

THE FIRST FIREFIGHT

I had been in country about five months and was crewing on a slick (transport helicopter usually a Heuy that did not mount guns). Intelligence had learned that several high ranking VC had dinner each evening in a small village near the U Mhin forest. The plan was for us to insert a Navy SEAL team to capture the VC while helicopter gunships provided suppressing fire.

The mission went as planned. We landed amongst a hail of small arms fire kicked the SEALS out and got out of the way. Once airborn again we climbed to about 3000 feet and watched the gunships work out. We saw some VC escaping through a field. Our pilot a full Navy Captain rolled in on the running figures. Since the SLICK did not have any mounted guns the shooting was left to me with a hand held M14. It was over very quickly. I had just killed a man.

*Twice
not nor
really fought
was not in
pilot seat*

When the shooting was over we returned to pick up the insertion team only to recieve instead, 7 VC prisoners. Some were wounded and all were terrified at the prospect of flying with us. One prisoner who was sitting next to me was a teenage girl who had been shot through the right breast, she was permanatly disfigured by an M16 round. I'll always remember the hate in her eyes as I wrapped a battle dressing over her wound. She was a good looking girl, the type you would look at twice.

The other prisoner that I remember was a VC officer who was badly shot up. He had been shot in the leg, the arm, and had a sucking chest wound. Despite his wounds he was full of fight. We carried as survival weapons two M14's that were kept slung over the pilot's and copilots seat. This mortally wounded man tried to grab an M14 and fire it! I kicked him real hard and pulled his arms away from the M14's. He continued to struggle. Threatening him with a 45 was foolish because if I shot the bullet would pass through his head and into the control tubes beneath the floor. Besides you can't threaten a dying man! Thinking of this I put the 45 away. If he continued struggling I would have to hold him or throw him out the door, the chopper was at 5000 feet by this time. However it didn't matter because with a sudden twitch and violent hemorrhage from his mouth he died. He died hard.

I remember the incident well. By the time it happened I was already hardened to the war and the deaths held no special importance. The man running on the ground might as well have been a running deer. It wasn't untill afterwards that I experienced fear. Since I was sitting on the door seat and not strapped in it would have been relatively easy for a prisoners to push me out the door. Not to mention the fact that I was alone with 7 VC! Only their terror saved me as their was little the pilot or copilot could do to help if trouble occured. I do remember the smell of blood and that it took days for me to get the blood smell removed from the chopper. But most of all I remember the girl. The hate in her eyes and her mangled breast. I had mentally prepared myself to see shot up bodies but not a woman, especially a pretty one.

POLITICAL WAR

THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY April 1985 by William Broyles, Jr. "The Nixon years of the war are much harder to accept, both in the larger arena of strategy and in the dirty corners where the war was fought. After the spring of 1968 the war had lost its idealistic goals. We could no longer realistically believe that we were fighting and dying to save South Vietnam or to preserve democracy or even to stop the spread of communism, as we had in Korea. We were fighting as, Henry Kissinger put it, for 'negotiating objectives' and to protect our credibility as an ally. And we were there because it was easier to continue than to admit failure and deal with the consequences.

"The veterans who fought in 1965 and in 1971 might as well have been in two different wars. The veterans of Nixon's war are much more bitter; they know that they were sent to die for diplomacy, nothing more."

WELCOME HOME

When I was getting short and my date with the freedom bird became real close I was happy as hell to be getting out of Vietnam in one piece. I was going home and was going to be married and returning to a life I had known. I truly thought that I could resume the life I had left behind a year before. A phrase that was commonly heard while in Vietnam was, "Happyness is seeing Vietnam in the rearview mirror." Well, we all know what happens if a driver spends the majority of his or her time looking in the rear view mirror. Perhaps because of this we were not prepared for the road ahead.

Soon after I arrived home it became apparent that no one wanted to talk about Vietnam. In fact, the family and friends went to great lengths to avoid any mention of Vietnam. A very traumatic year of my life had occurred and the family treated me as if I had just returned from a weekend vacation. I had so much to say, about events and feelings that I had to live with, friends whose survival I was concerned over.....Nobody was interested. That set the stage for the years that followed, Vietnam was a subject not to be discussed, indeed as I was to learn in college Vietnam was a subject to be avoided.

About a month after I returned my Father took me to the local VFW hall. As he explained it, I now belonged there. Those were happy moments as we went in. I felt a sense of belonging, I had earned a place in the VFW; besides, I had looked forward to this moment ever since I watched that Memorial Day parade many years before. Although he never said it, I knew that my father was glad I choose to enter the service and not avoid the draft, or worse for him--evade the draft. That was a good time, but it was short lived! I vividly recall the scene. That was the night of the monthly meeting and the VFW hall was crowded. My Father introduced me and we shared a few beers until one of the patrons said in a loud voice, "What the hell, he didn't fight in a war." A chill went through me and I started to correct him but the words never came. A few minutes passed than another man old enough to be my

father asked me how many babies I killed!! I just stood there and shook, the words wouldn't come, I tried to tell them that they were wrong and that everyone was the enemy. For a moment my confusion reigned, than my rage surged.

My Father saw what was about to happen and managed to get me out that VFW hall. I've never gone back, nor can I shake that horrible memory. You may think that this was just an isolated incident, something that happened just to me. Not so, regrettably this was a common occurrence for a lot of returning vets. The very people we thought would welcome us home; men who were our role models when we were children; men who should have understood what we went through REJECTED US!! Without any veterans support group we were alone. We were alone with our nightmares, flashbacks and Post Traumatic Stress; only back then nobody knew what Post Traumatic Stress was. For me this was the most difficult part of the Vietnam experience. I expected the hardships of war but I never expected the anger, spit and stigma that followed once I returned home. The Service prepared me for war but not for what followed.

This is an excerpt from a talk or more like a lecture series I gave about Vietnam, few years ago.

A 1st of Aug 94

Tom Johnson '88