Interview With A Vietnam Veteran
by Sarah Kilzer
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A Vietnam vet? Where am I going to find a Vietnam vet? When I first learned about this assignment, I had no idea where I’d find someone to interview. Little did I know that there are many Vietnam War veterans who live around Redding. The scary thing is that the majority of them are from my parents’ generation. That means these soldiers were still teenagers when they went off to fight. They were just kids.

I did some checking around and found that my mom works with a Vietnam veteran. Bill was nice enough to take time out of his hectic schedule to tell me about his war experiences. His goal of helping others learn about and better understand the war was a success. I feel personally connected to the war now. The war is no longer just a big tragedy to me any more. My interview with Bill has made me realize what everyone involved in the war went through and how they’re still dealing with these experiences.

I’m glad Bill was able to share his thoughts and feelings with me. It’s not every day that someone shares some of the darker moments of his or her life with me. I truly feel honored and lucky to have been able to broaden my perspective toward the Vietnam War via Bill’s generosity and willingness to share his story with me. It goes something like this:

Bill didn’t exactly volunteer for the war for fun. He was one of the young boys who were drafted right out of high school in 1969. At the time, he was a vocal member of the nationwide peace movement who supported war protests, draft resisters, and draft card burnings. Upon being drafted, Bill was faced with three options. He could accept the draft and go to war, flee the country to avoid the draft and seek safety from the war somewhere like Canada, or go to jail in refusal of complying with the draft. Bill’s wife, who was just as scared and devastated as his parents, urged her husband to flee to Canada. Although he supported the draft resisters and the draft card burnings, Bill decided to enlist in the Army to get a better choice of jobs. It was the year 1969, and Bill was a mere nineteen years old. He was a newly wed who’d just begun to live his adult life working as a mailman. He was terrified of everything that was going on in his life concerning the war. He felt as if his “whole world was shattered.”

The first leg of Bill’s journey to Vietnam began when he was inducted into the Army at the Oakland Army Induction Facility. He describes this experience as being terrifying and numbing. Bill felt so alone as he was herded into lines with hundreds of other men where he was probed and prodded.
and finally sworn in. Bill, as well as all the other soldiers who were there that day, were still children. Yes, they were physically strong and mentally alert, yet emotionally immature.

The activities he participated in during basic training at Fort Lewis, Washington, made Bill question his view of this country, democracy, and his ideals. The military built the men up physically, with lots of exercise, but torn them down mentally in order to indoctrinate them in the Army way. Men were taught to call the Vietnamese enemies “gooks” or “dinks” so as to dehumanize them and make it easier mentally to kill them. This went against everything Bill had been taught by his mother. She had told him to say “nigger” and saying “gook” was just as bad. At the same time, he was taught to treat Vietnamese civilians with respect. Next, Bill was off to Fort Gordon, Georgia, where he went through his advanced individual training to learn how to repair helicopter radios. Although the training consisted mostly of classroom work, exercise was also incorporated into the program.

After being unsuccessful in an attempt to be sent to Germany where he could live with his wife, Bill was finally sent to Vietnam in 1970. He spent eighteen long hours on a plane flying across the Pacific Ocean. It was very hot and humid that day. Bill was so apprehensive and nervous that for a second it may have seemed that the awful stench he smelled in the air was his own fear. He recalled what he first thought about the Vietnam War. He said, “How would I feel looking at another man across the barrel of a gun who was just like me, with a family, who just wanted to go home and live in peace, and be ordered to shoot him?”

The weather continued to remain hot and humid in Vietnam, except for when there were monsoons when it was hot and rained for weeks at a time. The countryside proved to be beautiful, despite the ugliness of war that surrounded it, with beautiful mountains, green forests, a surrounding pea-green ocean, and white sand beaches. Although the countryside was beautiful, the food was lousy. Meals consisted of roast beef and sour milk as well as powdered eggs.

The people of Vietnam, despite being dirt poor and selling girls into prostitution, were very honest, industrial, and moral. They were warm, generous, and kind with big hearts. They were very trusting. The Viet Cong on the hand couldn’t be trusted at all. By day they were civilians, and by night they were Cong. The ARVN’s were basically useless because half of them were Viet Cong. Thus the ARVN’s were seen as untrustworthy cowards and thieves.

