



ELTON TYLEND A

Vietnam

I had a deferment, was not interested in war or the military. No one in my family at the time had been in the military. I was suddenly undeferred without explanation. When I persisted in knowing why I was undeferred, I was assigned a government attorney and still got no answers. The lack of answers and a slip of the tongue strongly indicated that something was amiss. I was in business at the time, and my accountant set me up with a heavyweight attorney, another client of his. He charged me a lot of money for a retainer, and assigned his right hand man to investigate. Days later this man directs me to meet him “on the steps of city hall for a conference.” When we met there, he said



this would be our final meeting, that his boss wouldn't pursue the case any further. When I asked why he said: "Mr. L. has political aspirations and taking your case would be political suicide." He shared the results of his investigation with the condition that it would be said only once and would deny it if I made it public. The results: there were fraudulent deferments protecting the sons of the wealthy. Someone had called the draft board asking why I had not been drafted and threatened to expose them if I wasn't drafted. Bingo—I was drafted. Weeks later I discovered that a mentally unstable family member (through marriage) was the one who had called.

I was head of household and putting a younger brother through college. I owned and operated a rapidly expanding electrical business at the time. I was able to get a deferment on my own, meeting with a group of old gentlemen at the draft board by candlelight because it was the night of the huge East Coast power blackout. I thought I had gotten a lucky break, but when I showed up they were all there. On the merits of the case they opted to defer me. But in the spring of 1967, I was sacrificed to save the sons of the rich. I felt it would be life threatening to pursue the case any further.

I tried to get into the Seabees, and there was one opening for a high voltage lineman, electrician. The problem was it would take something like 29 days to do the paperwork, and I had only 30. The guy assured me it would work out. Well, it didn't. It was a couple days late so I ended up in the Army, Fort Dix, and when I got through and we were issued our MOS codes, no one knew what mine meant. I had to wait until I got to Virginia to find out what I was in for. I think we were the first Army group trained to be high voltage linemen, electricians. In fact, we were trained by the Navy. Ending up a lineman after all was so weird that I took it as a good omen.

I was a reluctant draftee. I was not into the military. I was just making it through. I thought my only MOS was high voltage lineman. I didn't realize I had a secondary MOS that the paperwork indicates I'd been trained for—combat engineer. A lot of us were products of McNamara's "expedited training." We got all our "training" in a single morning in a huge warehouse. I had come in later, one of the last ones to

come in. I was on time but the place was packed and I could barely see.

An officer was running through the drill: “This is the M-60 machine gun, this is how you load it, this is the safety—everybody got that?” There were a number of us in the back: “Excuse me, Sir! We can’t even see it from back here.” He glared at us and repeated more loudly: “Everybody got that!?” And some of the officers started closing in on us, and we realized real quick that it wasn’t going to do any good to say anything. Our morning “training” covered the basics including the grenade launcher and common explosive devices. From way in the back I could barely see what he was holding up! Weeks later, several weeks into the Vietnam tour, I was with three others on a volunteer mission—we were half drunk and stupid enough to volunteer. It was night and the only weapon between us was the M-60 machine gun in the back of the jeep. There were four of us and two were E-5 sergeants and none of us knew how to operate that weapon in the dark! That was a sobering experience. Much of my military experience was unbelievable, some of it absurd. I couldn’t figure it out, couldn’t wrap my mind around it. I still can’t.

I started to think back. ... Those days as a boy out in the woods when these wounded veterans from World War II—totally disabled some of them—would be hunting near our home. I was a good listener, so they talked to me. And I remember this one guy talking about the atrocities that he witnessed—not by the Germans but by Americans. I listened and I remembered it, and he showed me his horrible scars. He was shot so badly in the back. Huge red scars. In the end what he told me didn’t register.

I watched TV. It was all about American war heroes, so his experience was just too dissonant, but it stayed in the back of my mind. There was another incident when I was a teenager. A few days before what I still believe was a suicide (officially it was called an accident), my high school teacher and mentor told me something unforgettable. He was a bit drunk, and again I heard it but it didn’t register. I don’t know who else he had talked to about this, maybe I was the only one that he talked to about it. But he said he was in a unit in World War



II that went all the way from France to Berlin and they never took a prisoner. They tortured 'em and murdered 'em—every single one. Not a single prisoner was taken or handled as a prisoner. They were all executed. And he told me that he almost missed getting his state teaching position because the SPN code on his military record indicated that he was from an outfit that committed atrocities. It was a very difficult struggle for him, and he was gentle. You wouldn't know that he had been in the military unless he told you. So there were these stories from people I believed, but it didn't compute because what I got at home and through the media was the hero stuff. I used to make model B-17 bombers, and had them hanging on the ceiling, and fantasized about being a war hero. Everything encouraged that, what I heard on TV, from people in authority, what my other teachers said.

