The Quiet Hero: Platoon Sergeant Finnis D. McCleery

Medal of Honor recipient Finnis D. McCleery was a quiet person who shunned all publicity for his bravery in Vietnam. Let us remember him on July 11, 2003 ... the first anniversary of his death.

David W. Taylor

A Life of Service

Finnis D. McCleery was born in Stephenville, Texas on Christmas day, 1927 and died 75 years later in San Angelo, 155 miles away. His life between those years reflected an unassuming devotion to his country and family, marked by his Irish wit and a deep humility about what life represented to him and those he knew.

At the age of 19, in 1946, McCleery joined the fledgling Army Air Corps and served in the post-war occupation of Germany until 1948. He re-enlisted during the Korean Conflict from 1950 to 1953, although he was not sent to the Korean Theatre. Not satisfied with civilian life, he re-enlisted once again in 1958 and served continuously until his retirement in 1973.

A Man's Destiny: Vietnam

McCleery's Army career took him to Vietnam where he was eventually assigned as Platoon Sergeant, 1st platoon, in Company A, 1st/6th Infantry Battalion, 198th Light Infantry Brigade. In short order upon arriving in Vietnam, the 1st/6th became heavily engaged in the search for NVA main force units in its assigned areas of operation.

SFC McCleery led by example, earning the Silver Star on February 8, 1968 when, during the battle of Lo Giang he killed six Viet Cong who charged his position. When his platoon leader assumed command of Company A, McCleery took charge of 1st platoon, which covered the withdrawal of the company while under heavy fire. The company had suffered 19 dead and over 35 wounded. When it came time for the 1st platoon to withdraw, McCleery grabbed an M-60 machinegun to provide covering fire. Seeing wounded in the open, he ran under intense enemy fire to assist in their recovery.

On April 25th he earned the Bronze Star for valor, and a Purple Heart, during operations in the Que Son valley. In the late afternoon company A came under small arms fire. Shortly after the enemy fire began, a booby-trapped mortar round was detonated, severely wounding several men in the 1st platoon, including Platoon Sergeant McCleery. Ignoring his wounds, he exposed himself several times to reach the wounded and provided covering fire, while the wounded were attended to. He was wounded shortly after for his second Purple Heart on May 5th.

Nui Hoac Ridge

On April 22, 1968 Companies A, B and C of the 1st/6th had moved to Area of Operation "Manassas" as part of the Americal's "Wheeler/Wallowa" operation. The battalions Tactical Operations Center (TOC) was set up on LZ Center. On May 14, the battalions Alpha and Delta Companies along with its recon platoon and companies Alpha and Bravo of the 1st/20th battalion (under operational control of the 1st/6th), were given the mission of attacking an NVA force that was well entrenched on the Nui Hoac ridge, near Hill 352, directly south of LZ Center and 17 miles west of Tam Ky. The day was sunny and exceptionally hot.

The positions on and around Hill 352 had been deemed "impregnable". A company-sized force of NVA regulars was positioned in bunkers over six-feet deep with reinforced covers and excellent fields of fire on any attacking force. The sloping ridges around Hill 352 had few normal terrain features and little foliage to provide cover due to previous air strikes.

The combined forces from the 1st /6th and 1st/20th battalions began their attack by sweeping southward up the ridge. Their positions from left to right (east to west) were A/1-6, D/1-6, A/1-20 and B/1-20. At 1455 hrs Alpha/1-6 on the eastern flank of the assault, received heavy machine-gun fire to their left and M-79 and small arms fire directly from their front up the ridge. By 1500 hrs both Alpha and Delta 1st/6th were receiving automatic weapons fire from the top of the ridge. In 15 minutes each company counted four men wounded. At 1524 hrs Alpha received RPG rounds from their right front up on the ridge. They engaged the enemy position with light anti-tank weapons (LAWs). Only a few minutes later Delta received RPG fire from an NVA position 200 meters to their front. By this time Alpha had captured a 60mm mortar that had fired on them from their left flank. By 1527 hrs the first dust-off had been completed for the seriously wounded of Alpha and Delta and by 1539 hrs another dust-off was accomplished for more wounded.

All along the ridge the enemy fire intensified. Alpha and Bravo companies of the 1st/20th on the west flank of the assault force were also receiving heavy fire that had killed one and wounded twelve. Back on the east flank, McCleery's Alpha Company received recoilless rocket and RPG fire but gunships silenced the NVA position. At 1607 hrs Alpha of the 1st /20th, back on the western flank, received 50-cal. machinegun fire and called for artillery and air strikes.

Above and Beyond

By 1610 hrs McCleery's Alpha Company had begun their assault on the hill itself. The first platoon, led by SFC McCleery, was in the lead. He was serving at the time as both the platoon sergeant and platoon leader. As they approached the first rim, where the terrain broke over to the flatter top of the ridge, his platoon came under heavy fire and was forced to take cover. The NVA was bombarding them with mortars, rockets, machine-guns and automatic weapons fire. Realizing the gravity of the situation, with the momentum slowed and fearing his men would take heavy casualties if they paused, McCleery rose from his sheltered position to begin a one-man assault on the bunker line.

SFC Finnis D. McCleery at the age of 41, charged across 60 meters of open ground to the key enemy bunker. As he closed to 30 meters he began firing furiously from the hip. As he charged, grenades exploded close by and bullets were impacting all around him. He continued to the bunker and destroyed it with grenades. During this final push an exploding RPG round wounded him but, as one witness noted, "this failed to slow him down". After destroying the NVA bunker, McCleery climbed on top of it and, in full view of the enemy shouted to his men, "come on boys" and motioned for them to follow him in the assault.

McCleery then continued the attack, flanking the bunkers that were on the right side of the NVA bunker complex along the ridge. Approaching his second target, he was again painfully wounded by shrapnel but he silenced the position from which two NVA soldiers had been firing rockets and hurling grenades. Still disregarding his multiple wounds, he ran 50 meters to a third bunker and killed its defenders with a burst of fire. He repeatedly exposed himself to intense fire as he moved from bunker to bunker. According to one of his men, "he moved through the area even though as he was under fire from several directions but did not slow down". He then advanced to a fourth emplacement, destroying a NVA machine-gun crew just as his platoon began to penetrate the enemy perimeter. SFC Finnis McCleery had killed eleven NVA soldiers in the four bunkers.

Sergeant Alan Allen, a 1st platoon squad leader, had moved forward just in time to witness McCleery's stand on top of the first NVA bunker. Allen penetrated the bunker perimeter behind McCleery and, while McCleery wheeled to the right, Allen began an attack on the left side of the NVA bunker complex. Allen knocked out bunkers with his shotgun and hand grenades. As one NVA soldier attempted to fire an RPG rocket, Sgt. Allen pushed the launcher back into the

bunker with his foot and then fired his shotgun at point blank range into the enemy position. He earned his second Purple Heart from fragments of several grenades that exploded a few feet away.

After the battle the 198th Brigade Commander recognized that SFC McCleery's "... actions turned what could have been a disastrous defeat for his unit into a complete rout of the enemy." President Nixon presented SFC McCleery the Medal of Honor on March 2, 1971, with his full family in attendance. His oldest son Jack, who was serving in the Air Force in Viet Nam, was flown back for the ceremony.

