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*Vietnam was the first war to be broadcast on television into American homes. What the public saw, however, did not translate into enduring public support for American participation. Some Americans, on the contrary, were not convinced that the Vietnamese conflict posed any immediate threat to American security, and its unfamiliar setting and the scope of its violence—reaching to children and civilians—made this war particularly disquieting. For those Americans who fought and served in Vietnam, the lack of overwhelming domestic support aggravated the pain of their wartime experiences.*

*The readings that follow are from three participants. Richard C. Ensminger, from a military family, served in 1966–67 and again in 1969 as a Marine forward observer, losing a leg in combat. Roosevelt Gore, son of a sharecropping family, was an Army mortarman in 1967–68. Rose Sandeck served as the head nurse in the intensive care unit of an army evacuation hospital in Vietnam. For each in a different way the months in Vietnam permanently marked their lives.*

RICHARD C. ENSMINGER

I guess I saw myself as another John Wayne for my first few weeks in Vietnam. I loaded myself down with extra grenades and ammo, but it didn't take me very long to learn that all that ammo was too heavy in the heat. On the other hand, it was an Article 15 offense to discard it in the field, so I finally worked myself down to one or two M-26 fragmentation grenades, eight to ten magazines for my M-14, and three or four canteens of water. Since I was a forward observer, I also carried a compass, a map case, a pair of binoculars, and at least one meal of C-rations. My helmet was decorated with bottles of Texas Pete hot sauce for the C-rats and bug juice to keep off the B-52 mosquitoes. We didn't wear underwear; it would rot off you because we were lucky to get a bath every two weeks.

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I was always humping, always on the move. All of us worried a lot about ambushes. For that reason, we never had a set time for a patrol to go out. Sometimes we'd go in the middle of the day or late evening. If

we set a schedule, Charlie got to know about it. He would know when we were out, where we were, and whether we followed the same trail twice. You learned this from guys who had been over there for a while. They knew how to stay alive.

When I first got to Cam Lo, the old-timers who had been in Vietnam for a year wouldn't have anything to do with me. They knew I knew my job, but their attitude troubled me at first. We new guys stayed together and little by little moved into the group. It was an initiation. I had to prove to them that I wouldn't get them killed. It was something that everybody went through. One marine warned me, "I'll tell you once: you mess up and you're on your own. Mess up twice and I'll kill you." He was a lance corporal, the same rank as me.

"Are you kidding?" I said.

"No, I'm not. I'll kill you in a moment's notice. You're not gonna get me killed." I figured the best way not to screw up was to stay in the back and watch everybody else. New guys in the back of a line couldn't trip bouncing betties or step on mines. But if a new guy took the point, people started getting very nervous.

Most marine grunts were good for only six to eight months of combat. It took from three to six months to learn the basics of staying in one piece. Then, for the last couple of months before a guy's DEROS [end of Vietnam service], we just left him alone for the most part because he had the short-timer's attitude. This was when most of our court-martial and office hours came up. Short-timers didn't want to go out in the field; they were afraid some guy would screw up their chances of going home. Second lieutenants sometimes did that. They were a dime a dozen in the marines. A second lieutenant who screwed up twice was a dead man, and not necessarily because of the enemy. He might get killed by his own men.

A lieutenant who came in and said, "Hey, I don't know what's going on" and looked to his sergeants to help him along usually did all right. But one who marched in and announced that he was going to run the show, that he was the boss out there in the bush—if he made it, he was damn lucky. His sergeant might turn around to him and say, "Nobody can hear you. Stand up and tell 'em." Charlie would pick off that lieutenant as soon as he did that. The sergeants, now they were the ones we paid attention to. Some of those guys were amazingly brave: they would walk rice paddy dikes under fire and never get a scratch.