The American soldiers who were over in Vietnam fighting had one thing in common; they all wanted out alive. They were angry about being there so they took it out on the “gooks.” The boys worked toward their goal of making it home alive by fighting only when necessary. They wanted to hang in there and just survive until it was time to go home. With two-thirds of his unit being white, one-third black, and a few Hispanics, there was definitely racial discrimination. Many whites saw the black
soldiers as being black gooks. Many fights broke out between the men of both races. The blacks were very representative of the civil rights movement that was going on back home in the United States. One of Bill’s best friends, however was black, but they kept their friendship hidden.

The use of drugs was widespread. With drugs cheap and readily available, men were constantly getting drunk and high on drugs. They needed something to mask the loneliness and the pain they were suffering at war. Eventually it became so prevalent that the authorities gave up on trying to control it. It was even believed that the CIA was responsible for bringing massive amounts of heroin into the country.

One thing that Bill witnessed was the use of napalm. The unit of men who did the spraying had their own little motto: “We prevent forests.” Bill recalled seeing a young girl of six or seven years of age badly burned by napalm.

For the most part, Bill worked on repairing helicopter radios during the day and occasionally guarded the perimeter (in bunkers) during the night.

At the time Bill was sent to Vietnam, the United States was in the process of pulling out and turning the war over to the Vietnamese. Nixon had promised to end the war and Kissinger was attempting negotiations in Paris with the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. To bolster his negotiating position, he was conducting intensive bombing raids in North Vietnam, while at the same time reducing troop levels in South Vietnam.

His first impression was that the war was being fought to stop the spread of “evil” communism. The government, his “superiors told him” that if Vietnam fell, the rest of Asia would fall and before long, “evil yellow men would invade our country, take away our bibles, and rape our mothers.” Bill says that he later realized that the war was all just a big political sham to control the resources of Southeast Asia. The United States was trying to maintain control of the resources of Southeast Asia (oil, rubber, etc.) and maintain a military presence close to China and Russia. He recalled what one protester said – “If democracy was such a great thing, we wouldn’t be over there shoving it down their throats with gun butts, they’d be over here stealing it from us.”

Bill did participate in combat when the United States troops in South Vietnam were invaded. While all kinds of weapons were used (tanks, pistols, helicopter mini-guns and cannon, grenades, machine guns, napalm, bombs, and claymore mines), Bill himself only used a rifle and grenades. Regarding whether or not the U.S. held back during the war, Bill said that “we had a lot of firepower, but we were just outsmarted by determined people fighting for their families and their homes.”

Returning home from Vietnam was a very lonely experience. One day you were in the war, the next you were home. There was no debriefing or easing back. One day you were sitting with your
buddies, armed to the teeth and scared out of your wits, ready to kill, dirty, foul-mouthed, angry miserable, and the next day you’re sitting in your parents’ living room and expected to be normal again. Upon returning home, Bill says he was “no longer the staunch patriot” he was before and he had a “hard time believing in God.” He remembers the hardest part of being away from home as being away from his wife. He experienced “loneliness and boredom, interspersed with moments of sheer terror” at war. Overall, he was just glad to be out of there and thankful that he was alive. However, he still felt very bitter and disillusioned. The country too was in turmoil. Cities were burning and neighbors were fighting one another while the government was in chaos.

If he had to do it all over again, Bill says that he would have definitely gone to Canada or jail rather than war. He says that he’s still adjusting to returning home from Vietnam and it “never stops.” He ran away for awhile and lived by himself in a little shack in the woods for a year, trying to regain his sanity and spirituality. He’s spent countless years trying to make some sense of it all. It’s all resulted in many failed relationships, flirtations with suicide, and usage of drugs and alcohol. He also points out that more than twice as many Vietnam veterans have committed suicide as were killed in the war. Some of his friends also never recovered. They still live with the horror and bitterness of war. Their lives have also been “ruined” by drugs and alcohol. They’re homeless and unable to hold jobs and form relationships. He still keeps in touch with two of his friends. One, he says, is well adjusted, while the other is a “basketcase.”

Bill refers to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. as “America’s Wailing Wall.” The one time he visited it, he said everyone was crying, yet healing at the same time. This serves as a reminder of what happens when we allow a government to send our children off to die. The scars of that war will be with us for a long time and perhaps the wall will remind us to never let it happen again.

“...And it serves to notify the country that, despite the ugly, awful things that happened, the fact that we lost, that the country was torn apart, that we did all the wrong things for all the wrong reasons – those nineteen year old boys who gave their lives for their country are, indeed, true American heroes.”

~ Bill, 3 decades later

[Sarah wrote this as a high school assignment for which she received an “A”]