SFC Finnis D. McCleery (U.S. Army Photo)

The Quiet Warrior

Sgt. Alan Allen remembers McCleery as a warrior cut from a different cloth. " I always thought 'Sgt. Mac' cared deeply for his men, as much for their lives as his own; but I used to call him 'Friar Tuck' because he was short and rotund. He had a little hair around the side of his head and nothing on the top". He recalls. "Platoon Sergeant McCleery had that Irish look ...rosy cheeks, wire rim glasses and a mischievous twinkle in his eye". Allen also remembers him as a man of competence: "He was easy-going but when he told you to do something, you did it. You knew that he knew what he was talking about --- he always made sense. Because he was so much older he was sort of a father figure, and to me almost a grandfather figure".

SFC McCleery was awarded the Medal of Honor while stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia in 1971. His son Jack recalls, "Dad was very agitated. The folks at Ft. Benning made him sit and sit while they took pictures of him with his medal" (the picture which appears in this article). "He didn't like it one bit. He just wanted to be left alone".

Although he was a quiet man, those who knew him, his family, sensed the weight of his combat experience he carried with him. His son Roger reflects, "he rarely talked about Nam but we knew it was always within him. When I was 4 or 5 I remember him coming home in his uniform and laying on the couch for a nap. Mom told my brother Curt and I to wake him for supper. We shook him to wake up and all of a sudden we were flying 12-15 feet into the kitchen. It was an automatic response on his part. He didn't know he had done it. As soon as he realized what he had done he was on his feet checking that we were OK. From that point on, we just called him to wake him up. But he was a kind man. His way to discipline us was to quietly talk to us for a half an hour. We got so that we would rather get spanked and be done with it than be lectured. But it was his way."

His daughter Dee remembered those early years growing up: "My Dad couldn't stand for us kids to fight, as kids normally did with sibling rivalry. He would always say, 'there's too much fighting in the world'. Mom was the disciplinarian; she had to be, with him gone so much. But all he had to do is say something, and you listened".

After his retirement in 1973 Finnis McCleery moved back to his beloved Texas and opened a refrigeration/air conditioning repair shop, content to be a quiet family man. He was cordial and tried to fulfill whatever local requests he could when asked for appearances, but avoided going far from home. This included the traditional Medal of Honor Balls at the Presidential Inaugurations in Washington D.C. His children remember their father's consistent response to requests for appearances: **"I don't feel like I'm owed anything. I was just doing my job".**

McCleery retired from his repair business in the early 90's due to his advancing age and declining health as a result of his injuries in Vietnam, which dogged him even while he was still on active duty. Shortly after retirement he suffered a heart attack which required by-pass surgery. In 1998 his wife of 45 years, Lena, passed away.

Lisa Moore, the McCleery's 2nd oldest of seven children reflects on the incongruity of her dad's fame, and the man she knew: "My dad was a very humble man who was embarrassed by all the attention he received. He felt he did not deserve the Medal of Honor, that he should not have been singled out for his actions when there were so many other men who fought day after day, and whose actions were heroic. He always said that he was 'just doing his job'.

"I have always considered him to be the most unlikely hero. He morally opposed taking human life, but knew that his country required him to do so. Dad was a jolly man, short (5'5"), round and bald. He had a joke and a smile for everyone, always remembered to ask about your family. He always remembered birthdays and anniversaries, and made up errands for his grandchildren to do so that he could give them money.

"Dad wrote love letters to my mom when they were apart, and always gave beautiful cards to her for Valentines Day, her birthday and their anniversary. He followed politics and current events and liked to hear other people's opinions. He had a great sense of humor (once he painted the doorframe, going into the kitchen pink as a joke. My mom made him repaint it before he went to bed that night). Another time, he came home and told my mom he had bought her a car. She went outside and found an old Chevy with no motor in the back yard"

His son Curt, remembers, "Dad was always kind and thoughtful about other people. He didn't think about himself much ... he always put himself last".

McCleery's son Jack recalls his Dad had trouble sleeping in his last few years. "Sometimes it took a few beers for him to open up, but he would share with me the fact he had trouble sleeping and remembering the faces of the enemy he took on in close combat. He would share with me; 'I can still see their eyes'. It bothered him at the loss of life which took place but I tried to assure him God would understand". Finnis D. McCleery died July 11, 2002.

Lest We Forget

July 11, 2003 will bring the usual summer heat and bright sun to the Texas town of San Angelo. It will be much like that day on Nui Hoac Ridge. It will be one week after the July 4th weekend, and its citizens will be busy working and living their lives, few of them thinking about a hero buried in Belvedere Cemetery off Arden Road. But on this day this hero's family will remember the father and grandfather they lost one year ago, his grave appropriately facing the flagpole, and his wife, their devoted mother and grandmother lying in rest with him.

And although they won't be physically present on this day, thousands of Americal Army Division veterans will also remember this man, a fellow soldier, a leader, a brother in arms, a soldier who gave of himself. And they will salute him ... the quiet hero with an Irish grin and a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

Appreciation is given for the interviews with the McCleery family, Alan Allen and Wayne Johnston, who is webmaster of the web site for the 1st/6th Battalion and from which much of the description of the battle was obtained. Readers can learn more by accessing: **http://hometown.aol.com/old16inf**

The Long-Shot Warriors: Americal Snipers in Vietnam

The Americal Divisions sniper organization began late during the division's Vietnam tenure. While it experienced the same issues as other Army sniper organizations, snipers proved their worth in the field.

David W. Taylor

Early Beginnings

America's adoption of the sniper concept began with its development as a nation. Washington and his commanders recognized they had neither the manpower nor firepower to fight the British Army at close quarters. The American's use of the Pennsylvania Long Rifle was an effective weapon for its hit-and-run tactics. A British ordnance expert had stated, "no man would ever be killed by a musket at 200 yards by the person who aimed at him". But Continental sharpshooters could pick off British commanders behind their main lines at ranges of 200 to 250 meters.

During the War of 1812 Commander Oliver Perry employed Kentucky infantrymen armed with long rifles to sweep the decks of the British fleet. America's marksmen, in place of firepower, were most efficient at the Battle of New Orleans. On January 8, 1815 more than 8,000 British soldiers attacked a force of half that size commanded by General Andrew Jackson. 2,000 of Jackson's men carried Kentucky (formerly known as "Pennsylvania") long rifles and began engaging the attacking British at several hundred meters. More than 1,500 British soldiers were killed in a humiliating defeat at a cost of 60 Americans.

Advances in munitions for "long-shot warriors" continued and sharpshooters were used effectively by both the North and South during the Civil War. The most prized targets on both sides were artillery crews and senior officers. Among the many developments brought on by the Civil War, such as trench warfare, was the stark reality that "being visible was being vulnerable".

Frontiersmen and buffalo hunters provided the superior marksmanship in the Indian Wars. For example, in June 1874, several hundred Comanche Indians attacked about thirty buffalo hunters and merchants at an isolated trading post. They drove them away with long-range 50-caliber Sharps rifle fire, prompting the Indians to observe the Sharps as "the gun that shoots today and kills tomorrow".

