a CO form and he filled out a report and said he'd let me know.

Two CIA guys came in and filled my room up with maps. They wanted to know everything that had happened to me. They wanted to know why I'd gone AWOL and I told them about laying my weapon down because I didn't want to kill anyone.

Two days later I was notified that I had been granted conscientious-objector status and right after that I got a form letter from the Army saying that the charges against me had been dismissed. The charge was being absent without leave. They'd never charged me with desertion. I felt safe—at home—for the first time since I'd been captured, knowing the Army wasn't going to try to put me back in jail after being a prisoner for three years.

The Army put me on tranquilizers. They told me the tranquilizers would help me to adjust, but I figured they were afraid I'd go to the press and start talking about the war and how I didn't want to fight the VC. I had the feeling they considered me a radical. Some of the brass kept eyeing the peace symbol.

About a month later they told me I was free to go home. They told me I should keep taking the tranquilizers because I'd have trouble adjusting. I told them I didn't want any more, that the only trouble I had adjusting came from the tranquilizers.

It was time to go home. I was happy about that but it also made me think. For three years the VC were always telling me what to do and the Army was always telling me what to do when I got back... and now it was up to me. Nobody would tell me anything. I was on my own.

One of the first things I wanted to do was get inside my brothers, rap and communicate and dig on them as brothers. And help them, too, because they were having hassles with their own lives.

The Army gave me about \$40,000 in back pay and I used it to buy land and property. I bought the house in Cottonwood for my parents and a house in Huntington Beach in California and some land in Oregon and Nevada.

I don't exactly know what I want to do, except be left alone for a while. At first I thought about going back to school, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized life is more of a school than the technicalities they'd teach me in some classroom.

I've thought about doing a lot of things. Raising cattle. Running coffee from South America to Europe. Learning carpentry and working with my hands.

I suppose when I think seriously about it I see myself in Cottonwood in 20 years with a house and a wife and kids. I like kids and I'd like to have kids but I would teach my kids to think for themselves all the time, be themselves, not be what others want them to be.

When I first got home, I got a lot of letters from people all over the country saying they were happy I was all right. And I kept getting calls from girls around here that I didn't even know. The operators all knew me and they'd say—"Hi, honey" when I got on the line. We got three hate letters too, all unsigned. One guy had clipped out my picture in the paper with the power salute and he wrote—"You should have been killed over there."



After a while things leveled off and I could relax and get into being home. My brothers and I decided that we were going to build a rec room so we started digging out a basement under the house. We'll build it big enough so we can all fit in there. One of the things we're playing around with is that we'll set up our own rock & roll band and call ourselves "The Springman Brothers." My brother Ronnie really wants to be a rock & roll star.

I like to go up to Jerome because there's nobody there. It's a ghost town and peaceful and you can see the whole valley below you. I go up there and think about everything that happened—the war and some of the guys—and try to sort everything out. I've never heard from the guys I was prisoner with.

In some ways I want to hear from them and in other ways I don't. Like I wonder what happened to Hector and Brunswick and I wonder what happened to Snagglepuss and Doofus too—but if I heard from them it would bring everything back and I don't want that. I try not to think of some things that happened over there and I'm sure they feel the same way.

I think that being a prisoner robbed me of some years and some times I might have had, but it also taught me something about understanding human beings and it certainly taught me something about understanding myself. And I'm proud that I never killed anybody over there and never caused anyone harm.

Sometimes, though, I have these dreams and the dreams bring it all back. My dad had dreams for 15 years after his war and I hope I'll be luckier and that mine won't keep up that long.

I'll dream that I'm in the jungle escaping and I get to a clearing and there's a Texaco station there and I can't figure out what the hell a Texaco station is doing in the jungle. Or that I'm working at home

on the basement and I suddenly notice that I've got chains on my legs.

I've got two dreams that come back more than any of the others.

I dream that my brother Randy is on a conveyor belt that leads into a meat grinder. I can't do anything to stop the conveyor and it takes Randy into the grinder and he comes out in maybe 15 bits and pieces. The pieces are still alive and I'm trying to put Randy back in one piece again before they die.

I dream that I'm at home and I feel my chest split and my veins contract and my heart pops out. It pops out but it's still beating and I'm watching it outside of me. And Randy's there trying to stuff my heart back inside me.

I guess it's up to Randy and I to keep each other together. Hell, that's what brothers are for.



