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### From Boot Camp to Bitterness: A Marine's Account of the Vietnam War

In three decades, no one had ever asked me for my story of the Vietnam War, so it was ironic that a woman came to interview me about my experiences on the very day I had enlisted in the Marine Corp thirty-seven years ago. I didn't even realize the appropriateness of the date until that morning.

I was fresh out of high school, having grown up in Rochester, NY. I was 18, gung-ho, and rearing to go, so I joined the Marines because I was ready for an adventure. I *wanted* to go to Vietnam. Back in 1968, why would anyone join the Marine Corp if not to go to Vietnam? Later, we were told to make dream lists: three places where we would most like to get sent. On my list was "Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam." Those were the days when I still supported the war.

Basic training was nothing spectacular; everyone was trained as infantry. Those people were masters at brainwashing. They took a simple kid, erased all the things he grew up with, and replaced them with Marine Corp values. They did it well, too. When I left for Vietnam much later, I felt I was well trained and had a good chance of survival because I knew what I was doing. After basic training I was sent to Pensacola, FL, where I was trained as a Morse code specialist. For six months I had headphones on, listening to Morse code. In 'Nam, all communication by the NVA was done in code because technology wasn't what it is today.

We flew to Vietnam on a commercial jet, complete with stewardesses. I remember looking out the window at Vietnam, seeing a huge, dark, isolated mountain, and thinking. "Jesus Christ, I wouldn't want to be up there." But sure enough, as soon as we got down, we were put on a truck and taken on a long winding road up that mountain.

The mountain was called Hill 327 and I spent a couple months in the DMZ, working in a bunker listening to and trying to break Morse code. It wasn't a particularly dangerous place, but at night I had to

patrol the perimeter. One of the most memorable events during my time in Vietnam happened on one of those patrols. A group of about nine Vietnamese civilians came down a road that absolutely no one was supposed to be on. Granted, they probably weren't completely innocent; they were probably connected to the VC in some way, but I still told them to stop. They were testing us and didn't stop. Beside me, I could hear the guy I was on patrol with getting excited, saying, "Waste 'em, waste 'em, waste 'em!" I fired some warning shots, and there was a split second where I thought I really was going to waste them. But then I could hear my parents saying, "Don't do it Terry, it's wrong." So I didn't waste them, although I probably would have gotten a medal for it. I'm really glad I didn't kill all those people, and when I got back home I told my parents that..

Along with Tet came one of my most chilling memories of the war. There were a lot of VC lying dead on the ground in piles, but no one had bothered to close their eyes, so there were flies swarming all over their eyes. It really bugged me. I was up near Danang for most of Tet anyways, so I was relatively safe. Danang in general was pretty safe, just like downtown Vacaville, and everyone was really clean. When I went in I always had filthy boots, but it was a badge of honor to have dirty boots in that place. You could tell where someone had been just by looking at their boots.

I had a really great commanding officer. He was a lieutenant who'd worked his way up through the ranks, so when I met him he was well seasoned. We got new 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenants all the time. We'd be in the mud, and here all these new lieutenants would come in with their spit-shined boots, gather us all up and start telling *us* about war. We didn't take them too seriously. The older officers were good though. I got sent to Bangkok for some R&R for five days during the war. It was about as far from the war as you could get—you were clean, showered, fed, and had all the cash you wanted. Basically I was 19 and I just went crazy for those five days. Then I had to go back.

My attitude toward the war really started to change midway. I was in there for 13 months—all of '68 and a month '69. I was supposed to go into Khe Sahn, but the Marines were getting hit so badly they couldn't get me in. After it was all over it was all for nothing. I started getting this attitude that I didn't want to die here. I just started thinking that it wasn't going to matter a damned bit, so I got more cautious towards the end. When you got toward the end of your tour it was called "being short" and you really were more

cautious. My brother ended up serving two tours in Vietnam, but I only served one. I was tempted to re-enlist for another 6 months because they gave you thirty days leave, but I figured I'd been lucky enough the first time around, having come out with not even a scratch, so I didn't want to push my luck.