Michael Lee Lannings book, "Inside the Crosshairs – Snipers in Vietnam", notes: "the term sniper probably originated with the British Army in India, where officers hunted snipes, a slender-billed bird related to the woodcock. Snipes, fleet of foot and wing, were difficult targets, and shooters proficient at hitting them became known as 'snipes'. The British then began referring to well-aimed shots both toward and from the enemy as snipes, and those who fired the rounds as snipers".

World War I saw the German Army most committed to the concept of snipers on the battlefield with its superior gun manufacturing, a tradition of training men in marksmanship and the best technology in optics and telescopes. Germany fielded large numbers of trained snipers. Britain countered with snipers of their own, drawn primarily from big-game hunters. American and Canadian forces also employed snipers from their ranks. The World War I battlefield placed senior officers well out of range of artillery thereby placing the primary targets for snipers, on both sides of the trenches, as front line officers and regular infantrymen.

World War II was mostly devoid of sniper activity until the German siege of Stalingrad in late 1942. German and Soviet snipers made movement inside the city extremely deadly. By early 1944 British sniper schools were established to prepare expert marksmen for the Normandy invasion in August. The unofficial definition of British sniping became "the art of drilling round holes into square heads". The American Army largely left sniper training and employment to individual units. Japanese snipers in the Pacific Theatre tended to establish their positions in the tops of trees. While most snipers established a credo to "shoot and scoot – and live to shoot again", Japanese soldiers were prepared to die for the emperor. Therefore their treetop positions became their final positions once they were spotted.

During the Korean Conflict the North Korean Army was not at all reluctant to use snipers. The American Army and Marines took up the challenge by designating their best marksmen as snipers and providing the best rifles and munitions they could find. But no official school existed to train snipers or sniper teams in a formalized way.

Army Snipers: Vietnam

The Vietnam War required adaptive thinking in tactics, weapons and operational procedures to fight this "different kind of war" but the US Army was slow to adopt the sniper concept.

The systematic training and employment of sniper teams began when Major General Julian Ewell assumed command of the 9th Infantry Division in February 1968. Prior to his assuming command Ewell convinced the Army to explore the formation of a formalized sniper program in Vietnam.

In 1967 the US Army Marksmanship Training Unit (USAMTU), Fort Benning, Georgia received the mission to evaluate sniper operations and weapons in Vietnam. During April and May of that year sniper equipment arrived for most of the combat units in-country, including the 196th Light Infantry Brigade (separate). The 196th had actually established an in-country sniper school of limited duration in Chu Lai, for the purpose of fielding a number of modified M-14's for that purpose. Sniper activities were evaluated from July through October. In February 1968 the final report was issued recommending a formal approach of instruction and operational procedures be established. Of note for Americal veterans was the fact the report noted: "The highest enemy KIA to man-days ratio occurred in units that were operating primarily in the central highlands, coastal plain and southern portion of the northern highlands of RVN". Much of this type of geography would be the domain of the Americal Division.

The task for establishing the first formal sniper school (9th Infantry Division) fell to Major Willis L. Powell and eight noncommissioned officers from the USAMTU who arrived in June 1968. Powell's credentials made him well suited for the mission. Powell had more than 20 years experience in the Army as a NCO and officer and served a previous tour as an ARVN advisor. He also had years of experience in competitive shooting at the national and international level.

By early 1969 the Army sent additional marksmanship teams to Vietnam to train snipers. But concurrent with this late but rapid acceleration of the sniper program, the "Vietnamization" of the war began the transfer of major troop units back to the USA. By now Powell was back at Ft. Benning training additional instructor teams to go to Vietnam to train snipers at the division level. Powell, looking to the close-knit marksmanship community in the Army hand-selected the officers and NCO's to run each team.

The Americal Effort Begins

Captain Virgil Umphenour arrived at Fort Benning in January 1970 with 9 hand-selected NCO's who were to form one of two sniper training teams scheduled for activation that month. Umphenour had served in the Marine Corps for four years, then the Arizona Army National Guard,

active duty OCS at Ft. Benning, then airborne and ranger schools. When the requirement came for more sniper instruction teams, Umphenour was the commander of the 18th Airborne Corps Rifle & Pistol Team (Ft. Bragg) and 82nd Airborne Division Training School XO.

After forming up his instruction team at Ft. Benning in January 1970, Umphenour's group flew to Saigon then to Chu Chi to spend some time with the 25th Infantry Division's sniper team. Most were former 9th Division team cadre whose Vietnam tours had not expired when the 9th Division was transferred back to the states.

Umphenour arrived at the Americal Division headquarters in Chu Lai in early March 1970. Through a classified supply program known as "Ensure 240", his and other division sniper training teams were provided the weapons and training supplies in advance of their arrival. Using the course instruction developed by Powell while at the 9th Division the year before, and reviewed with each sniper training team at Ft. Benning, Captain Umphenour and his group were "up and running" within a week upon arrival at their training site located at the divisions Combat Training Center.

The Sniper Training Team and its students insulated themselves because of their specialized mission. The team bunked together and constructed a "sniper bar" for themselves and their students.

All battalion commanders were to submit nominations for sniper training, with the goal of accepting approximately 20 students per class. Umpenour noted, "we had three key selection criteria for the school: First, they must have served at least two months in the field as infantry. Second, they must have fired expert on their most recent rifle qualification and third, they must be a volunteer". Aware of the propensity for some field commanders to send "undesirables" as a means to "shape up or ship out", Umphenour estimates "90% were real volunteers and just a few undesirables. Some of those so-called undesirables took an interest in the sniper concept and did well".

While the primary mission of the Sniper Training Team was to train snipers, having a core group of experts in marksmanship within the division provided other benefits as well. Shortly after the first class graduated, an infantry company had been ambushed by the NVA and took heavy casualties, despite using up most of their ammunition. Newly assigned Assistant Division Commander Brigadier General Ted Mataxis was concerned. Recalls Umphenour, "General Mataxis wanted me to go and sit down with the company and find out why they couldn't hit what they were shooting at. We found out their rifles were not zeroed and gave basic instruction in marksmanship. Then we found they still weren't doing well, their rifles fired so erratic they couldn't hit a very liberal target group – 8 inches at 100 meters." Upon closer inspection Umphenour's team found the rifle barrels were worn out. "We attributed that to two things", he recalls, "first the dust blowing in the barrels over time from helicopters and second, the 'mad minutes' the units fired which used periodic tracer rounds, and the phosphorous from those rounds eroded the barrels". As a result of that finding, Mataxis ordered that all weapons in the division be test fired. "This caused quite a stir with the Maintenance Battalion Commander", remembers Umphenour, "but we were proven to be correct". As a result, sniper training was suspended for one month and sights were fixed (many were found inoperable) and all rifles were test fired. The findings from that one rifle company were duplicated in many parts of the division. 5,000 barrels had to be ordered in a "Red Ball Requisition" which arrived from the states in a matter of days.

Training for a sniper class lasted approximately three weeks. The time varied slightly based on equipment availability and timely arrival of students. While the core of the program focused on marksmanship effectiveness, other subjects such as radio procedures and calling for artillery fire were thoroughly covered. Because of their secluded positions, sniper teams in the division often spotted larger groups of NVA/VC than could be prudently engaged by single shot rounds. Here, the ability to call in indirect fire support often paid off in big dividends.