I could usually have gunfire coming in on Charlie within a minute or a minute and a half of asking for it. If gunfire had to be cleared through the Danang Intelligence Center because of friendly troops in the area, it might take half an hour, which was entirely too long. Sometimes Danang would even deny gunfire because friendly troops were out there. Of course they were. We were the friendlies who needed fire on an enemy position. When the first round slammed in, Charlie

would always look around in surprise. If the round was close enough, he'd scramble around and try to scatter. If the second round was on target, I'd tell the gunners to fire for effect. Then I'd see bodies flying apart, vegetation being torn up, the earth just erupting, all hell in one moment. I've been on the receiving end of it, so I know what the enemy's feelings must have been.

If a forward observer gets spotted by the enemy, his life expectancy is about fifteen seconds. The same is true for snipers and scouts. I knew that before I went to Vietnam. As soon as Charlie saw you, he was going to try to kill you. I had a close call like that on Operation Prairie. I caught some Charlies in the open, but I didn't know they had small flanking units all around them. When they passed by a firebase, I called in 81mm mortars, maybe a hundred rounds pumped out from four tubes. We started taking automatic weapons fire from the side while I was on the radio, telling the mortar crews what was happening. Before it was all over, my radio operator and three or four other grunts got hit. It was a damned scary business.

I got wounded nine months into my first tour, in February of 1967, when a firebase basically got overrun during Operation Independence. It was a shrapnel wound. Charlie mortared the place on a cold, rainy night, dropping maybe forty or fifty rounds before he came at us—I believe he knew that firebase backwards and forwards. Before it was over, I burned out the barrel of an M-60, the 60mm mortars ran out of ammunition, all the LAWs were fired and not one radio worked. I was down to fifteen rounds for my .45 pistol when Charlie finally pulled back. If he'd hit us again, all of us would have been dead.

We fired a lot of 60mm illumination rounds and pop-up flares during the attack. Everybody carried two or three pop-up flares. To fire one, you pulled the cap off and put it on the rear end. Then you hit the cap and a little parachute flare shot about two hundred feet in the air. The flares let us see the enemy fairly well; I could tell that some of them were moving quickly, but others, for some reason, weren't. They were firing their weapons mostly from the hip. I'll tell you, I was scared to hell and back, but I think I fought to the best of my ability. There was always some fear in my mind that I was going to screw up, that I would let down one or two guys that I'd gotten close to. It was like walking a log across a river: one wrong step and you're going to fall in. The fear of screwing up was there all the time.

There were always some guys who looked for any excuse to avoid combat. One of them lives here in Watauga County. The way he tells it, he would put on his flak vest, his helmet, and his body pants—which I never saw anybody wear in Vietnam—and then he'd drop an M-26 grenade on the ground and walk fifteen feet away. That gave him enough shrapnel wounds in his legs to get medevaced out. This guy

never really got hurt, but he picked up three Purple Hearts. He boasted to me one day that's how he got out of Vietnam.

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I came back to El Toro Marine Air Station in California, where I took a shower, picked up my seabag and gladly took thirty days' leave, with fifteen days of grace travel to my next duty station. When I went to Vietnam, I weighed 235 pounds. I weighed 175 pounds when I came back, all solid muscle and red clay dirt. I rode a military bus down to San Diego to catch a flight to Miami, where I planned to unwind for a while. I had on my short-sleeve khakis, which were very wrinkled because they had been in my seabag for thirteen months, and my combat boots. I had slapped some black polish on them, but I really didn't care what anybody said. I was home.

As I got off the bus and started to walk up a ramp at the San Diego airport, a woman who looked to be about fifty years old jumped out of the crowd and pointed a .22 pistol at a marine twenty guys in front of me.

"You woman and child killer!" she screamed. She put six rounds in that marine at point-blank range.

When I heard her first shot, I hit the ground and rolled back under the bus. It was an automatic reaction—I had to find a place to hide. The marine who was shot had wounds in his stomach and side, but none of them was fatal. The woman was lucky to live through what happened to her, too. Some of the other marines threw her over a fence eight feet high. I understand the fall broke both her legs and several ribs. All of us who witnessed the shooting were held up a day because we had to give statements to the police and navy criminal investigators about what had happened. I simply wrote that I crawled under a bus.