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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What were the highlights of the story? What parts did you least like? Why?
  2. What changes did Rick go through during his time in Vietnam? What experiences do you think were most important in changing his beliefs? His feelings?
  3. Rick said, "Under the circumstances I've been treated fairly." Do you agree that Rick was treated fairly by his Vietnamese captors? What hardships experienced by the prisoners were deliberate punishment? Which were shared by the guards? Give examples to support your answer.
  4. How would you have treated Rick if you were one of his Vietnamese guards?
  5. Were Rick and his family treated fairly by the U.S. Army? Give examples.
  6. How do you think the changes Rick went through have affected his relationships with his family? With his work? His political ideas? Imagining that you are Rick today, write a letter to one of the men who was a prisoner with you. Include what you are doing, your thoughts about events in the U.S., and recollections about your time in Indochina.
- 

Hoa Binh

August thirty-first  
Stanley was all excited  
She just made eighteen  
And got to vote  
For the first time  
There were sixteen slates  
To vote for  
In Vietnam that year  
And every slate's poster  
Said that  
That slate  
Wanted Hoa Binh  
From voting  
She came back to me  
All excited  
Casee  
I vote for Hoa Binh  
That's nice, Stanley  
I did too  
Back in Hoa Ky  
I hope your vote counts

—Michael Casey

*hoa binh: peace*  
*Hoa Ky: United States*



William Calley's story is very different. He participates fully in the war, following the orders of his superiors despite the questions arising in his mind from time to time. When he is singled out to be tried for war crimes by men high in the chain of command, his response is that he was only following orders and doing his job. In his story, Lt. Calley begins to reevaluate whether loyalty to his country means unquestioning obedience to his superiors.

## William Calley



William Calley

## WILLIAM CALLEY

*On March 29, 1971, a military jury convicted Lt. William Calley of the premeditated murder of at least 22 civilians\* in the village of Mylai in South Vietnam. The issues behind this war-crimes trial—the longest and one of the most sensational in our country's history—raised a flood of debate among the American people.*

Maybe if I were President, I could change things. Till then, I'm like anyone else: I'll carry America's orders out. For that's what the Army is: a chisel, it has to keep sharp and let the American people use it. If the people say, "Go wipe out South America," the Army will do it. Majority rules, and if a majority tells me, "Go to South Vietnam," I will go. If it tells me, "Lieutenant Calley," or "Rusty Calley," or "Whatever, go massacre one thousand communists," I will massacre one thousand communists. But—I won't advocate it. I'm against massacre, and I won't preach it: I won't be a hypocrite for it. Or maybe *that* is a hypocrite, but I'll do as I'm told to. I won't revolt. I'll put the American people above my own conscience, always. I'm an American citizen.

\* \* \* \* \*

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from Lieutenant Calley: His Own Story as told to John Sack.  
New York: Viking Press, 1971.

\*Estimates ranged between 109 and 567 villagers killed at Mylai.

The trial: we didn't think in November that it would be four months long. The jury\* itself took us three days, though. We went through twenty-five officers, most of them prejudiced for me: not personally, but against the Army for trying me. A captain, "It seemed to me, *Somebody was out to railroad somebody.*" A major, "I personally, I didn't think it was right." A lieutenant colonel was most outspoken. His face was hard, tired, weary, worn: I thought of Johnny Cash. And disgusted, as though he had thought, *We're spending thousands of dollars beating the young lieutenant over the goddamn head. The same as we're doing in Vietnam right now.* He came on very defensive.

"Colonel, is your belief prejudicial to the defendant?"

"No."

"Let's put it the other way. Is it prejudicial to the government?"

"Yes."

A full colonel said, "Over there, we never knew who was the enemy, really. A little old twelve-year-old would come up, take your chewing gun, and the next minute drop a grenade."

One of those twenty-five officers said he knew other purported massacres. "Of a similar nature?"

"Of a similar nature."

"Did you ever discuss it with fellow officers?"

"Yes sir. Not only the Mylai incident but similar incidents."

"You were in sympathy with Lieutenant Calley?"

"Yes sir."

"Are you in sympathy with him now?"

"Yes sir."

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\*jury: choosing an unprejudiced jury for the trial.

... I once saw an open letter to President Nixon.

Mr. President:

I protest the court-martial of Lt. William L. Calley, Infantry. You, Sir, I and our nation must share the guilt of Vietnam. Calley is being tried by all conscience-stricken citizens, who see him as a reflection of themselves.