The students soon adopted an unofficial sniper tab that was worn above the Americal patch. Other divisions had adopted the same approach. Umphenour recalls, "we noticed the unofficial tabs and recognized them as a form of espirit de corps. We just looked the other way."

The standard sniper weapon was a 7.62mm M-14 "accurized" rifle, using an "Adjustable Ranging Telescope" (ART) and special 7.62mm M118 National Match Ammunition collectively designated as the **XM 21**. Starlight Scopes were also assigned for use in limited visibility periods. The doctrine called for two-man teams (both snipers) a radio operator, one M-60 machine gunner and one M-79 man for security. The effectiveness of the program began to take shape. In May 1970 Captain Umphenour sent his first report to the U.S. Army Marksmanship Training Unit at Fort Benning, which covered a 10-day period:

Update Information on Sniper Program
AMERICAL DIVISION

1. To date, this division has 57 snipers within combat units.
2. To date, sniper actions are listed below:

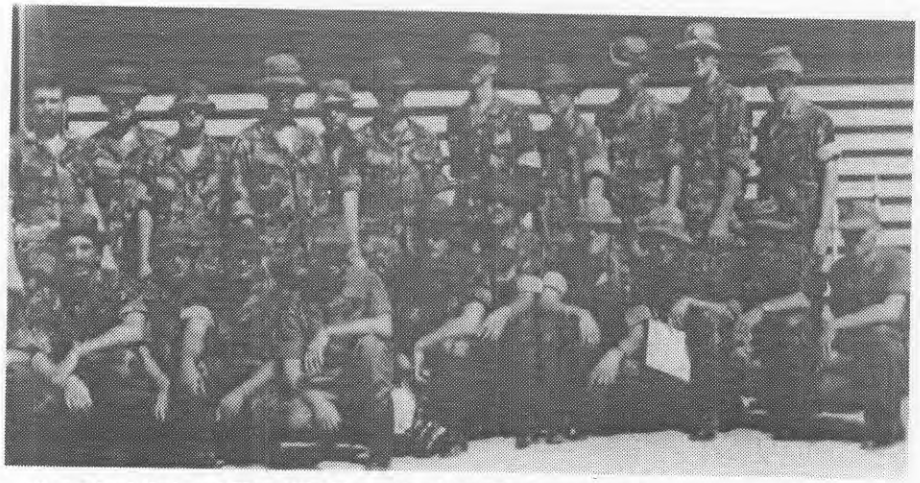
Time	Sight	Terrain	Range	Rounds Fired	Kill	Wound
1630	ART	Trail	450	1	1	-
1900	Star	Trail	500	2	-	1
1930	Star	River	200	2	1	-
1200	ART	Woods	650	1	1	-
1215	ART	Jungle	75	2	1	-
1400	ART	Jungle	45	3	1	-
1715	ART	Hill Top	500	2	1	-
0815	ART	Paddy	900	1	1	-
0515	Star	River	250	1	1	-
0530	Star	Riv. Bank	500	2	-	1
0100	Star	Paddy	100	1	1	-
1415	ART	Trail	700	5	1	-

Long-Shot Warriors

All division snipers were debriefed when they periodically returned to the sniper school to have their weapons checked and re-zeroed. Through the debriefings the training team learned if and how their snipers were being effectively employed. Typical missions were to deny enemy access into infiltration routes, being inserted prior to unit air assaults to take out VC/NVA who may fire on the helicopters, calling on snipers to take out single targets out of range of M-16's ... and "stay behind" missions.

Captain Umphenour recalled one incident where a trained sniper excelled in both roles as a sniper and artillery forward observer: "There was this PFC Salas in the 196th Brigade who was at a night defensive position (NDP). He saw a VC leading a group of 18 NVA a far distance from his position. He called in artillery fire and then, to hold them in place, began shooting at them to pin them down. He killed one NVA on his 5th shot. After the action the commander of the NPD actually measured the distance. Salas made his kill at 1,600 meters"

One of the most effective Americal snipers was SSG Fidel "Papa Leach" Serrano, of the 3rd/1st battalion, 11th LIB. This native of Caguas, Puerto Rico entered



Americal Sniper Class #2 Circa April 1970. Instructors are in front with some of the students. (Photo courtesy of Denis Bourcier)

the Army in 1961. His first Vietnam tour was with the 101st Airborne in 1967-1968, where he saw much action around Cu Chi, up in Hue and by the DMZ, which included the heavy fighting during Tet 68. He returned to Vietnam after a short stint at Fort Bragg, and was assigned to the newly formed Americal Division and the 3rd/1st battalion, 11th LIB where he remained for three years until the division stood down.

Serrano was one of the graduates of the first sniper class at the Combat Center and oversaw the sniper teams in his battalion. He recalls, "we always operated in teams of no less than 2 and no more than 5 men. Sometimes I would go out with one other man for protection. Other times a team would go out with two snipers, an RTO and two weapons men for protection".

Serrano was the consummate sniper warrior. He preferred the jungle to everything else and adhered to critical lessons learned while with the 101st. He and his teams "packed hard". "Some men in the field liked to pack a lot of useless stuff" he recalls. "Things such as writing paper, letters and gifts from home, etc. I would tell them you can't kill VC with paper". He required his teams to carry gas masks and CS gas canisters. His 101st experience told him it was the best way to break off close contact. Lots of ammunition, rations, water, hand grenades and smoke grenades. The snipers carried even more: Their modified M-14's (XM 21), Adjustable Ranging Telescope (ART), starlight scope and special match ammunition. Serrano also carried a silencer for his XM 21 and a modified M-79 (prepared by the armorer at the sniper school) with shortened barrel for shooting CS canisters.

Serrano's first kill remains etched in his mind. While working with his company he shot an NVA officer and retrieved some documents and his pistol. "The Americal map that I used was old and, even though I shot the NVA near a village, my map showed no village" The following morning the company came under heavy attack from the NVA but the commander could get no artillery support because the guys in the rear saw the village on their map".

Serrano's battalion felt most comfortable allowing snipers to work in "Free Fire Zones". One night he and his RTO, along with an E-5 for gun support staked-out a riverbed. He saw a large sampan with two VC hauling about 100 bags of rice. After shooting the VC the sampan beached itself. In the morning they destroyed the rice, undoubtedly leaving more than a few of the enemy hungry.

SGT Denis "Rocky" Bourcier also from the 3rd/1st battalion accompanied SSG Serrano to the first sniper class. Bourcier was a native of Springfield, Massachusetts who entered the Army in 1969 and graduated from the airborne and NCO schools at Ft. Benning.

After serving as a squad leader with Delta Company for one month he was "encouraged" to volunteer for sniper training. "I was kind of a troublemaker", he recalls. "Not that I was insubordinate, but I questioned everything." Bourcier found the training at the sniper school to be top notch. He and Serrano were assigned to the battalions Echo Company for sniper duties throughout the battalion. The sniper school regarded Serrano and Bourcier as two of the division's most proficient snipers. Bourcier: "Our battalion base was located on Hill 411. Not far was the Song Tra Khuc river, which curbed around the general trace of the firebase. The area was fairly open around us. We could hide on the near side of the riverbank and wait for targets. Adding to our effectiveness was OP-1, an ARVN Observation Post. It was very high up, had a great view of the area and the soldiers up there could radio us about any enemy movement."