At the end of the war I did end up getting the basic medals. They were even going to award me some more. We were in formation and they called my name, but I refused them. I think it had to do with my age, the era, and my general attitude at the end of the war. To this day I still regret having refused those medals.

Going home was hard for me to do. In Vietnam, the combat zone, things were pretty lax. I'd enlisted for three years, so when I got home there were people chewing my ass off because my boots weren't shined. When you came back from 'Nam, you came back by yourself—no unit, no parade. You ended up lost at the airport and people gave you dirty looks, laughed at you, and mocked you. Nobody gave a shit what you just went through. You just went through something amazing and you wanted to tell someone but no one wanted to hear it, and if they did, they just wanted to argue with you and tell you were a baby killer. The stories you hear about how vets were treated are true. Vietnam was so bizarre, I'll believe almost any story anyone tells me about their experience. It was just all so strange.

When I got done with 'Nam I still had some time left in the Marines, and I got sent to Morocco. Morocco was the place everyone wanted to go, but two other guys and I were chosen because we were veterans of Vietnam. I had a blast there, and when I came back to the States I applied to a university in Rochester. They asked me about my background, and as soon as I told them I'd been a Marine in Vietnam they told me I was in. I spent the next few years in school before I took off and drove around the country, doing odd jobs, liquor, and drugs. I wasted a lot of time back then, but maybe that was a good thing because I was so distracted that I buried the memories of Vietnam.

It wasn't until about eight years after I'd left Vietnam that I started having to deal with those memories. My worst Vietnam experience happened almost 10 years after the war. I was at a concert at the Greek theatre in Berkeley with a bunch of friends, and I was on the hill with this young woman. Things were going well—you know, a little hugging and kissing, and she was snuggled up to me when a friend came up and tried to start a conversation. "Hey Rosa," he said, "Did you know Terry was a Marine in Vietnam?" This

woman became so repulsed; she looked at me like I was a child molester. I knew she felt dirty, like she couldn't wait to get away from me, and I just thought, "God, it's been 10 years and you people are *still* doing this?" I felt really horrible that night. That incident just burned into my brain, bringing back so many other memories.

I couldn't afford to fly to the east coast for a Marine reunion, but perhaps it's better that way. I'd like to maybe sit in a bar with my old buddies for an evening, have some beers and reminisce, but I couldn't talk about it for three whole days. As I got older more movies about Vietnam started coming out, but I don't watch them anymore. They put me in a bad mood. I got up one morning at home and found a rat in my kitchen. In 'Nam there used to be rats everywhere when you woke up. They were all over you, crawling in your crotch and in your armpits. This rat in my home triggered something, and I just grabbed a cane and started beating it to death. There was blood everywhere, and then I heard an M-60 go off. I just kept beating the hell out of this rat and the more blood there was the more machine gun fire I heard. Then I thought to close the sliding glass door of my home so the neighbors wouldn't hear the gunfire. And as I placed my hand on the sliding glass door, it suddenly dawned on me. I thought, "Oh, my god, they can't hear it." For me there was an M-60 in that kitchen, but for them—nothing. I just sat down and cried. And after that I had to clean up all that goddamned blood in my kitchen.

Vietnam was a whole bunch of boredom, a whole lot of horror, and a whole lot of drama. You didn't fire your weapon every night, didn't kill someone every day. But you remember the instances when the boredom is broken. Oddly enough, if I could go back and change things, I'd do the same thing again. For some perverse, weird reason, I liked it. I talked to a lot of other guys and they all said the same thing. Once I got into an argument with someone where I said that people love war. They told me no, they don't, but I countered with, "Yes, they do. I was there, and there's a certain drama and glamour about it." It was really hard for me to come back to normal life. I remember one New Year's Eve we were sitting in this village smoking some marijuana we'd gotten from a mama-san, cradling our M-60s in our arms, just shooting them off. Every 4<sup>th</sup> round was a tracer, and we were just blasting away. For a 19 year old kid that was a lot of power. It's no wonder that when I came back to the States, Vietnam was such a tough act to follow.