I read that, and it just turned a key inside me. If it's true, I had an obligation to everyone in America: *I must be a reflection they'll want to look at.* The guilt itself: I could do nothing about it. Mylai had happened and it would have to stand pat. But there's more to America than war, I knew, and I should try to reflect that too. I should reflect this so Americans could say, "We are good people, too. We aren't tyrants: we try, we make errors, we do things wrong, but we will change and go on." The guilt would hurt, but I should reflect every part of America's people. Because they're a good and a great and a wonderful people.

I had a tremendous responsibility. If that letter's true, if I was a mirror, really, for America, I had to be very honest now, to tell everything there was of Mylai, to give everyone straight turkey with no Christmas dressing with it. I had a greater responsibility than the prosecutor did. I couldn't say, "I didn't do it." I couldn't bring in a GI, give him a decent dinner, give him a witness fee to testify coming and going for me. "Calley's the greatest thing there was. He was Christ walking over the rice paddies—" No, that isn't honest, it isn't what a court in America should be. I was like someone high on a cliff in Acapulco. I could back out ("No, I didn't do it!"). Or could be brave and say, *I'll give her a jump today.*

... It sounded exciting: but I had some secret moments, *I'm not strong enough, I'm not brave enough, I don't really want to go through with it. I can't reflect continuously.* I thought I might cry if the prosecutor said, "He killed a hundred people there." On the trial day, I hadn't slept. I got dressed, I drove to "Calley hall," and I sat down there: I was uptight. . .

I knew, *I'll destroy my dignity if I'm indignant today,* and I kept composure this way: I wrote. I wrote on a white lined pad,

My largest fear now is if I'll be able to keep control. There is a tremous [I meant tremendous] amount of fear going through me. I'm starting to shake. I'm trying to reconcile myself that I'm not the first to be going through this. But it doesn't help. . .

And that's when the prosecutor began. A captain.

"Gentlemen, I'd like to tell you a little bit about Mylai Four. We want you to *be* there, and we will try to put you there on 16 March, 1968. The village of Mylai Four is located in Quangngai province."

I listened and I became relaxed now. I knew, *He can't hurt me,* the captain could have no idea of Mylai or of what happened there. He had never been to Vietnam: to war anywhere, and he was so dissociated from it. He said I had done premeditated murder there. It's true: I sat up with sergeants in the wee hours of March 16, 1968, and I plotted to kill those people in Mylai Four. I filled up the cartridge clips, and god! How premeditated can you get? Of course, in Vietnam we called it a combat assault.

"At seven-thirty," the captain went on, "the helicopters set on the western side of Mylai the accused and the first platoon. They disembarked, but they

didn't receive any fire. They found the village undefended. They found women, found children, found old men: none of them armed. Some of them still eating breakfast. So the accused's platoon began to gather these up. These unarmed men, women, children, *babies*, were taken to the southern side of the village by PFC Paul B. Meadlo, Spec Four Dennis I. Conti. The accused directed, 'Take care of these people.' The accused left. Meadlo and Conti guarded the men, the women, the children, the babies. Calley returned. 'Why haven't you taken care of these people?' 'We *have* taken care of them. Guarded them.' 'I mean kill them. Waste them.' And with full bursts of automatic fire, Meadlo and Calley shot those people, those unarmed unresisting—"

He just didn't understand it, the captain. Killing people in war's something new? Now what in the hell *else* is war than killing people? And destroying their homes and their farms and their way of life: that's war! And who in the hell is hurt besides civilians? I sat and I heard the captain talk and I could almost cry: I thought of the thousands of men, thousands of women, thousands of children, thousands of babies slaughtered in Vietnam, the bodies rotting away. The captain didn't seem to know about them. I did: I had been in Vietnam.

\* \* \* \* \*

One thing we were taught at OCS [Officer Candidate School] for twenty years we had thought was bad. To kill, and a sergeant in gym shorts and a T-shirt taught it. We sat around, and he kicked another man in the kidney: a few inches lower, really, or this could be a lethal kick. It was just gruesome: a *POP*, and I thought, *Oh, god. No one can live through*

*that.* He really kicked, or he flipped a man with karate and *WHAM*: he would show us the follow-up. . . We never became proficient though. We did better at cleaning rifles: an M-16 is less gruesome to kill someone with. We thought, *We will go to Vietnam and be Audie Murphys.\* Kick in the door, run in the hootch [house], give it a good burst—kill.* And get a big kill ratio in Vietnam. Get a big kill count.