By age 21, I began to question all that and was not very happy about being drafted. I almost went to Canada. I came so close. To this day I don't know exactly what tipped the balance because I was agonizing at 1 or 2 in the morning, deep in the woods. I had a wooded area at my disposal, and it was agonizing. I was very incisive in decision making back then, being in business and all, so whichever decision came down, I would have gone with it without hesitation. It went down on the side of going, but just barely. When I confided that to my then girlfriend—it just blew me away. She said, “Oh, good, because I wouldn't want to be dating a coward.” I was really taken aback by her response.

I think my mother was quite tickled that she had a warrior in the family. Most of my family and virtually the entire town were flag wavers, believed in authority, thought the president wouldn't lie, and that sort of thing. I don't think they were aware of the struggle that I had deciding whether or not to go. They just thought, well, of course, there's no problem.

I don't recall seeing a protester until I got to the induction center the first time for tests and there was a group of protesters. I had never seen actual live protesters before. Well, I didn't know what to think of that. But one thing that did make an impression on me when I was inducted was the two people who refused to take the step forward. The response from the

sergeant—there were two sergeants as part of the detail— was extreme rage. The two civilians were dragged away behind closed doors, and I had a strong feeling they were beaten. This was chilling to me, and I never forgot it. I guess I didn't, at that point, think of not taking that step forward. And no one else knew that they would refuse. One was right beside me. He never said anything about what he was going to do. These little things started to add up, and I began asking myself some troubling questions.

We had some heavy pep talk sessions when we were told that we were soon heading out to Vietnam. And these wound-up officers, I presume just back from the war zone—at least that's what they led us to believe—were talking about how badly the people wanted us there, and how we'd be doing this great service. It was powerful stuff, and they were very excellent orators. And, well, you kind of get hooked on it.

We shipped out, literally by ship—the USS General John Pope, as I recall—out of Oakland because we had all this heavy gear, this construction gear, and I guess for whatever reason we had to go with it. It was an old rattletrap of a ship with no stabilizers, and it was quite a trip across the ocean. When we hit high seas there were a lot of very sick people.

There was a weird incident quite a ways from Subic Bay in the Philippines where a soldier died. He went into diabetic shock, and they had nothing. There wasn't supposed to be anybody on board with that condition and they had no supplies. So the medicines were dropped by a helicopter in the middle of the night. I happened to be up on deck. Nobody told us what was going on. We found out the next morning because my unit had K.P. duty and the dead body was in the freezer in clear plastic.

Due to regulations regarding the body, we had to stop at Subic Bay, which was an unscheduled stop. We went out of our way. Because of the delay we got news in the *Stars & Stripes* that peace talks had begun. Some people were disappointed because, oh, the war will be over before we get there. As I recall, this was in 1968, just a few weeks after Martin Luther King was assassinated. The death tolls and casualty tolls were incredibly high, a fact I was noticing with some dismay and wondering what was up ahead.



We got into Cam Ranh Bay. Our group was actually composed of several small units. One got off at Vung Tau. There might have been one other stop, and somebody went up farther north. But we got off at Cam Ranh Bay, the unit that I was with. It felt like an American city, and so it threw me off. There were one-armed bandits. There were cafeterias. It just didn't seem real with the music, all the comforts of home. That didn't last long.

We got loaded on a convoy and told not to worry for the first day because we were heading into a "friendly" city. I remember the officer saying Quy Nhon, on the coast. We did get to Quy Nhon and an incident there was burned into my memory. We were headed out of the city, I think we were already through the city heading out, and a group of unarmed women were throwing stones at us. And if they could have killed us they would not have felt bad. The anger ... I could hear a little bit of broken English about "G.I. Number Huckin' 10, go home!" Others spoke entirely in Vietnamese, but it was like powerful angry, angry stuff. And we were armed by this time. And the canvas was down on the deuce and a half, so we had to dodge some pretty good sized stones, and they were flung with all their might.

It so stunned me that I just said out loud, "If these are the friendlies, I sure hope we don't meet anybody who's really pissed at us." And everybody cracked up for a second, and then there was total silence. I don't think we said another word for half an hour. I mean, we were just told how happy they were to see us, and we had just gone through a friendly city, they told us.

When we reached An Khe in the central highlands, the orders concerning our small unit hadn't arrived. There was no paperwork. They had to find a place for us and wouldn't let us work the highlines unless there was an emergency. We went to another camp and played baseball, day after day after day. And they almost didn't have a place. It took quite a while for them to find out who we were legally, and put us to work.

Then another bizarre incident occurred. I had a background in electrical but I'd never done high voltage lineman work, never worked that kind of voltage hot. We were supposed to

have civilian engineers hired by the Army to guide us. The one who was supposed to be working with us at An Khe never showed up. One day he did show, and this floored us. He showed up on a motorcycle, black leather jacket carrying an AK-47. And he said, "Hi, I'm John Henry." And I don't remember him saying I'm your engineer. I don't think he gave a shit about what he was paid to do. He had other business.

He said, "If you guys are looking for a good time and you want clean women, come down to Sin City and the girls on the left side are mine, and they're checked once a week. It's cool. You know." And he says, "Seeing you're my guys, I have a house out in the country. You're welcome to come out and visit."