The Phase-Out Begins

Major Lones Wigger became the second Officer-In-Charge of the Americal's sniper program. This Montana native entered the Army out of ROTC in 1961 and was assigned to the Marksmanship Unit at Fort Benning. He won the Gold and Silver Medals in target shooting at the 1964 Olympics in Japan. Wigger served his first tour in Vietnam in 1967, as an agricultural advisor in the Delta.

Wigger's team arrived in Vietnam in January 1971, less than a month after Umphenours group rotated back to the states. But instead of moving directly to Chu Lai to pick up the program, they were re-routed northwest of Saigon for two months to train Vietnamese officers as cadre to begin their own sniper training (Vietnamization was in full swing). They also helped the Vietnamese construct their own sniper training range. Wigger recalls, " I don't think they ever trained snipers because they could not get the XM 21's (modified M-14's) which we used. Apparently the brass felt they may fall into the wrong hands and be used against us".

Upon arriving in Chu Lai two months late, Wigger's team picked-up where the others left off. Reporting to the Combat Center's CO, he also had a strong line of communication to the ADC, General Mataxis. Like Umphenour, Wiggers found Mataxis very enthusiastic about snipers and gave him full support. Unfortunately for Wigger and his team, Mataxis departed shortly after his arrival. Command attention was drawn to other areas as the draw down of American forces increased and holding down casualties became a primary focus. One of the primary lessons of the Americal Division's sniper experience was no different from other divisions in Vietnam. A division sniper program needed high-level interest and support to function effectively.

Wigger's sniper training team was surprised at the body language from those who volunteered for training. "Most didn't believe I had much to say", he recalls. "They considered us as REMFs and Lifers. I told them that in two weeks they would be getting first-round hits at man size targets, at 500 meters every shot. Knowing the Army's general lack of marksmanship interest compared to the Marines, I could agree with them that they thought I was blowing smoke". After several days of training the students became enthusiastic as they learned from qualified NCO's and developed confidence in their equipment. Notes Wigger, "they were very competitive between themselves during record days.

They were champing at the bit to get back to the field and apply what they learned".

The respect sniper students gained for their instructors carried over once they left. When they returned periodically to re-zero their weapons and have the gunsmith go over their guns, they tended to stay with the sniper-training cadre rather than spend time in their battalion rear. Wigger: "They wanted to rub shoulders with my NCO's and tell their stories".

Wigger's NCOIC was SFC Burl Branham. This two-war veteran was from the Appalachian Mountains of Eastern Kentucky. He served in the Korean War with the 3rd Infantry Division and saw most of his unit wiped out. At age 20 in Korea he was appointed Master Sergeant. In 1966 he served his first tour in Vietnam with the 25th Infantry Division as a Platoon Sergeant in a tank battalion.

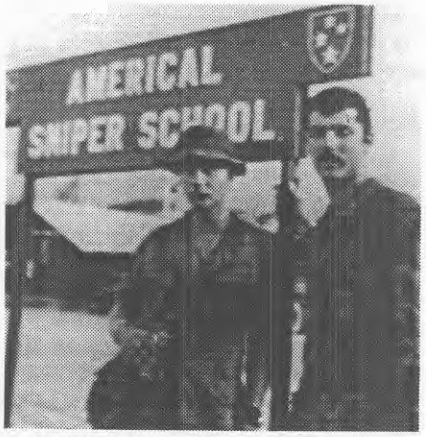
As the withdrawal in forces from Vietnam grew, moral continued to decline and drug usage increased throughout Vietnam. But Wigger remembers, "we had an unwritten rule that if a sniper was caught using drugs he was dropped from the program and required to turn in his rifle". Wiggers used his R&R to return stateside where he qualified for the US Shooting Team and participated in the Pan American Games in Calle, Columbia. On another TDY tour he shot in the National Matches at Camp Perry, Ohio.

SFC Branham insured the quality of the sniper training in Chu Lai was maintained as he saw his beloved Army melt down from the lack of political will. Continuously snipers would return from the field for re-zeroing their weapons and related how they were not being fully utilized due to the command emphasis on keeping casualties down.

Throughout the sniper program within the Americal, some men decided they could not kill one-on-one in the highly personal manner created by the Adjustable Ranging Telescope. Branham recalls two snipers who returned to the school and asked to go back to being regular grunts. Branham: "That happens. They were good men. We had them turn in their equipment and go back to their units. Sometimes ... that's just the way it is". Snipers were also "marked for life". Standard procedure was to forward to the FBI all sniper names who successfully graduated.

The strong reliance on superior firepower in Vietnam never culturally gave the Army's sniper program the opportunity to fully realize its potential. Burnham recalled that one night a number of VC were seen at a distance outside the Chu Lai defenses. He offered to send snipers with star light scopes. Instead, gunships were used to saturate the area. Only one VC body was found.

Like Umphenour's team before him, Wiggers team provided added value beyond the sniper mission. "We provided refresher training for new arrivals at the Combat Center in basic marksmanship. We gave them classes in basics and took them to the range with our M-16's to show them the importance of zeroing their rifles. Unfortunately many, once assigned to their respective battalions were assigned weapons and went directly to the field without zeroing those rifles." Remembers Wigger's, "I tried to get the G3 to allow them to draw their personal weapons before they came to refresher training so we could zero all the soldiers before they went to the field, but was turned down as being too inconvenient and required too much paper work."



Left: Denis Bourcier and fellow sniper (Photo courtesy: Bourcier)

Late in 1971 most of Wiggers sniper training team were rotated back to the US when the 198th and 11th Brigades stood down. Major Wigger and Sergeant First Class Branham transferred the sniper program to Danang and the 196th Brigade. They brought in two shooter instructors they knew who were assigned to the 196th to continue some sniper training capability, if required. In December 1971, Wiggers and Branham rotated home. The Americal Division and its sniper program were no more.

Where Have the Soldiers Gone?

SFC Burl Branham returned to the Marksmanship Unit at Fort Benning in December 1971 where he coached 5 National Championship Teams in marksmanship. In 1974 he was tasked to organize a team for shotgun shooting, which he did. He retired in 1977 as a Master Sergeant but continued his coaching function as a civil servant. From its beginning in 1974 until his retirement from civil service in 2000, Branham's shotgun teams won 4 Olympic Medals, 35 National Championships and 18 World Championships. He lives in Columbus, Georgia.

SGT Denis Bourcier left active duty in November 1970 and returned to college, earning his Ph.D. in Toxicology and specializing in Occupational Health & Safety. For a number of years he was a university professor then, for the past 15 years he has been a health and safety manager at Boeing. Recently he left Boeing with four associates to start AVChem, a chemical management services company. He resides in Kirkland, Washington. Bourcier's web site for Americal Snipers can be accessed through the Americal web site: Dial in **www.americal.org**. On the Home Page double click on **"Links"**. Then scroll down to "Companies" and double click on **Americal Division Snipers**.