One thing at OCS was nobody said, "Now, there will be innocent civilians there." Oh sure, there will in Saigon. In the secure areas, the Vietnamese may be clapping the way the French in the '44 newsreels do, "Yay for America!" But we would be somewhere else: be in VC country. It was drummed into us, "Be sharp! On guard! As soon as you think these people won't kill you, *ZAP!* In combat you haven't friends! You have enemies!" Over and over at OCS we heard this, and I told myself, *I'll act as if I'm never secure. As if everyone in Vietnam would do me in. As if everyone's bad.* I went from OCS to Hawaii: to Charlie company, First battalion, Twentieth infantry, and I still didn't hear of innocent civilians. All autumn we landed on beaches or climbed the Kahukus: the tallest, the steepest, the meanest mountains there are if you're infantry, antelopes, mountain goats—anything. We were taught how to assault them, how to take basecamps, how to kill enemy: for Charlie was really made for war! We were mean! We were ugly! We never conceived of old people, men, women, children, babies: of Vietnamese being near us. Never did anyone tell us—

Oh no, I'm wrong. The day before we went to Vietnam, we were given an orientation talk, *Vietnam*

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\*Audie Murphy: was the most decorated GI in World War II. A number of films, including "To Hell and Back," were made about his life as a soldier.

*Our Host.* I should know: I had to give it (I also gave *Chemical, Biological, and Radiological Warfare*). The company made a horseshoe around me. I kept telling it, "Wake up! We're going to Vietnam! Wake up! Because it's our host—" Oh, what a farce that was. I read off a list of "Do"s and "Don't"s that the

Pentagon sent us. Items like—I don't remember. Do not insult the women. Do not *assault* the women. And—I'm too foggy about it. Items like "Be polite."

I had only three minutes for *Vietnam Our Host*. I did a very very poor job of it. I realize that now.

\* \* \* \* \*





We went to Vietnam on Pan American Airways. We landed there on December 1, 1967, in—I didn't know, it could be Ojis, India, and I wouldn't know. I acted asinine that day. I almost thought, *It is hand-to-hand combat today*, and I stood in the trailer truck like the meanest, the most tremendous, the most dangerous weapon there is. My rifle slung low. My helmet pulled down. I even scowled! I realize now, I couldn't impress the Vietnamese less. None of them looked at me: *Another truck of GIs? Big deal. . .* But still I felt, *This is my day!* And these are my men! We're rough and we're tough, and Charlie's here: Charging Charlie! To end this damned war tomorrow!

. . . So that was us: Charlie company, and we were in Vietnam now. And seeing it through the open doors of a cattle car: a shanty land, the houses of cardboard and tin. I was awed: there seemed to be no nice sections anywhere. I felt superior there. I thought, *I'm the big American from across the sea. I'll sock it to these people here.*

We continued south. We took up residence inside our AO: our operations area, and met the Vietnamese people there. One thousand kids, out to solicit the laundry business when we had guard duty on a Vietnamese bridge. All the men loved them. Gave the kids candy, cookies, chewing gum, everything. Not me: I hated them. I had promised myself, *I'll act as if I'm never secure.* I hollered, I yelled, I threw rocks, I threw little kids in the river—yes! I was afraid of Vietnamese kids. At OCS, I had heard enough of kids putting things in a gasoline tank or a GI's hooch. I kept yelling, "Go or I throw you in water."

"You no do it, GI! Vietnamese bridge! I Vietnamese! I stay on bridge! Tonight, I bring all VC

to bridge—" Oh, they would tantalize us. "I bring VC and they *cacadow* [kill] all American GI! I stay on bridge!"

"Okay, I throw you in."

"No throw me in—" I would throw him in. And listen to every kid say, "Oh, throw me in, GI!" They actually loved it.

\* \* \* \* \*

[Calley tells about leading ambush parties which never located any of the enemy.]

But there the depression set in. After my second, my third, my fourth, my fifth, my tenth, my twelfth, my twentieth—ambush, I still hadn't had a VC in my killing zone, and I had had perfect ambush sites, too. I thought, *What am I pulling ambushes for?* I hadn't met any VC in the daylight either. What am I running patrols for? Or looking for? Or humping for? What did I have sixteen months of training for? Now, Charlie was made for killing! Charlie was made for war! Charlie was combat infantry: *We want to kill!*

Not half as much as our colonel did. He kept asking us, "Any body count?"