This was so bizarre, and by this time we had a vehicle. I think we had already stolen a jeep. To get a vehicle that you weren't requisitioned at the start took one year's worth of paperwork. And the same was true for any major part pertaining to our highline equipment. It took a whole year to get a replacement. What happened to the other group farther south, their unit was disbanded because a single part broke. All of them were due back home in less than a year. It was mind boggling to me coming from a business background at the time.

At any rate, I learned about the black market. John Henry sounded like a bogus name to me, but everybody knew him. If you just said John Henry they knew who you were talking about. He had a house, a real house stocked with a bar, with power, air conditioning, a number of young women who followed him around. We did visit him and he said, "What would you like?" And I said, "It's a hot day, what have you got to drink?" He said, "You name it." So just for the hell of it I said, "How about a Scotch and amaretto?" [Claps hands.] Anything you named he had it. It was like New York City.

There were all these things that didn't jibe with the pep talks. Other officers were trading real estate. Anyplace that was really decent was owned by Americans, and they would trade them back and forth to other officers, would rent them, for these huge monthly payments, and then they could have their women come and so on, on their off time.



I spent the bulk of my tour in Pleiku farther north, and learned about some really ugly things. One of them was the sport killing of Montagnards, the mountain people, by this fellow who drove an earthmover, one of the big ones that can turn sharply from both the front and the back. When the Montagnards would walk along the edge of the road they thought once the vehicle was mostly by, they were safe. But just then he would work the back end and drive over them with those huge tires. I was the jeep driver for our lieutenant at the time and overheard the discussion. That's how I came to know about it. The soldier was told not to do it again. That's all! Apparently he had killed a lot of people over quite a long period of time before he was told to stop it or face legal reprimand.

They were gentle people, the Montagnards. When I did guard duty I had a captain give us our orders. It was getting dark fast and we had a long way to trek in the dark to get to a remote bunker. There would be one Montagnard to three Americans in some of the bunkers. This captain said if I get any reports that those Montagnards have been abused, you're going to wish all you had was a court martial to deal with, but first you're coming into my tent if I get your name and number. He was screaming. I think he meant it. Apparently there had been a lot of abuse at An Khe. One night our Montagnard did not show up, and apparently it was because he was abused the night before by some other guard detail. He came late, very late. I had no trouble with them. I had some of the friendliest meetings with Montagnards because they were so up front. But they were black, and the units mostly, the people I was with, were from the deep South—Texas, Georgia, and all in through there. Some were very racist; I mean a racism that I could not understand not having been raised in it. It blew my mind.

That sparks a very sharp memory. In Pleiku we had a good deal because, I have to assume, the officers in charge of my unit smoked pot and did other things. We always got warned about "surprise" inspections day or night. So we smoked a lot, and one night of heavy pot smoking, I saw this guy from Georgia, one of the more racist people I have encountered, faced with a situation. In the little cubicle there was only room for one more person to join the pot party. There was a black guy and a white

guy, and he apologized profusely to the white guy. He said, "I'm sorry. We don't have room." And the black guy was invited in. That blew me away. And they really came to like each other. So pot smoking was a good deal. With the booze I saw many people get ugly, and load their weapons and try to kill each other. I had one guy put a .45 in my face. He was a decent young kid but he just got wacky with booze. But the pot-smoking people were cool.

We had TDY status, temporary duty, and we were never really accepted. We remained outsiders. We worked in all the camps but didn't know any particular unit any better than any other, so we could get away with things. I mean our MOSS were weird. Nobody knew what they were. We were a special unit for the Army and it wasn't clear what officer was in charge. That worked to our advantage from time to time. When lower ranking officers ordered me to do something dangerous I responded by saying, "Colonel so-and-so has ordered me not to do that." I got out of it. It was taking a big chance but it worked. Not long into the Pleiku venue, I was looking toward survival. I was pretty turned off. The more I saw and heard, it just got crazier and crazier, and I did not believe that the people wanted us there. That was a joke, a sick joke, but you didn't want to dwell on it. We were all counting the days we had left in country and hoping for the best.

During the day we had a lot of Vietnamese working inside the big camp called Engineer Hill near Pleiku. They were supposed to be "friendlies." I went one time and one time only to get a shave from one of these folks. This woman got real careless with the straight razor. Looking back, I have flashbacks about this, I think she was fighting the impulse to slit my throat. It still gives me a chill. I was too naïve at the time to realize how close I came. Later, one of the male barbers was shot while attacking the camp.

I was there after Tet in 1968, but the people were traumatized everywhere I went. When I was out on guard duty, I had people who were edgy, and if you did something unexpected or made a loud noise in the dark, I mean, these guys, you really had to calm 'em down. And as part of an apology they would say, "Well, a few weeks ago this camp was overrun and I'm a



survivor, and so don't fuck with me. Just be cool." The tension was still there. I felt very lucky that I came over by ship. That gave me 23 more days beyond Tet.