I believe in God and country. When I went to Vietnam, I believed it was my duty to go over there and fight for my country. I came back as a corporal E-4 with a Purple Heart and a couple of unit citations. I knew I had done something worthwhile, but I wasn't prepared for the demonstrations against the war here, for the people who downgraded me for being in the military. As I saw it, there were three groups of people in the United States: the older people who didn't care about the war, the kids who didn't understand it, and those who were totally against Vietnam, against everything we were doing over there. The situation eventually got so bad that we were told to stay away from the civilian population as much as possible to hold down friction.

I went on to Miami Beach to spend thirty days with a couple of sergeants, but I cut it short after only six days. I was twenty years old, but I was supposed to be twenty-one to walk into a bar. I was old

enough to fight for my country, but I couldn't get a beer. That wasn't all. If I walked up to a girl and asked her to dance, she'd take one look at me, like I was something with a bad smell, and wouldn't have anything to do with me. I had been back from Vietnam for only a week and already I was feeling like an outsider. And I was getting angry. I let my weight shoot up to two hundred pounds, I wore all my campaign ribbons, and I let people know I was one mean mother. I remember walking in one bar in Miami and some people said they wanted me out of there. I told a dude who shoved me that if he did it one more time, I'd gladly take on him and everybody else in the place. Another veteran was in there, a fellow who had lost an arm in Korea.

"I'll be more than happy to back you up," he said. The place settled down fast.

I went on to my next duty station at Quantico Marine Base in Virginia for training in crowd and riot control. In the fall of 1967, a big antiwar demonstration was being planned at the Pentagon, and a bunch of us at Quantico were trucked up there for security. I was one of several marines put on top of the building. I had a pump shotgun, body armor, and a helmet. Our shells had rubber bullets in them, but somebody high up must have thought it would be a bad idea to issue ammo to men who had served in Vietnam. Maybe they were afraid we would get mad enough to shoot somebody.

I had to work one more big demonstration, this one in front of the Capitol. This time, about fifty marines were called up from Quantico. We were issued full riot gear: helmets with plastic face shields, body armor, gas masks, and shotguns with five rounds of rubber ammo. Some marines in the line behind me had tear gas guns for backup protection. The people in front of me called me a babykiller, they called my mother every name in the book, and they did the same for my sister. I didn't like crowd control duty and had asked to get out of it. I tried to make it clear to my sergeant that someday a protester would come up to me and say the wrong thing and I'd shoot the bastard.

"You can't do much harm with a rubber bullet," he said. Well, I stood in that line and took the verbal abuse, but when a man spit in my face, I showed him what a marine with a shotgun could do. I got an Article 15 for my trouble and a transfer to other duty.

I volunteered to go back to Vietnam after a little more than a year in the states. I didn't feel comfortable going outside a military base. Somehow, I felt I wasn't wanted in American society. And I was getting tired of the petty, spit-shined mentality of the stateside marines. In Vietnam, I could do what I was trained for. Maybe I was also getting a bit paranoid—officers and authority were making me nervous. When I got back to Danang in April of 1969, the base had grown tremendously. It was now a big city of metal buildings. Naturally, a few things hadn't changed. I still had to go through Dogpatch, two miles of warehouses

outside the base, to get to a staging area where I got orders for the 3/5th Marines.

As I see it now, I think I wanted another tour in Vietnam to help keep marines from getting killed. It had become more important to me to keep Americans alive than to kill NVA. I was a sergeant by this time, and I figured I would be sent out to a rifle company as a forward observer, which was a good way to accomplish what I wanted to do. But Vietnam had changed and the marines had, too. We had draftees now. On my first tour, we were all volunteers. Now there was a drug problem that I hadn't seen before. Marijuana grew in every creek bed in Vietnam. Grunts were getting stoned on it, on hash and other drugs—you name it, and you could buy it. I could see this was a different war from the first time around, and I made up my mind not to trust the men screwed up on drugs. I would do my duty, but I intended to come out alive.