"No sir."

"No body count?"

"Nobody there to shoot at."

"You better get on the stick sometime."

"Yes sir."

It got so, I cringed if I ever heard helicopter blades. Our colonel would look for VC suspects from—oh, ten thousand feet, and play platoon leader with us. "Oh, Charlie One? I spotted a VC suspect. A few minutes from you." Of course, the Colonel could go a kilometer in thirty seconds and I was in the damn foliage: it might take me a lifetime. "Go where the purple

smoke is, Charlie One." Of course, there was a fifty-meter hill in between us.

"Negative on the purple smoke."

"You don't see it? You idiot, I'll throw another purple smoke."

"Negative on the purple smoke."

"You idiot! It's right on the other side of the little hill!"

I got just a little fed up. He had that damned chopper there, he should land it and capture the VC suspect himself. Or shoot him: I had to walk there, as if I couldn't be ambushed at that purple smoke.

"Get the VC, Charlie One?"

"Yeah."

"Get any body count?"

"No. It's just an old lady taking her taxes in." Or a little boy, or a little girl, or it might be a farmer there with a wooden hoe. I would radio, "He seems friendly."

"Oh does he? He has that damn corral there. What is it?"

"You said it: a damn corral. He seems proud of it."

"Destroy it."

"You want to destroy it? All right," I would say, and I would tear the corral apart, get all the wood together, get a hot fire going—

"You didn't get a body count?"

"No—"

"You better start doing the job, Lieutenant, or I'll find someone who can."

I thought, *Oh, forget it, Colonel. What do you really want of me? Shoot him?* If all you can think of is *Kill them. Kill—the war's never over.* You stay there another day and you can kill someone else. And someone *else*. Or do you kill everyone in South Vietnam? And say, "We have won, we are going home."

I imagine so: just everything in today's society is "How many thousands?" "How many millions?" "How many billions?" And everything was in Vietnam: was numbers, and I had to furnish them. So television could say, "We killed another thousand today," and Americans say, "Our country's great."

The body count—damn. I did what every lieutenant had to: I finally got us a body count. I mean I reported it. One night I said, "We have incoming, sergeant."

"Sir?"

"We have incoming rounds."

"I see." He went where the GIs were, and *tata-tata*: he started shooting it up. Artillery guns, machine guns, we had a mock little firefight, and I called in a body count: three, and a combat loss of some compasses. It was near inventory time, and I had lost those compasses somehow. . .

On patrols, the GIs didn't talk to each other much. A GI might tell me, "I don't want to carry this [empty water can]."

"Why do I have to carry an empty can?"

I didn't know. I didn't know why a cheap plastic water can is a nonexpendable item. I didn't know why a GI pays ninety-eight cents for losing one. Or why we were on this damn patrol, and I didn't want the GIs asking me. Imagine if I answered honestly—

"Why are we doing it?"

"Because the Captain said so."

"Why did the Captain say so?"

"I didn't ask."

"It's a simple question, isn't it? Why didn't you ask?"

"Because the Captain would tell me, 'Because the Colonel said so.' And then I would probably ask him, 'Why did the Colonel say so?'"

"Why did the Colonel say so?"

"Because the General told him, 'I've got nothing better to do.'"

"If they've nothing better to do, Lieutenant—why are we in Vietnam?"

Seriously. OCS always told us, GIs will think you're a dumb damned officer if you can't answer them, and I knew, *I can't*. I couldn't bring the GIs' spirits up: I wondered too, *Now where in the hell are the VC here? Or aren't there any?*

\* \* \* \* \*

I got so I stayed away from the troops. I went through my chain of command: my sergeants, and I would communicate through them. I liked the Army sergeants: the professionals, who just didn't question the United States Army and the United States. But the young privates—well, if I even stopped for a C-ration lunch with one he would ask me, "Why are we in Vietnam, sir?"

"We are here to stop communism. If we don't, it will conquer all of Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand—"

"But sir. How is this getting shot at stopping communism? We still haven't seen a VC."

"Write to your congressman, damn it! I didn't draft you."

... I did as OCS taught me. I didn't say, "I'm the boss around here," but I let the GIs think it. I knew, *I am one little pea in a peapod. And they're churning us up into pea-soup*, but I didn't say it. I had this thing, and I didn't drop it. I acted big: I tried to let everyone think, *We accomplish things here*. I tried to keep up the esprit de corps.