I saw some very gung ho people. I tried to steer clear of them, and I was able to because of my status. With some, if you indicated that you weren't pro-war, there'd be some shit going on, some heated argument. But I believe that most of the people I was with were draftees and who were just putting in their time. The folks in my small unit were especially slack, with the focus on partying and, when sober, on survival. But some of the units that we interacted with were very gung ho. The company commander at Engineer Hill was looking for rank. He was either a captain or a major at the time, I don't recall now. He was volunteering units for some real bad shit. I remember one guy from our hooch who put a .45 bullet through his own hand to get out of a detail. He's the one who told me what was happening maybe two days before, and then, all of a sudden he has this "accident" cleaning his .45. It was a bloody mess.

At the start there was one exception in our small unit, the sergeant. He was more into military discipline and at times would pull rank. I recall some group punishments for our slackness. It got kind of ugly at one point where things got out of hand. But I think we mellowed him out a bit. At company muster one morning he caught me saluting with the finger. He just glared at me. In another case he didn't report me AWOL when he could have. So he turned out to be a decent fellow after all. I'm quite certain that he got involved with black market activities related to the NCO club and the Vietnamese women who worked there after dark. Late one night at his request I accompanied him while he returned the women to Pleiku City. I don't know what was on that truck along with the women but there was an incident at the main gate that night that had him really worried. I refused to get involved any further after that.

It was unbelievable at times. I don't know why I was picked, but for whatever reason I became the lieutenant's jeep driver. The jeep our guys had stolen in An Khe, we brought it up to Pleiku. It had phony paperwork because he had a connection

with a higher-ranking officer. So I became his jeep driver for a time. We were high on Engineer Hill and there was this beautiful lake, Ben Ho, to the west, and there was this one narrow driveway that went down toward the lake. We didn't know anybody who had been down there. This beautiful day, we're out driving and he says, "Let's take a look." So I drove down, and about a half mile along we see black pajamaed Vietnamese running in every direction. So, my God, total shock because we're not far from the main camp. So I spun the jeep around and came tearing back up, and the road was blocked by American officers. I was ordered to stop short so I hit the brakes and they ordered the lieutenant to walk up to them. I didn't know what was going on.

He comes back a little red faced and he says, "Boy, we were almost in big trouble." I said, "Well, why?" He said that we were off limits. Nobody is supposed to be down this road. I said why? He said, "Well, I'm not supposed to say this but, this is the time when the tanker goes down and fills up the gas tank for the water works, for the little generator down there. It's a big tank and it takes the Vietnamese a while to drain it everyday at this time." And I looked at him. He said, "That's why we have water. They told me that before we got there, during Tet and before, the waterworks was blown up virtually all the time."

The waterworks was an easy target, and it was difficult to put back together. It was a water purification plant and pumping station, and they had this arrangement and we were never without water. Someone had made a deal with the other side, with the "enemy."

That trade arrangement for gasoline was fresh in my mind when later in the spring, I was put on ration for gasoline for the jeep. And I said, "What the hell is going on?" The motor pool sergeant said, "We're low on fuel." And one morning I came and I was refused. He said, "You have to have emergency status paperwork to get even a gallon."

It got to the point where they were going to cut off the heaters for our showers, and the water was pretty damn cold. So I kept asking, "What's going on?" Well, they can't get the tankers up Mang Yang Pass (a very steep stretch of switch back



that we called Ambush Alley). The Viet Cong have got .50 calibers hunkered into the ledges and they just riddle 'em as they snake past. And they can't do enough by helicopter. The Viet Cong totally destroyed the pipeline again and again and again. It was busted up along the pass, so they couldn't get the fuel up.

I remember this one morning I go out and I say, "How much gas can I get." And the sergeant in the motor pool says, "How much do you want?" I said, "I'd like to get a full tank for a change." He says, "Go ahead." I said, "Wait a minute. Yesterday I could barely get five gallons. What's going on?" He says, "I don't know. All I know is I got plenty of gas today." So I had some free time, and with this whole thing about Ben Ho Lake in my mind, I drove down to Pleiku City. And I saw a whole string of brand new bright shiny 10,000-gallon tankers parked in the middle of the city. In sharp contrast to the OD color of Army tankers, these were a flashy yellow and bore the Shell emblem. You couldn't miss them! Apparently they had all just come up through Ambush Alley and I didn't see any scratches or bullet holes.

There was a little reading room on the base. I came across this copy of a book titled *The Betrayal*. It was hot off the press in either 1967 or 1968. And it talked about far worse things than I had seen. The author, Colonel Corson, was disgusted with the dirty dealings and unnecessary deaths of Americans. I learned from his book why there were so many defective artillery shells or short rounds. The military contractor was allowed to cut back on quality control. A short round totally destroyed the NCO barracks beside our hooch. Had it happened minutes earlier, the death toll could have been high.

One thing that upset me right from the start was we had special training on the M-16 there, to try and keep it from jamming. We were told in Vietnam you can't put more than 18 rounds in a clip or it will surely jam. And you had to use a special type of grease and you had to keep it up all the time, and then it would still very often jam. Some of the guys wanted to get AK-47s, which were readily available. All the civilians carried them. John Henry carried one, could get you any number of AK-47s. We were not allowed to carry an AK-47. It was

illegal. You were forced to carry an M-16 and only an M-16 otherwise they would have been chucked. It was an inferior weapon and half the fire power. Hundreds of little details like this built up over time.