When I flew out to my company near An Hoa, south of Danang, I jumped off the chopper in the middle of a firefight. In a way, my arrival was a sort of metaphor for my second tour. Lima company never stayed in one place; it was always on the move. No rest, no sleep. After only two weeks in the bush, I was numb, worn out. All I wanted was a hot meal and twenty-four hours of sleep. I saw a lot more killing and mutilation during my second tour. For one thing, I was closer to it. During my first tour, I spent some time with the Combined Action Platoon program on hamlet security, but now the war seemed like one endless search-and-destroy mission. Since I was one of the few forward observers in my battalion, I spent almost all my time in the bush. I would go back to the rear with a company, then turn right around and go back out with another one.

I was so tired I started to act by instinct alone. I was lucky to get four hours of sleep a night. I know now that I was doing a lot of stupid things: I'd see two VC running out there and call in a fire mission, instead of letting my snipers and scouts handle them. I'd just blow the hell out of an area. I was even calling in false reports. I was out for blood. The one mistake in my life that I'm sorry for, that I still have nightmares over, came one day I was with Lima company. We took some small-arms fire from a village. Right away, I called for mixed air and ground bursts of artillery fire that flattened the place in less than five minutes. . . . It was a godlike display of power. After it was all over, I walked through a burning, smoky ruin of straw and bamboo huts. I could see parts of human and animal bodies scattered all around, and I noticed that the air was saturated with a sharp smell of gunpowder and urine. At this time, every marine unit in my battalion was supposed to meet a quota in VC and NVA—it was a meat quota. A lot of civilians who got killed were called VC. In fact, the village that I shot up became a VC village: four hundred confirmed kills,

women and children. Lima company met its meat quota for two months with that one village alone.

I justified what I had done by thinking about marines that I had seen get shot and lay wounded, unable to move to safety, while the VC kept shooting at them. Sometimes the VC would shoot at a grunt even after he was dead. Seeing such things had a hardening effect on all of us. I think a lot of marines felt we were still fighting for a reason in 1969, but we weren't sure what the reason was anymore. The war had become a sort of perpetual-motion killing machine. We killed them and they killed us, and nothing seemed to change.

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. . . I took over the platoon of fifty-four marines and led them toward a hamlet a short distance away.

There was enough bamboo in the area to limit our line of sight to about a hundred meters. The NVA were waiting for us in a classic L-shaped ambush along a creek bed outside the hamlet. They let the point squad walk into the hamlet before opening up on the rest of us. I believe we were hit by an entire company of NVA supported by a weapons platoon because those people laid down some fire on us. I was one of the first men to get hit, in the back of my left leg, and I'm sure it was my radio operator who did it. I felt a sharp, burning pain in my leg and swung around and saw the RTO frozen to his rifle, which was still firing. His head was gone. A round had taken it off and blood was spurting up from his neck like a water fountain. He must have had his M-14 on automatic and his trigger finger touched it off when he was hit. It put seven bullets in my leg. To this day, I don't know who he was or where he was from.

I can remember somebody dragging me into a bomb crater or some other kind of hole. My leg felt like it was on fire. I reached for my backpack and got out a shot of morphine to get some relief from the pain. By that time in the war, almost everybody was carrying little tubes of morphine. I popped off the cap, squeezed a bit of the fluid out, and stuck the needle in my leg. I still had some idea of what was going on around me—all hell was breaking loose. About twenty feet away, a gook in a spider trap was popping up now and then to spray the area with his AK-47. I shot at him with my M-14. A lot of marines were getting hit. A corpsman jumped in the hole to give me another shot of morphine and fell back in when he tried to leave. His guts were blown out. I could hear men screaming for their mothers, for God, for death. Those who got up to help others got shot themselves.

The ambush probably lasted less than an hour, but it seemed like days. I heard choppers coming in and the next thing I knew, a marine was trying to help me. I was certain he was an NVA, so I pulled out my