I didn't. I let those doubts show, and the GIs saw through me: I read it in Hersh.\* They said,

"Who is Calley kidding?"

He made something out of himself he wasn't. He reminded me of a kid trying to play war. Everyone used to joke about him.

I was a phoney: true. The best thing might be if I had been honest, I think—but no. . . I couldn't say, "I don't know what I'm doing here. I think I'm screwed up. And the Army's screwed up. But men: tomorrow we go to Mylai One. *And kill those—*" I couldn't say it, I couldn't think it! What do I do if America's really screwed up? Defect?

I wasn't about to. I believe in America, and I wouldn't be disloyal to it. I wouldn't say, "Captain Medina, I'm sorry. You've only got two platoons."

"No, I've got three platoons. I've got the first platoon, the second—"

"I'm sorry. The first platoon just walked off." Certainly not, I wouldn't throw down my rifle and say, "I quit," or demoralize the GIs just because of beliefs. In Vietnam, I wore a large face and I tried to keep people's spirits up: I did what every officer ought to. . .

Something new: we went to a Vietnamese village where the GI morale went *up*. Someone there had been shooting us with mortar shells even, but, of course, when we got there everyone was an old papasan, an old mamasan, or a child saying, "We love the GIs." Everyone was friendly until we started to turn up VC flags. I realized then, *We were being taunted. We were being made a mockery of*. And damn it: when we moved out of this village and we were a hundred meters from it, they again socked it to us. Medina\* phoned, and he got province permission to go to that village to burn it. That's what the GIs wanted:

\*Seymour Hersh's book, *Mylai 4*.

\*Medina: Calley's superior, a Captain in the Army.

to burn it! They held up their matches and Zippos, and they burned the hooches down. The people looked shocked, as though telling us, "Gee, you're burning our houses down." And they picked up and left us. They didn't patronize us. They knew the GIs meant business now.

... If you're a GI who has lost eighteen friends in a minefield with a Vietnamese village a few hundred meters away—well. You think, *Why didn't the Vietnamese signal us? Why didn't the Vietnamese tell us, "Hey, there's a minefield there." Why didn't the Vietnamese help us? . . . Or simply say to us afterwards: "We're sorry about it."* Never; they sat in front of their hooches talking, twiddling thumbs, and all saying, "Gee, I see an American unit," "I wonder what it is doing," "I know what it is doing," "Hahaha." If these people won't lift a finger, a GI will say, *damn them. I'm here to help these people, and they couldn't care less.* And so a bad feeling sets in.

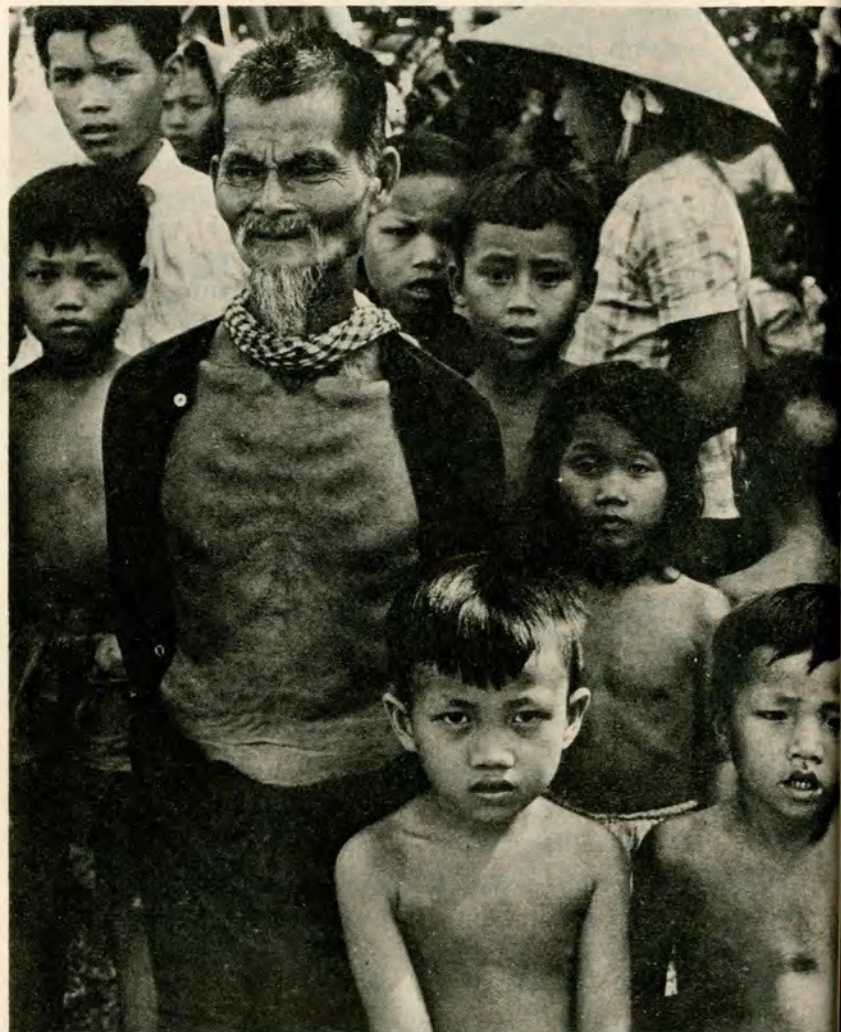
... As for me, I didn't touch a Vietnamese if I didn't have to interrogate him. Say if I was at a village and I was fired on. But everyone there was a nice sweet person like on a Southern porch. All right, I would get a head honcho or—I don't know, I'd get someone there, and I would ask him, "VC adai?" Or "VC adoe?" It may be fictitious, but I was told these are Vietnamese sentences for "Where are the VC?" They are the only sentences I know, "VC adai?"