As a draftee I was slated to do a two-year hitch. What happened was the military came out with this new ruling that if you had put in x number of days in the war zone and you only had five months left when you left the war zone, you could be discharged upon return. Now, I was so frazzled by this time. I hated the military by the spring of 1969, with a passion. I felt that if I were stateside in the military I would spend it in the brig for sure, or worse. I doubted that I could have lasted five more months in the military. So I did the paperwork and extended my tour, and all I needed was something like three weeks, barely a month. The paperwork went through. Everything was cool, which meant that when I completed that extension I was done with the military.

I got verification that I'd been accepted. Everything was cool, and then I got the word that everybody else is going stateside. My whole unit is disbanded. I said, what's happening to the equipment? Oh, this is it. The Army is getting out of the high voltage lineman business. I said, what do you think they'll have me doing? You'll have to report to so and so. That's when I learned that my secondary MOS was combat engineer.

This miserable, cold, numbers-juggling sergeant that I reported to wants me to work on explosives. I said, "Excuse me, but I haven't had any training on explosive devices." He says, "It's not that hard. You'll learn. Now get out there on the front line and report to so and so."

Now an incident had happened maybe two months before that was one of those powerful experiences, one that has bugged me for many years since I returned. I was asked by the officer in charge if I would mind going with a survey team and making sure that they did the survey right, and that they weren't playing around. He was a real stickler for good straight pole lines, and so on. We were going to run a new line at the logistics depot. The end pole was right on the perimeter. There was only one extension of the logistics depot, and that ran along the bomb pits for the 500-pounders and other major



explosives. When I got there my job was to put a stake where we wanted the surveying team to begin, and then I had to pace out—I think it was 70 paces—and put another stake.

When I got to the perimeter and was pounding in the stake I noticed three guys between the rolls of concertina. They were between the second and third roll out. I was so engrossed in what I was doing and I had a bit of a time limit, but I remember chatting with them. It turned out they were setting explosives. There were three of them. So I said, “Well, have fun. Stay cool.” And I set my sights and I paced off the 200 feet and there was a hell of an explosion. We were right near the perimeter and the bomb pits, and at first we didn’t know what was going on, whether it was the start of an attack, incoming, or what the hell was going on. So we dove under the jeep. There were several of us there.

Then I realized that it was the guys that I’d just been talking with. After assessing the situation, with no more explosions, we could hear somebody crying for help. So we went back up to the wire. Two of them were pretty obviously dead, but this one large guy, the biggest guy of the group, something had shielded the upper part of him. He was blood red from the waist down, and his voice was like a little boy. He was crying like a broken record for help.

He’s out in a minefield and we don’t know what to do. We were waiting for the people from the camp and they got there as quickly as they could, but they said there’s only one sergeant who knows where the damn mines are and we can’t find him. They couldn’t get out to this guy. Then a military ambulance team arrived, and they put planks, which was a pretty brave thing to do, they put several planks on top of the concertina coils and crawled out. One went out on his belly to pull this guy, try to pull him across. We had to leave, so I don’t know what happened in the end. It took so long I doubt that he made it. Now, when this sergeant is sending me to do on-the-job-training with explosives, my first thought is, what really happened there? Was one of those guys doing on-the-job training, someone who didn’t have any prior training? So I was in a hell of a panic. This scared the shit out of me.

I went to the CO but he wouldn't do anything. Then I went to a rather interesting first sergeant. He had more clout than the company commander, but he said there was nothing that could be done. I went to everyone I could think of, and I don't know why I went to this specialist four at a typing pool. I must have looked really frazzled. It was just before I was going to be out there fusing perimeter mines and setting trip grenades. He had just come in the office, I think I started out with, "You know, they're trying to kill me. They're having me do on-the-job training with explosives. I haven't had any explosives training before." I said, "Is there anything that could be done to get me out of this?" He very quietly said, "Come back at noon and I'll see what I can do." So I came back, and I'm trying to psych out what's going on here. He had me sign some forms. There were quite a few copies. And I said, "What's going on?" He said, "You're out of it." I said, "Well, how?" He said, "You're going on R&R." I said, "Well, where?" He said, "Singapore." I said, "Well, when?" He said, "You can leave right now." That I did.

I hitchhiked out. I can't remember which airport. I think I had to get all the way down to Cam Ranh Bay for a commercial airliner. I'm the last one walking up to this gate. The time was tight. The officer at the barbed wire entrance asked me for the paperwork. He looks it over carefully and growls, "There are no flights to Singapore." I looked out at that commercial airliner. I said, "Well, where's that flight there going?" It's going to Hawaii. I said, "Well, that's close enough." He looks me in the eye and then I see a big grin. He crosses out Singapore, writes Hawaii, and says "Have a nice trip."