SSG Fidel Serrano returned to stateside duty at Fort Reilly, Kansas after deactivation of the Americal Division. But he decided that the stateside Army was not for him. He missed his beloved jungle and the independence of the sniper mission. He returned to Puerto Rico where he worked in construction and the hotel industry until his retirement in 1989. He lives in Las Piedras, Puerto Rico.

CPT Virgil L. Umphenour completed his Americal tour in December 1970 and shortly after departed active duty (he had been on an extended tour from the Arizona Army National Guard). He moved to Alaska and joined their Army National Guard, serving in a variety of positions until retiring in 1981. In 1987 he started a big game hunting and fishing guide business – "Hunt Alaska" which he runs today with his son Eric out of Fairbanks. His guided tours can be referenced on the web: **huntalaskawithus.com**.

MAJ Lones Wigger returned to the Marksmanship Unit at Fort Benning, Georgia. He participated in the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich, winning his second Gold Medal in target shooting. Wigger remained in the Marksmanship Unit until 1987, when he retired as a Lieutenant Colonel. He went to work for the National Rifle Association which was the governing body for Olympic shooting in the US, serving as Director of Operations at the Olympic Training Center for the shooting sports, retiring from that position in 1994. He lives in Colorado Springs and is a consultant for the US Shooting and Federal Cartridge Co.

Serving God In All Places: The Americal Chaplain – Vietnam

Three Chaplains share their personal reflections on serving soldiers during "a season of war"

David W. Taylor

Book of Ecclesiastes 3: 1-11

"For all things there is a season,
And for every affair under
heaven its time.
A time to be born and a time to die;
A time to plant and a time to
uproot the plant.
A time to kill and a time to heal;
A time to tear down and a time to
build.
A time to weep and a time to laugh;
A time to mourn and a time to dance.
A time to scatter stones, and a time to
gather them;
A time to embrace and a time to be
far from embraces.
A time to seek, and a time to lose;
A time to keep, and a time to cast
away.
A time to rend, and a time to sew;
A time to be silent and a time to
speak.
A time to love, and a time to hate;
A time of war, and a time of peace.

What advantage has the worker from his toil? I have considered the task, which God has appointed for men to be busied about. He has made everything appropriate to its time, and has put the timeless into their hearts, without men ever discovering, from beginning to end, the work, which God has done."

A Season of War

War draws individuals from many walks of life into a life experience few are prepared for. The challenges come in many forms. And even "men of God", prepared as they are for ministering to others in the realities of life's many journey's, find war a challenge unlike any other.

Here are the thoughts and reflections of several Americal chaplains who served in Vietnam. This dialogue is not an attempt to summarize the thoughts of the many chaplains who served the division in that war, but will allow their fellow soldiers to gain an appreciation of the struggles they faced working side-by-side with the soldiers they served and loved.

Two chaplains, Fathers James Sheil and Richard Shannon, were ordained as Catholic Priests and Reverend James Cosner was ordained as a United Methodist Minister. They have graciously agreed to share their thoughts with their fellow vets about the reflections they have, looking back on their "season of war" ... a season all soldiers lived.

(Chaplain Richard Shannon celebrates Mass with A Co., 1/52nd Battalion, 198th LIB, south of Chu Lai. Source: U.S. Army Photo – courtesy of Father Richard Shannon)

All of us come together from varied backgrounds to serve in war. That is no different with "men of the cloth". What was the path that led you to the Army and to Vietnam?

Cosner: "I am a Wyoming native. Prior to Vietnam (1954-1955) I served as an enlisted soldier in the Army. After being discharged I turned my back on the military and took on the challenge of college and seminary training to become a United Methodist Minister. In the 1960's I was skeptical and critical about the U.S. involvement in Asian's political struggles. But because of my prior military service, I was persuaded from within my church denomination to volunteer to become a military chaplain.

Shannon: I was born in Chicago in 1934 and ordained as a Priest in 1959. I was stationed at two parishes before I entered the Army. I was asked to join the reserves in 1963 and joined in May of that year. I was allowed to go on active duty in July 1967 and was stationed at Fort Hood, Texas. After four months I was assigned to the 198th Light Infantry Brigade which was forming to go to Vietnam. We left in October of that year and during the several weeks it took to go over I had services each day for the men and I was able to talk with them about many things.

Sheil: I was ordained as a Priest in 1966 for the Diocese of Cleveland, Ohio. After ordination I was involved at several area high schools and instrumental in several boys being given the opportunity to serve in the military rather than go to "jail". At a memorial service for several young men who were killed in action in Vietnam, I was giving a kind of "duty-honor-country" talk and suddenly realized I did not know what I was talking about. I immediately asked the bishop for permission to join the Army. I entered the Army at Fort Polk in May 1969. The character and quality of the people I was assigned with wholly impressed me. On the other hand, the schooling in the Chaplain Basic Course at Ft. Hamilton (Brooklyn) New York did not impress me. The course began with, "You might think you're ministers and priests, we are going to make you officers". Most of us priests just finished with basic trainees for the previous 6 months and loved it. We knew we didn't go along with the officer stuff. The best part was being with other chaplains. The rest could have been done in a few weeks rather than months.

What was your initial impression on arriving in Vietnam and your unit assignment?

Cosner: Like everyone else I was scared. I arrived in October 1968 and I wanted to serve in a line unit but was offered a rear area support battalion near Saigon. I opted for a slot in the Americal Division and before long, found myself at LZ Gator with the 5/46th battalion, 198th LIB. The unit had not had an assigned chaplain since arriving in Vietnam in March 1968 and they had not been notified that I was coming, so they had no place or space for me. That was discouraging. On the other hand this was a unit that was taking casualties almost on a daily basis. I judged that my services were needed. Here life hung in a different balance than I had ever experienced before. Life was day to day and there was no future until one had survived his 365 days of hell. People spoke of God and faith with an intensity and urgency that I hadn't experienced before and wasn't really prepared to respond to.

Shannon: I remember the heat. I was celebrating Mass on top of a hilltop and the sandbags began to smoke all by themselves. Instant combustion! We were all pretty busy arriving in Vietnam.

Sheil: I don't recall having too many profound thoughts upon arriving in Vietnam in March 1970, other than to come home alive and reasonably unhurt. My first assignment was with Division Artillery (DIVARTY) and I spent a lot of time with DIVARTY Air. As times got rough I was readily accepted. After a few months I was assigned to Headquarters, 11th LIB at Duc Pho and provided "Catholic coverage" to the battalions, the Air Force, Dust-Off, MP's, LRRP's, Special Forces in the area and anywhere else I was needed to pick up the slack. I think most of the units I came in contact with thought I was "their" chaplain.

How do you remember the process of finding some kind of acceptance by the men in a war time climate?

Cosner: Every military chaplain carries the baggage of being an officer, "religious" and providing an ancillary service. Commanders, staff officers and NCO's sometime see the chaplain as an added burden, failing to appreciate the assets that the chaplain brings. Gaining the support of commanders and staff is imperative for the chaplain to get around and do his work.

