

Michael Kelley
US Army D Company 1st/502d Infantry, 101st Abn Div
In Vietnam: 11/10/1969 – 9/23/1970
Letterman General Hospital: 10/1970 – 6/1971
Interviewed By: Scott Homrighausen

After Vietnam

Now, I was wounded badly when our platoon medic stepped on a mine next to me. I had been in Vietnam almost eleven months when that happened and I spent almost another eleven months in the hospital down at Letterman in San Francisco. I was one sick puppy, let me tell you; just in agony. Finally, the doctor said, “Okay, we’re discharging you. Go over to this building and get your stuff.” So I went over and I had civilian clothes on and the guy said, “You need to go over to the Oakland Army Terminal on the other end of the Bay Bridge and process out, but you need to be in a Class A uniform to do that.” I didn’t have a Class A uniform so he told me I’d need to get one. So, I went over to the clothing store and said, “I gotta get a Class A uniform.” The guy there said “Okay, no problem. Three days.” I said, “You’re shitting me.” So I had to wait three days for this fricken’ Class A uniform.

Finally that was ready and I got into Oakland Army Terminal at like 4:55. I get off the bus and I go into this processing station and I step up to the counter with the big sign that says OUTPROCESSING, just as the clock hits five o’clock. I look like a skeleton, weighing about 150 pounds, and I’m weak and tired. I hand my paper to the guy and he says, “Sorry.” “What do you mean?” I asked. “We only process Sixth Army and hospital returnees from eight to five,” he says, “If you were coming out of Travis its twenty four hours a day.” As he was saying this, I could hear this group that had just come in from Travis and they’re getting up in the bleachers to start their process out. So I said, “Well,

can't you put me with those guys?" And he leaned over to me and says, "How much money ya got?" That guy tried to hustle me on my last day in the Army. I'm tellin' ya, if I'd had any strength at all, I would have killed the son of a bitch. I was sooo upset. So I told him to stick it where the sun don't shine and spent the night on the base and processed out in the morning.

One of the sad memories of that day stands out. One of the last things a soldier does is sign his DD214, his discharge paper. He looks it over, they ask him if it's alright, and he signs it and they hand him the original and he turns around and walks out of the Army. Well, these guys were walking down that hall, taking off their uniforms and throwing them on the floor because they didn't want to be seen in Oakland or Berkeley in a uniform. That's what it was like in those days; we got no respect. I was heartbroken. I mean, I was very proud of what I'd done and here's this sea of uniforms that I had to shove apart to get out. Here were all these guys walkin' across in their t-shirts out the gate. The guards were givin' them a rashin' but they just told them to kiss their ass. I'll never forget that. I thought, "God, this country is in a sad state."

Well, the whole Bay area was that way - there was a lot of dissension towards the troops. When I was in the hospital, the troops there did not want anyone to know who they were or what they did. I dunno what it was, but they did not like us. We got very little respect. It was disgusting.

Now, I'd gotten a degree in art before I was drafted, but I couldn't lift a paintbrush or a pencil until about 1978 when a friend of mine, Bernie Edelman, got a hold of me and said he'd like to have an art show in New York. So, for the first time in ten years after the

war I picked up a pencil and started drawing and it felt pretty good. Now the subject matter was the war 'cause I couldn't focus on anything else. I got a lot of heat for that. I got a lot of heat from that not just from people outside my sphere of influence, but from my family. They'd say, "Why are you doing that? Why don't you forget the war?" You know, that just pissed me off. You're asking me to just forget the most amazing experience of my life? Why wouldn't I chronicle what I'd done and seen and felt? Why not? Everybody writes about what they know. I'll tell ya, I took a lot of resistance. Most of the art shows that we put together, we had a hard time finding a home for because of the same thing. Gallery owners didn't want anything to do with it since it was controversial subject matter.

But whatever I was as an artist, I enjoy writing much better. Art's fine, but writing is different. If you do a drawing or if you do a painting and a year later you come back and you don't like something about it, you're screwed. That's it! But with a written piece, if you don't like it, you can change it.

I wanted to tell it like it was. I greatly resented the treatment we got when we got home. The other thing I started to see was many myths about who we were and what we did. Now, if there's going to be an investigation of what we did in Vietnam, let's go back and investigate World War I and World War II and the Philippines where we killed 250,000 people. I hate that second guessing everything we did. So anyway, part of what I wanted in the early stages of my art was not to glorify it. This is what we were, this is what we did; neither good nor bad. But don't tell me it was this way and don't tell me it

was that way. Also, I wanted to memorialize my friends in some respects so a lot of my drawings are about them. They are the people whom I respect.

Now I've lived all over the world and I've been in combat and I know that human nature isn't what a lot of people here think it is. Whether they like or not, we need to have a warrior class. Until human nature changes, you better have a good army and you better have it ready because your freedom and your happiness is on the line. Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not pro-war, I'm just pro-soldier.