I got several extra days beyond the normal R&R allotment due to an airlines snafu. But now I still had over a week to go, and I was still assigned to this sergeant and the guy didn't care. I was just a number to him. So I did the freak thing. I didn't show up, and said I'm so frazzled I can't tell time anymore. I don't even know my name. I'm short and I'm dangerous. Well, they threatened me with court martial, but I really did a good show. I hid in the barracks, and they sent two MPs to get me, to look for me. I was well hidden and I heard one say to the other, "Well, the guy's short and he probably is dangerous to



himself and everybody else. Why don't we just suggest they make him barracks guard." So I finally show up and report and I get my new orders, barracks guard. This was May of 1969.

Nineteen sixty-nine started out well with an R&R in Japan but went down hill from there. Around Tet I was sent to Bong Son, to LZ North English. I was going to be an acting sergeant in charge of a combat engineer team to engineer and install defensive lighting on the Bong Son Bridge. A general had the feeling that the bridge, a vital link on Highway 1, was going to be blown by sappers. There was no lighting; it had failed. They had previously sent two or more groups of engineers out and they couldn't make a go of it. It was a half-mile span or more, and the only generator they had that could do it was a three-phase unit. You needed a background in phase theory to set it up and work with it. I loved science and I was good at theory. The general had put the heat on to get this job done, so I was treated like a celebrity.

I had many officers with their sergeants come, and I never saluted a single one and no one ever called me on it. The officer would say, politely "When do you think you'll be finished?" And I said, "It depends on when I begin. I need supplies." The officer replied, "Tell the sergeant what you need." I looked at the bridge and told him what was needed. He drives off. Another officer would come and ask "How's the bridge project going?" and so on.

I got sucked in. I was given a lot of kudos for even tackling the job and I was treated like royalty, which was a nice switch. I'd been hassled a number of times for not being a good soldier, for sitting on the COs desk, not saluting, that kind of crap. I was never into it. So here I was, treated like royalty.

The problem was, although it was an easy drive to Quy Nhon with those huge supply depots, they couldn't find the material. I'm talking basic electrical supplies. Apparently, they had all disappeared—been sold on the black market. Another guy came with me from Pleiku, a fellow from Texas. He didn't have the theory but he was a mechanical genius, an excellent climber, and we worked well together. Between us we came up with ingenious ways to make things work. We made cable

holders out of spikes and scraps, we bow-tied together the copper strands of wire to make connections because there were no split-bolt connectors and so on. It was quite a challenge.

One day we went to check on the generator and try and do some figuring to see how much power we could get out of it. I was deep in thought; the generator was down in a low area with quite a large guard detail, and then you come up a quite steep embankment and you're right at the start of the bridge. The bridge was quite protected. It had a lot of steel. We just got back to the bridge and there was a hell of an explosion near the generator. It was pretty hairy because we were up on the bridge, easy targets. When we calmed down, and the med-evac choppers started coming, we raced back down and they took out quite a few people. Some of the wounded were being worked on right there. I believe it was a "friendly" Vietnamese who had set up a booby trap.

The day we arrived at LZ North English I had to report to the commanding officer, a major as I recall. That night when I went for a beer with the group that I was going to be in charge of, and we were getting to know each other well. It turns out these guys were pretty hard-core. They had lost a lot of their friends. They were pretty ugly when on duty. They were pretty mellow with me, pretty decent, young kids, younger than I. They told me how upset they were about the commanding officer killing a group of Vietnamese children out in the dump that was just outside the defensive berm around that LZ. They told me that a Spec 4 was given the order to shoot the kids, and he just said somebody's been out in the sun too long. So he ignored it. This officer, I was told, was being ferried out in a chopper when he saw the kids in the dump he had the chopper hover and he killed them all, quite a number of children. And as hardened as these guys were, they were still very upset about this incident. I didn't realize just how hardened these guys were until one morning we got ambushed on the way to the bridge. Fortunately nobody was hit. These guys were good. These guys put down a hail of fire, I mean, their reflexes were so incredibly fast and they didn't duck. They just put down a hail of fire and suppressed the fire coming from behind the railroad berm and we were going at



a pretty good clip, but it was a heavily loaded five-ton at full throttle. We drove for miles and the next village that we came to, the trucks stopped. I don't think anybody was signaling. I didn't hear any orders given. I'm sure there were none given. They leaped out and they blew up, tore apart, everything on the same side of the street of that village as the shooting came from many miles up the road. Every single hut was set on fire. They fired every round of ammo they carried, including all M-60 grenades. The two of us from Pleiku were the only ones with any ammunition left and we never fired a shot. There was no fire coming from that village. This was retaliation. Apparently this was standard operating procedure.

This incident bothered me a lot; it still plagues me. Over beers that night back inside the LZ I asked this kid. I'll never forget his expression, he was really taken aback, like nobody would ask, you're not supposed to ask a question like that. "Why did you try to kill those unarmed people, those civilians?" His response: "Well we had to teach them a lesson." I think he was just grasping for a rationalization. I don't think anyone had asked that question. It's just that rage and that adrenalin, from being under an attack, and they had lost a lot of their friends, and they hated Vietnamese. They only did it on that side of the street. It wasn't totally random shooting. But I had a hard time with that.