That having been said, I perceived that my biggest challenge was making myself available to as many soldiers as possible. Being present was magnetic. Soldiers were curious, and sometimes confrontational. They wanted to know who I was, what I represented, and they wanted to know answers to questions. It was rare, during a break or lull that I didn't have someone talking with me. I spent as much time in the field as time would allow. I conducted worship services and memorial services in the field, on remote firebases, and at the chapel.

I went through the command to have a chapel built. This building provided a place and space for much counseling, group conversations and worship services. It was an important place for men rotating in and out of that firebase.

Finally, I was fortunate to have seasoned soldiers, who were known and trusted, to serve as my chaplain assistants. Once they got to see me as a person they could trust, then they enhanced the relationship between myself, and the soldiers in the field.

Shannon: I believe that because I had the same uniform as they did and that I was in Vietnam with them there was a great deal of acceptance. When I got to a unit in the field many times I would spend the whole day with them because the choppers would not always return quickly. Usually I would get a ride on the chopper that brought them their evening meal. My ministry in the field was limited by dependence on chopper rides. Because of this I as a Catholic Chaplain did not see some units on a regular schedule.

Sheil: In war there was less fluff and more substance; also we were much closer to our people. There was no putting the chaplain on a "pedestal". We wore the same uniform, shared the same comforts or lack thereof. As a priest/chaplain, I lived with my people. They did not have to call me for an appointment to see me. I did what they did, and ministry happened this way in the ordinary things of everyday life. Often we were all afraid together.

War places chaplains on the horns of a dilemma: the values of the sacredness of life versus the drive for self-preservation. How did you reconcile that with the soldiers you ministered to?

Cosner: Life in general places religious people on the horns of a dilemma - sacred versus secular. Godly values as opposed to worldly values. War creates an extension, and an exaggeration of that human dilemma. Every Christian and Jew is taught "Thou shalt not kill". The government orders them into a killed or be killed environment. The chaplain is faced with some kind of palatable blending of those opposed values. Soldiers unable to reconcile this conflict dealt with enormous amounts of guilt, confusion, cynicism and anger. The chaplain attempted to assist the soldier in that struggle – sometimes successfully, sometimes not.

Shannon: For most of my tour I was the only Catholic Chaplain assigned to the 198th Brigade and I had to cover all the battalion and support units. This was the most difficult thing to do because the men were in small units and could only be reached by helicopter. On Sunday I would have Mass for our headquarters and all other units I could reach by jeep. I would have about seven Masses each Sunday. I believed that I was a source of hope and strength for our soldiers as they faced possible death each day. I knew Catholic men would appreciate the opportunity to attend Mass and receive the other sacraments as often as possible.

Sheil: I didn't look at it in terms of those thoughts back in those days. I just wanted to take care of my friends, the soldiers I ministered to, as best as I could. Sometimes I was not sure of what they were asking of me. I learned to watch others' back and to be aware of people watching mine. I also learned to take care of my people as others were taking care of me. There is no doubt they enjoyed having me around and looked forward to my coming. I think I offered them some kind of hope and vision that there was more beyond all the stuff we were dealing with.

Any reflections on your chaplain's assistants?

Cosner: Chaplain assistants were one of my most important assets. Our battalion had a policy of giving short-timers a rear-area job whenever that was possible. I was fortunate to have some fine men serve as my assistants. They were invaluable because they helped me understand what life was like as a grunt and they added credibility to my ministry. They provided a "connection" to the soldiers, by knowing when someone was in trouble and needed the assistance that the chaplain could provide, or needed someone to talk to. And each of them became my friends and part of my support system – they also knew what I was going through. They were special people for me.

Shannon: As we formed the 198th Brigade at Fort Hood, each chaplain had the opportunity to choose the assistant that he wanted from all the assistants at Ft. Hood. I chose my assistant because of his good qualities: He had sound judgement, was intelligent, was of good character and could work independent of me. He was good with people and we got along fine. I didn't know if he would ever forgive me for taking him to Nam. He did, and after a few years I married him in Mt. Vernon, Illinois.

Sheil: Keep in mind I was at the brigade headquarters level, covering a lot of ground for the battalions, support units and even other units not part of the Americal. And I arrived at the11th Brigade after it had formed in Duc Pho. Overall I did not find my

assistants to be of much help. There was one standout exception: an 11-B Sergeant who was assigned to me after his third Purple Heart. He was terrific. He knew his way around the field, was definitely interested in the soldiers more than anything else, opened doors for me that otherwise probably I would not have known about. He was one of the best soldiers I have ever known.

We must always try to find God in all things. How did you try to help soldiers find God in the chaos of war?

Cosner: I had to first rediscover God in the horrors of war myself. Part of my adjustment was trying to find anything Godly in that war. One long day the unit I was with moved several klicks in some severe heat. In the morning a mine was detonated, taking some casualties. In the afternoon we were pinned down by sniper fire – no casualties. When we bivouacked that evening, tired and harassed, it was in the presence of a spectacular sunset followed by a sky filled with bright serene stars. I had such a peaceful feeling. I saw goodness in the soldiers passing out some C-rations to villagers; many kind and caring gestures among the soldiers. I tried to share some of my realizations and experiences. It was so important for me to go where those soldiers had to go – for me to get into the field, and share in their experiences. My being in the field with them gave us a common experience – then I could interpret that common experience in the language of faith.

Shannon: I had the most contact with troops at the brigade headquarters and the support units for the battalions. Finding God in war is a very difficult thing to do because war is a terrible evil. However, God can bring forth good from evil. I believe the men who served in Vietnam and returned home have a better appreciation of the life God gave them. So many of them became people of peace. It was in Nam that they began to see how precious life is and how quickly it can be taken from us. Did they find God in war or did God find them?

Sheil: Finding God was not a rational process, more an experiential one. Most of the time I think God touched me through the soldiers. They really cared about each other and, when I was with them, they cared about me – unobtrusively and in a rough sort of way. They also took time to tell me when I was all wet. For example, while on a hill waiting for the bird to take us on a combat assault, a soldier asked me to hear his confession. He mentioned he was "out of the church". I told him I could not help him. He fell on the ground and washed my boots with his tears; it was as if Jesus was there asking who I thought I was to decide whom he would forgive. I knew then the love of the guys and the love of the Lord, and I am not sure there is much difference. I think in our own way we were living what Christ taught.

(Chaplain James Cosner – circa 1968. Photo courtesy of Pastor Cosner)

There is an old saying, "There are no atheists in foxholes". Did your experience confirm, refute or redefine that observation?

Cosner: We all believe in something. Most have some definition of a deity that they believe in. When we look death in the face, the faith that we hold becomes something really important to hang on to. I affirm – there are no atheists in foxholes.

Shannon: I'm sure they may have been some atheists in Vietnam. Did they stay atheists all through their tour? I don't know. Most likely there were some who made promises to a higher power that if they made it home they would fulfill that promise.

Sheil: We were all so scared that we would look – and did look - for help anywhere.

How did you manage the dichotomy of the "separate worlds" of the soldier and the chaplain?