"No bitt," "I don't know."

"VC adoe?"

"No bitt," "I don't know."

I had a GI interpreter with me: Specialist Grzesik. In Hawaii, Grzesik had taken forty-five days of Vietnamese: Saigonese dialect, and up north he would



always tell me, "I can't understand him." But you don't need an interpreter for "I don't know," and that's what the Vietnamese told us. It frustrated us. That someone could shoot an AK-41 and people wouldn't know it. The soldiers would tell me, "Strange damn place! I could of swore that a VC was shooting at me." I couldn't go back to Medina again or to higher and say, "I'm back."

"What did you ask the Vietnamese?"

"*VC adai.*"

"What did the Vietnamese tell you?"

"*No bitt.*"

"You're an Army officer, aren't you—"

I knew I would hear it. An officer ought to get results: okay, so I sometimes shook up a Vietnamese who kept telling me, "*No bitt.*" I just popped him as I asked him, "*VC adai?*" To begin with, to touch a Vietnamese head is degrading him. And everyone did it.



... As for me, I didn't care to make people cry, but I was an Army officer and I had to get that intelligence. I would pop a Vietnamese in the mouth, sometimes. If it threw him, I stepped on his ankle bone and I started to grind it. I may have killed a Vietnamese once: a horrible thing, but I have to live with it. He was kneeling, and I was kicking him as I asked him the "*VC adai*" and the "*VC adoe.*" I meant to break some ribs but he turned black and blue and he just passed out. A medic said, "You busted his kidney." I never shot a Vietnamese, but I did make believe to. I would say, "*Cacadow?*" or "Kill," and I'd take the Vietnamese out behind the house. I'd fire, I'd let a GI give a good-sized scream, and I'd ask another one, "*VC adai?*" It never worked: the VC knew—the Vietnamese knew I was joking about it. They still told me, "*No bitt.*"

Nothing worked ever. Had it, I guess the newspaper stories might say, "Calley was a tremendous man. He broke the Vietnamese's legs, or ripped their nails out, or cut their fingers off. He learned where the VC camps were, and he saved a thousand lives." But it didn't work, so I was a dummy and I didn't continue it. One day, Grzesik, the GI interpreter, told me, "It's futile. I don't want to ask these questions." I kept beating the man but god! It hit me that night like a ton of bricks, I realized, *Grzesik's right.* I was torturing them, and I wasn't getting answers. I was just hurting them, and I stopped it: I stopped as fast as I'd started it: I went along, and I didn't even say, "*VC adai,*" anymore. I realized, *I've been foolish.* I had been asking everyone where the VC were: I had been talking to VC myself! That is why everyone said, "I don't know." They weren't about to tell me, "I surrender."

At last it dawned on me, *These people, they're all the VC.* I realize, there are Americans who say, "How do you really know it?" Well, I was there. I made decisions. I needed answers, and I didn't have a more logical one. We had an AO of five hundred square kilometers, and if those people weren't all VC then prove it to me. Show me that someone was for the American forces there. Show me that someone helped us and fought the VC. Show me that someone wanted us: one example only! I didn't see any. A story: I used to see wicker baskets everywhere. And every basket was upside down, I could see. Strange: but Intelligence said if Americans are around, it's a VC signal to turn their basket upside down. And everyone's basket was upside down. . .