That experience and the explosion near the generator—as I got shorter it seemed there was more and more happening, and I was in worse situations. Bong Son was my toughest assignment. We were awakened the night before I left, in the middle of the night, to be on alert and not to make a sound or to fire any shots because an enemy unit that was going through the area was so big there wasn't enough firepower to stop them. If they decided to take us out they could have. That's what we were told. This was all whispered. I was pretty happy to leave.

The day I left, I was being driven to the little airport, the tiny strip, and they were flying me back to Pleiku. I was in the officer's jeep. His driver drove me out. The radio was on, and the guys I'd been working with they were calling in for support and it sounded desperate. They were pinned down by some big guns and if support didn't come they were goners, the whole

group I had worked with. I asked where they were. The driver said they had taken a left and were just up the road, and we were heading right and we're going to go like hell and get you out of here.

Here we are today, bogged down in yet another immoral war. I see the same patterns, the same lies, the same misinformation, the same mindset surrounding the Iraq fiasco. Again I see working class folk doing the dirty work and the dying. Again, privileged sons and daughters and the draft dodger Chicken Hawks who send them to Iraq are raking in the profits. Worst of all—and this is the most depressing for me—I see these poor suckers and their parents getting hooked on the “hero” hype just like we did. How many of the 100,000 Iraqis killed and maimed in this illegal war are children, women, and old men? In Vietnam, nearly 60 percent of the carnage was inflicted on defenseless civilians. Two million more still suffer the horrible effects of Agent Orange. What will be the long-term effects of depleted uranium on Iraqis and our own returnees? When other countries commit such atrocities, we call their leaders and soldiers war criminals. This kind of craziness is a repeating pattern. I'm absolutely sure of it. I've seen and heard too much. I've witnessed it myself. The most incredible thing to me is why, for example, did World War II vets lie? Except for those rare ones who must have felt like odd fish because they were saying something that no one would believe because everybody else was saying something else. I think they first lied to themselves about the atrocities they committed. They were blinded, couldn't see 'em for what they were.

I have talked to former soldiers in Hitler's army. I've talked to several people here in Madison who were in Pol Pot's army, Pol Pot's murderers. These were very deep and no bullshit sessions face to face. They were still trying to deal with how they could have done what they did. They didn't realize they were doing it at the time. I don't think those kids in Bong Son really thought about what they were doing. I think they were blinded by the hype and acting mostly unconsciously. No orders needed, it just happens, these were all basically decent guys. Over a beer or something they're kids just like you are. I've counseled vets, and



what I've seen is nothing compared to what some of these very hurting individuals saw and experienced. When they tell it straight, it's like they can't quite wrap their mind around it. It didn't seem that bad at the time. It's when the nightmares come back and it connects with emotion that it all starts to unravel. At that point there's no longer denial, just the big questions like how could I have been a part of that and maybe even felt good about it at the time?

What I've been doing for a number of years, I started developing a course that would really deal with the core causes of war and strife and how to get from there to peace. I started by working with large groups of street people at Interfaith House in Chicago. Some of the street people were vets and all were veterans of ghetto warfare. The course was mandatory if they wanted to stay at Interfaith, so they had to take this course that I was developing. I would counsel in conjunction with the course. They had to take the course as a background to counseling. I wasn't doing normal psychology or counseling, you know, where you do it piecemeal. This was kind of a holistic thing, and they had other volunteers and staff who were filling in too. Social workers, psychologists, and therapists worked with them as well. It was a situation where they were being honest for the first time in their lives. These people had been hustlers on the streets, hustling to live. But here they were trying to turn that around because they had people who cared about them and showed it. They came clean with their addictions, with some pretty horrible stuff that they were part of. About 65 percent of them did not return to the street.

With some of the veterans, I realized that part of their craziness was war related. It was more war related than street related, and they understood my experience. I would just say what I observed in the war zone while easing into the conversation and then they would take it from there. I didn't see anything special, but I did see it. I perceived what was in front of my eyes. Maybe that's because of the brave people who told the truth, like my high school teacher. I mean he had nothing to gain by telling me this terrible story. He was about to die. I don't know if he knew it, and he's telling someone who's a good listener something that's been tearing him apart. Even

though I couldn't wrap my mind around it, I did believe him. And so how come some can see it and others don't? He was a young kid. He wasn't one of the vicious torturers but he observed it, and they all kept quiet. And I don't know if he said it to anyone else but to me.

He was a caring individual, extremely good teacher, brilliant, and sensitive enough to be bothered by it. I think that war experience was part of his alcoholism. I think it weighed on him heavily. And he was going under. I was too young to realize how bad off he was, and like I say, a few days later ... it was listed as an accident, but I feel it was a suicide.

He had lost his job as a teacher because of alcoholism. He had started an electrical business and after I finished high school I worked for him, but I told him that I probably wouldn't be working much longer if he didn't straighten up because he was ruining the business. There were a lot of contributing things. I still don't know exactly why he told me that and so close to his death.