Cosner: There is a separation between clergy and laity in all aspects of life. I have had to deal with that reality for over forty years. Vietnam was only one year when that separation was exaggerated by the intensity of men's search for a deeper faith. I was saddened when that gap was so huge that nothing we could do or say would bridge it. I celebrated when that gap became an arena for dialogue and a stronger faith and some learning came out of all that conversation. I've found that dichotomy to be a challenge – but for that one year it was a special challenge and I grew from that. I believe, hope and pray that others grew also. I have a profound respect and admiration for the men I met and worked with in Vietnam.

Shannon: I never had a problem remembering that I was a priest first and a Captain in the U.S. Army second. It was an honor to serve my country and that country was the men who served. Sometimes they would see the "bars" and thought of me as an officer. I think most of the soldiers accepted me because I wore the same uniform and was stationed in the same place they were. They knew I was there because I wanted to be with them.

Sheil: I don't think there was such a dichotomy of separation, nor is there one today.

What topics ... what kinds of help did soldiers most often seek from you? What were your responses?

Cosner: Most often it was some variation of what clergy refer to as "God questions". If God is love, why is there war? – that question can take a hundred forms, but it always comes back to reconciling "my perception of God" and the unthinkable horror that people visit upon each other. Another question: "How can you represent God and wear a 'killing uniform?" That was asked over and over. "Why are you here, chaplain?" was another common question. Men needed to bring together the sacredness of God and the ugliness of a war that their country sent them to participate in.

Shannon: This business of killing. I believe most soldiers did not want to take innocent lives. They were in so many fire fights where they could not see whom they were shooting. When they would find children or innocent people dead, this bothered them and they talked with me about that. My response was always that they did not want to kill these people directly and therefore they were not guilty of killing innocent people.

Sheil: The big question I recall was, "Is there really a God?" I'm not sure how I answered these questions, or even if I did answer them. I was sure of God myself, and what I saw forced me to expand my thoughts. I think my beliefs influenced how I lived, and maybe they caught on from that. The guys I have met over the years seem to remember things that way. I think what we saw done to others, and not always by the "enemy", reinforced our desire to take care of each other.

What are your reflections when visiting the wounded in hospitals?

Cosner: I had difficulty with the sense of celebration that wounded soldiers often experienced in the hospital. I understood the sense of relief that they had survived being in the field and they were on their way out of country without being in a body bag. But I looked at the months, years, or a lifetime that they would suffer and struggle from these wounds. I celebrated their relief at being on their way home alive, but often at such a great price. They were overjoyed at being alive, but I was already anticipating the long lone struggles ahead for them. I just could never enjoy the ecstatic moment of happiness that they were sometimes experiencing.

Shannon: Men in the hospitals always looked forward to seeing a chaplain from their unit. Those who were injured seriously were always concerned about their buddies and how they were. I always make it a point not to forget the veterans who were wounded in that war. I pray for them each day and for many other veterans for whom the war is not over.

Sheil: The experience of visiting the wounded in hospitals was overpowering. The first question asked of me was almost always: "How is my buddy?" Most of my "hospital" experience was either at the Brigade Medical Unit at Duc Pho or the hospitals at Chu Lai. Seeing all those mangled soldiers left me with tears more often than not. The guys themselves, in the midst of their pain, were wonderful – usually wanted to know what was going on with their buddies, even though they knew they were probably going back to the "world". And the nurses - words fail; they were wonderful. In the Brigade Medical Emergency Room, the concern of the guys for their buddies was so common; we didn't always notice it – unless a rare someone didn't ask those questions.

Thank you for contributing to this article. In closing, briefly describe your life journey after leaving Vietnam, up to the present time.

Cosner: After Vietnam I continued life in an almost total denial of that year. I forgot the names of people, dates and places. I went on as though Vietnam had never happened. I could talk about it, but I avoided the emotion and pain. I remained on active duty for six years, then resigned my active commission. Four years later I went through a painful divorce. When I remarried it was as though the healing began. I began to tell my wife of events in Vietnam; I cried and relived the pain of those experiences. In 1988, acting upon advice I had been given, I wrote the flashbacks I had been having for 20 years. Over the following ten years I told people of my experiences, and then in 1998 I fleshed out the experiences into a manuscript. That process brought about the healing I continue to experience.

Shannon: After Vietnam I was stationed at Ft. Carson in Colorado Springs. After 18 months I was sent to Korea for 13 months. I returned home and became a parish priest again. I was asked to join the Reserves again and I did. I served with various units in the Chicago area. I was in the process of being called up for Desert Storm when it came to a fast ending. I retired about nine years ago with the rank of full Colonel. During my Chicago parish years I spent seven years in the inner city. I then became pastor of another city parish in 1983 and remained there for 12 years. I took six months off for a sabbatical and was made pastor of St. Patrick Church in Lemont, IL. I hope to retire in January of 2004 when I will be 70. I will not be pastor of any parish but I will be free to help out with Masses at various parishes in the diocese.

Sheil: After Vietnam I was sent to Fort Benning, Georgia. That assignment, while difficult, helped me put my Vietnam experience into perspective. I then went to Germany for two assignments until I resigned in 1977. I was angry in general. I learned later that a lot of my anger had to do with Vietnam – things that, for whatever reason I had not dealt with. I saw too much of what I can only call incompetence at the leadership level. To be fair, I also saw many more leaders who went well beyond competent into heroic. I remember with a great deal of respect most of the leaders I knew. I also did not like the way the Army was going in those days. There was a deterioration of authority and rising racial tensions. In retrospect I think my decision to leave was the right thing at the right time for the wrong reason. I had a lot of growing up to do. I returned to Cleveland and parish work. I also had to deal with several Vietnam issues, which began to surface at the time. I developed a back problem which required surgery, and in an effort to deal with all these issues, I sensed in myself a deep-seated anger. Eventually with the help of friends and a powerful healing ministry that seemed to come out of the blue, I began to deal with these things. I had my first heart attack in 1987 – a big one – and a second in 1989. I resigned my position as a parish pastor and returned to being an associate pastor. I was recalled to active duty in 1991, and in 1994 attended the Chaplain Career Course. I was with some fine people but not overly impressed with the course. The Army and the Chaplaincy had changed significantly. I was sent to Germany in December 1994 (medevac to Walter Reed Hospital for a bypass in July 1997). Retired in May, 2002 and recalled to Active Duty the same month. While in Cleveland during my brief retirement I had a stroke. Life is good.

(Chaplain James Sheil in the field, late 1970. Photo courtesy of Chaplain Sheil)

Serving God in All Places:

Reverend James Cosner is retired in Akron, Colorado. He is an ADVA member and attends functions when he can. He has finished his book draft, "Faith Under Fire: Memoirs of a Sky Pilot in Vietnam". He is currently looking for a publisher.

Father Richard Shannon continues his ministry at St. Patrick Church in Lemont, Illinois. When he retires he hopes to spend more time with veterans groups and attend some of the Americal reunions.

Father James Sheil continues serving on active duty in the Army at Fort Lewis, Washington. Thanks to Colonel John Insani he is a member of the ADVA. Despite serious health problems in the past, he continues to minister to soldiers and their families and ... as he says, "life is good".

The Lord is my shepherd;
I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
He leadeth me beside the still waters;
He restoreth my soul;
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:
For thou art with me;
Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies;
Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.
