

Memorial Day

Vietnam Remembered

By Eric Karlson
Contributing Writer

At the age of 18, I found a letter on my dresser. It read:

Dear Mr. Karlson,

Your number was chosen in the nationwide lottery and you have been drafted into the United States Army. You will report for your physical exam in Perth Amboy, New Jersey on December 9, 1969.

"Yeah right. Take a *** hike!" I mumbled, as I crumpled it up and threw it to the floor.

I grew up in a very stressed family with a rage-a-holic father and a mother who was in and out of a mental institution. There was a lot of dysfunction. To survive the brute reality of my home life, I consumed a lot of alcohol and drugs.

I joined the Army, desperate to kick my habit.

My days of boot camp were spent stabbing dummies with bayonets, shooting paper targets of enemy soldiers out in the field, marching, doing push-ups and KP, and being pushed to our physical and mental limits.

They lectured us about how great the United States was for protecting little countries from the "evils of communism." No matter how much they seemed to explain, I still couldn't get it. They told us about Vietnam and how if we let the commies take it, they'd be landing on our beaches next.

A couple of months after my training in the states, I was shipped to Camp Eagle in Phu Bai, south of Hue (near the Demilitarized Zone) in Vietnam.

When I got there, I quickly realized that we were not going to win this war. All the GIs knew this as well. The morale was horrible. We were apathetic and felt like we were being used for cannon-fodder - just sent out there to get shot up rather than actually winning anything.

We were under tremendous pressure, especially the infantry on the front lines to come back with dead Viet Cong enemies or body counts.

Many of us turned to drugs. I found myself smuggling marijuana, opium and heroin from the Vietnamese villages to the military base in Phu Bai where I was stationed.

As I traveled into the villages to score drugs, I witnessed some American forces brutalizing the



In Vietnam, the U.S. destroyed 9,000 out of 15,000 hamlets, 25 million acres of farmland, 12 million acres of forest, and left 25 million bomb craters.

Vietnamese to the point of murder.

After the end of one month in Vietnam, I went AWOL. My breaking point came after seeing an American Sargeant "blow away" a Vietnamese boy for stealing his wrist watch. Something snapped inside of me. I realized that I could not be a part of what American forces were doing in Vietnam.

To survive, I lived with the Vietnamese villagers. The locals protected me from U.S. forces. They demonstrated to me their huge capacity for understanding and compassion in a way that I never experienced before in my life. For the most part, my frozen heart began to open.

I was eventually caught near the city of Hue. Along with two other GIs, we were being chased by military police who captured us.

There was a Colonel back at the base who wanted to court martial me and lock me up in Long Binh jail, but a major who had befriended me pushed for immediate discharge and I was sent home.

On October 15, 1970, I was back on U.S. soil behind twelve-foot barbed wire fences in a stockade in Ft. Lewis, south of Seattle. Two days later, I was discharged and on a plane back to New Jersey.

I grew my hair long, marched in demonstrations in Washington, D.C., and joined the antiwar movement and the Vietnam Veterans Against the War to continue my protest against the injustices taking place in Southeast Asia. The GIs there were counting on those of us who had made it back to tell Americans the real story.

The saddest aspect of the Vietnam war were how the veterans were treated when they returned home. Unfortunately, they didn't receive recognition for their courage and desire to protect their country. They were placed in a no-win situation.

Memories of Nam permeated my

life. I missed the simplicity of the peasants and their loving ways, and also my buddies with whom I'd found so much in common. There was much confusion after having lived under such extreme conditions where compassion and staying alive were all that really mattered.

Since the government of Vietnam recently opened the country to tourism, the possibility now exists for me to return. What would I find? Are all my friends and lovers dead? Are the people who helped, protected, and cared for me gone? Vietnamese who supported or even associated with Americans during the U.S. occupation were either killed

or taken to slave labor camps in the jungles. Few survived. But even if their physical presence is gone, their love and compassion lives on in my heart.

In the presence of the Vietnamese peasants, I was given a vision of what life could be for us all. I hold that vision in hopes that the qualities these simple people expressed in their everyday lives will someday change the way people think and act. Perhaps our world will then reach the potential that the Creator intended for us - one in which intellect and heart fuse as one, and our decisions are made from a level where love and concern for our fellow human beings guide our actions.

Every injustice bears within it a seed. This seed can be nurtured in darkness and the fruit will be resentment and further injustice, or it can be nurtured in the light and the fruit will be that of learning and compassion. We have the opportunity to expand our hearts and find new ways within ourselves to change life for the better. Our Vietnam experiences brought forth a vital seed for all of us to recognize the treasures that we have in our lives.

Eric Karlson is the author of *Fall To Grace* (Mariposa Press). His website is [www. Mariposa-Press.com](http://www.Mariposa-Press.com). He can be reached by email at erick@Mariposa-Press.com.

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