As soon as I understood it, I wasn't frustrated anymore. I wasn't fooled anymore. I went through the villages, and I didn't say, "VC, *adai*," anymore. I said, "How are the VC today?" And, "You're a VC, aren't you?" And, "Everyone here is a VC, isn't he?" The people would tell me, "No no. We love the GIs. We give you water—" Hell, if I let them they'd poison the water, too. I didn't listen: I just walked on.

I had no love for these people now. I did have a few weeks earlier, but it had been slowly driven out.

. . . Once, we came to a village where we really caught a VC, rifle and all. I don't exaggerate: I pulled him out of a secret room. He had gone through a crack, around a corner, and then behind a fireplace with an AK-41. We found him, though, and I sent him to military police with a manilla tag on: name, location, etcetera, and on the back something like "Found behind false wall." You won't believe it: I caught him again a few weeks later. In the same village again. And wearing the same manilla tag as though

telling us, "I've been interrogated, and I'm okay. I've got a ticket to ride!" Of course, he had taken charcoal and he had crossed out the "Found behind false wall." I told myself, *He has probably killed two or three of us.* And the MPs [military police] *didn't do a damn thing with him.* I went there angry: I said, "I didn't call him a VCS," a VC suspect. "I said a VC!"



"Well, fine. So why didn't you go and shoot him? I can't," the MP said. "I'm at headquarters with the Geneva people\* on me."

"But you've got a POW camp—"

"A prisoner, I've got to give him a bed, a blanket, a pillow, and three square meals every day. And so many cubic meters space: I haven't space."

"But the guy's a VC—"

"All of these guys are VC. But they could tell me, 'I'm Egyptian,' and I'd have to believe them. . .

"I'd love to be in the field with you. I'd take every prisoner and I'd kill every damn one. Do it, Lieutenant, or you're going to see these people back."

I didn't tell the GIs that: but I didn't have to. From then on, they would ask me, "Why don't we do something to these people?"

"What do you want to do? Send them to Task Force? They're going to send them back out."

"My god, sir. I want to do *something*."

"Well, what do you want to do, troop? Talk to these people? Go in and pacify them?"

"Hell no! I want to go in and shoot them!"

I wouldn't let the GIs do it. . . I just couldn't let the GIs kill without having orders to. Suppose an American politician told me, "That's horrible! If that woman was a VC, why didn't she have her uniform on? Her weapon?" I couldn't authorize that, and yet—I thought about it. I was troubled about it. My duty in our whole area was to find, to close with, and to destroy the VC. I had now found the VC. Everyone there was VC. The old men, the women, the children—the *babies* were all VC or would be VC in about three years. And inside of VC women, I guess there

were a thousand little VC now. I thought, *Damn it, what do I do? . . . Chop up all of these people?*

. . . Everyone said eliminate them. I never met someone who didn't say it. A captain told me, "Damn it. I sit with my starlight scope, and I see VC at this village every night. I could go home if I could eliminate it." A colonel: he told me about a general's briefing where the general said, "By god, if you're chasing dead VC and you're chasing them to that village, do it! I'll answer for it! I'll answer for it!"

. . . The day we got orders to Mylai, we had services for Sergeant Cox. A well-liked soldier in Charlie company—well, we never lost a soldier who wasn't liked. I haven't the vaguest idea why he had picked up a 105 artillery shell with a bamboo handle on it. A lieutenant said, "*Put the damn thing down*," but it went off: it blew him to hell. It had been booby-trapped.

We had services at our task force headquarters camp, a camp known as Dotti. We got ourselves half-way decent: shirts on and trousers bloused, to sit around an old artillery emplacement of 55-gallon gasoline drums full of dirt, sand, or cement, or on some sandbag bunkers: a bleachers, sort of. Medina kept yelling at us, "Calley! Where are your people?"

"Sir, they're all here."

"Brooks! Where are your people?"

"Sir—"

It soon dawned on Captain Medina, *The company's here*. We had been out in Vietnamese villages for three months now. We were together and god! We were fifty or sixty soldiers short.

\* \* \* \* \*

\*The Geneva Accords were signed in 1954 as an end to the first Vietnam war. The Accords called for an International Control Commission made up of Polish, Canadian and Indian observers.