It took some months after I came back in 1969 before I became an active protester. The moratorium came up in the fall of 1969. I was at Eastern Connecticut State University in Willimantic, Connecticut. I remember carrying a sign, not because I particularly cared about what was on the sign but to protect from flying objects. We had people threatening to drive their cars through our march line. They were furious. They viewed us as traitors for protesting the "holy war" against Communism. This was the end of 1969. I felt like I was back in another war zone. It was kind of weird.

That's when I began to realize the greater courage that it takes to go unarmed and be a peacemaker and a protester. I didn't have a lot of fear while I had all that heavy gear and weaponry. I had some very tense moments. I've never known fear quite as bad, but it was like one incident in Vietnam that was so terrifying. Much of the time I had this rather typical feeling it was not going to be me. It was a good feeling. It just didn't bother me. But without any protection and with people that angry, now I have even greater respect for Martin Luther King. It takes a special courage and I wanted to be part of that.



My role models are Tolstoy and his connection with Gandhi, and Muriel Lester, who studied under Gandhi and converted Richard Deats to nonviolence. He was executive director of FOR, the Fellowship of Reconciliation. I headed a Chicago chapter of FOR for several years, so I worked with Richard Deats from a distance and I feel this kind of transmission of the torch from some very important peacemakers. Many FOR people worked alongside Dr. King from early on.

The Jewish theologian Martin Buber has made a big difference in my way of thinking about others and the world. I was into literature. My first major was classical literature and I ended up studying Holocaust literature, and the brave witnesses like Primo Levi, Emmanuel Levinas, T. Borowsky the Polish writer, Viktor Frankl, and others. Their experiences dealing with the situation, and what they were part of and what they wish they had done or not done, helped me deal with guilt and distress that I felt for having been kind of a just go-along-to-get-along type. You know, trying to look out for my own ass instead of taking a proactive stand and just letting the chips fall where they may, instead of going along and even getting sucked in like when I got all these kudos for engineering the Bong Son Bridge lighting. Feeling kind of good about that, and then having to deal with what that really meant later. Not a good feeling.

As I look back on the entire war experience there is only one thing, one incident, where I still feel I did something right. It was a wild night of partying in the barracks on Engineer Hill near Pleiku and it was getting very late. Most of us were a bit drunk or stoned. A group of black soldiers from another barracks congregated at one end of our barracks. They had become very loud with their music and belligerent about it when asked to turn it down. I was asked by several people to go and talk with them. These were big guys. I'm almost six feet tall, but I had to look way up when asking them to tone it down so we could get some sleep. They refused and when I came back and conveyed that message, there was an angry verbal response from everyone at our end of the barracks.

I decided to trip off the main electrical circuit breaker located on our end of the barracks to shut things down. But one of the black soldiers found the breaker panel with a flashlight, restored power, and the music was cranked up even higher. Then they loudly threatened serious bodily harm to anyone who dared turn it off again. It was then that I saw and heard ammo clips being inserted into weapons. The black soldiers had left their weapons back at their own barracks.

My gut told me something ugly was about to happen. I told the other soldier in our cubicle that I was about to shut them down again, and that he'd better seriously pretend to be asleep in order to avoid retribution. The main electrical cable went along the back wall of the barracks behind our bunks. I cut into it with a pocket knife and the blade welded into the copper wire with a big explosion, but the music was so loud no one could pinpoint where the explosion came from. Then I jumped into the bunk and began to snore loudly. Moments later a black soldier was training a flashlight around our cubicle and then on my face, a few tense minutes later he moved on and the party was over.

Weeks later in Hawaii on R&R I started to relate this incident to a member of the provost marshal's staff. In astonishment he blurted out details of another incident so similar that he thought I was a witness to the case he was currently investigating. In that incident more than a dozen unarmed black soldiers were shot to death at one end of a barracks by white soldiers at the other end. He asked me not to tell anyone about this because only those with top secret clearance ratings were supposed to know the details of this mass killing. I felt quite certain that I had saved some lives that night.

I'm equally certain that weeks later, on the way back from the war, a black man saved my life. I was emotionally devastated by the war, and he picked up on it and was worried about my safety. He was the second cook on an east bound train out of Tacoma, Washington. Almost out of money, the ticket I had purchased ended in western Montana. When I told him that I'd be hitchhiking back to Connecticut from there, he expressed grave concern. At dawn, just before reaching that Montana station, he woke me up and hid me



away in the cook's quarters. He brought food and water, too. All he asked of me in return was "pass it on." I've tried to do that, especially while working with street people in Chicago. I still keep trying to do that.

I think a spiritual component is critical to peace. It's a way of seeing. It's a way of visioning self, other, and world that brings out the peace from the inside so that it's not an angry or violent stand for peace. Instead, it's real peace that comes from the depths when you yourself are at peace. You're better able to make peace outside. That's what I find in the great peace-makers. It comes right down to this power of being, and peace being a virtue, as Spinoza rightly said. It's not the absence of war. It's a virtue. It's a power, an inner power, a state of mind or being that is one of benevolence and confidence. Violence is the method of the weak and fearful. When we're strong and we're confident and we're connected, we wouldn't gravitate toward violence. We'd be able to steer clear of it.