

AVEL VIETNAM

Newsletter - January 2020

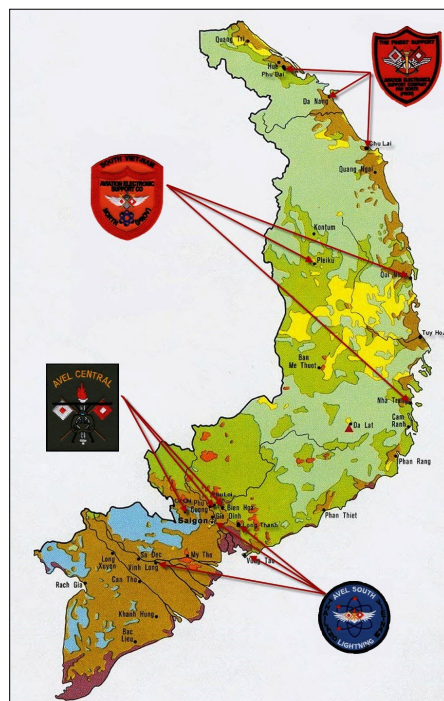
The Vietnam War Was Already Lost, but I Had to Go Anyway.

Fifty years ago, American troops began withdrawing, but tens of thousands were yet to die.

*By William Broyles Jr.
July 10, 2019*

In the summer of 1969, the first American troops were withdrawn from Vietnam. Their war was over, but mine was just beginning. The previous November, Richard M. Nixon had been elected president with a “secret plan” to end the war. Surely peace was near. That same month I received my draft notice. About 24,000 of the more than 58,000 Americans killed in Vietnam were yet to die. I didn’t want to be one of them. No one did.

I had demonstrated against the war from the safety of my college deferment, so I thought of going to Canada. I also thought of getting a friendly doctor to say I had bone spurs or anxiety, but those choices would mean someone else from my refinery-town high school would have to go in my place.



By the time I arrived in Vietnam a year later, the rate of troop withdrawals had increased. But in Paris the peace talks were proceeding at a glacial speed. Hundreds of Americans and thousands of Vietnamese had died while the diplomats argued about the shape of the table. I was flown out to a platoon in the foothills of the Truong Son mountains, near where the Ho Chi Minh Trail fed North Vietnamese troops and supplies into the northern provinces of South Vietnam. We circled a blasted hilltop still smoldering from enemy mortars. Gaunt, tanned Marines in ragged fatigues moved slowly as they went about their morning rituals, heating C-ration meals and welcoming security teams back from their night positions.

Here’s what I wrote in a letter home back then: “I have 58 men. Only 20 have high school diplomas. Average age 19. Over and over I read: address of father: unknown; education: one or two years of high school; occupation: laborer, pecan sheller, gas station attendant, Job Corps. They had grown up in the ghetto or Appalachia or along the Rio Grande border or on a rez. Kids with no place to go. No place but here.” They were expendable, and they knew it. I was the clueless 24-year-old second lieutenant who had been put in charge of them. They couldn’t care less that I had a fancy degree from Oxford. They didn’t want to know if I would help them win the war. They knew it was already lost. They were wondering, would I get them killed, or not?

At night we took two-hour watches, Hiers my radio man and the others in our command foxhole. On my watch a call came in from battalion headquarters. Da Nang had been hit by 122-mm rockets.

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We were ordered to cross the river to find and kill the rocket team. I had just arrived, so to me the attack on Da Nang was like the bombing of Pearl Harbor. I summoned my squad leaders and gave them the order. They laughed. No. Way. Not for a few relatively harmless rockets disturbing the comfortable sleep of the Americans in the rear. Besides, the enemy owned the night. Even during the day, a river crossing was one of the most dangerous maneuvers we could do. In the dark, we stood zero chance of finding the men who had fired the rockets but a serious chance of men being killed, wounded, lost or drowned. Solution: We would do the mission only on the radio, but no one would move a muscle. As far as battalion headquarters knew, we withdrew from our position, crossed the river and discovered no rocketeers on the other side. It was a virtual mission. At first light, we did it for real.

This was the Marines. These kids weren't afraid of a fight. They would have stormed the beaches at Iwo Jima. They would have given their buddies the last drop of water and their last C-ration. They would go out under fire to bring a buddy back to safety. They would give their lives for one another. No hesitation. But would they give their lives for the diplomatic benefit of Nixon and Henry Kissinger? At the order of some hard-charging major safely back at base, who was making the most of a six-month combat posting to feather his résumé? We would die for one another, but we didn't want to die for nothing.

In early 1970, the Pentagon announced that the 26th Marine Regiment would be withdrawn in April. That was us! Everyone wrote home with the good news. We were going to live! Then we learned about what was known as the "Mixmaster" strategy. All of the Marines throughout Vietnam who were already set to go home were transferred into our regiment. All of us who had been there for less time were transferred out. With great ceremony the 26th went home, but few of the men who went with it had ever actually served in the regiment. The rest of us were dispersed all over Vietnam; we went home on our regular rotation dates or in body bags. "Xin loi," we said, "Tough break, don't mean nothing."

It's been 50 years, which means Vietnam is as far from me today as World War I, another war of dubious purpose, was from me then. I remember so much. The lush shades of green. The smells of mud and water buffalo and human excrement and burned flesh. The blood and the leeches and the music playing from eight-tracks before the sun set and we all wondered if we would see it rise. The laughter, too. The smell of cordite and the sound of an enemy mortar being launched at us and the shells from the big 16-inch guns roaring over us like subway trains. I remember the helicopters and the green AK-47 tracer bullets coming at us, and the body bags and the orphanage children burned alive by the Vietcong for having helped us. I remember the faces and the nicknames and the Freedom Bird calendars that marked the day we would fly out of this place, if it was the last thing we ever did. And for too many it was.

Whenever I stand at the Vietnam memorial, I see their faces looking back at me. I wonder what their lives might have been like, what they might have done for the world, what kind of fathers they might have been. And I think the same about the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese who died on both sides, especially in those last six years after the peace talks began, when no one wanted to be the last to die for a lost cause.

I wished only that my own sons would not have to kill and die in such a senseless way. But after Sept. 11, my oldest son became a pararescueman, a Special Ops paramedic in the war we have been fighting for 18 years, as long as all of our 20-century wars combined. He was deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan, Djibouti, Uzbekistan and elsewhere. I alternated between great pride and helpless fury. I had cold sweats from thinking the car coming up the driveway was the casualty detail telling me that he had been killed. It was only then that I realized my own parents must have gone through the same thing.

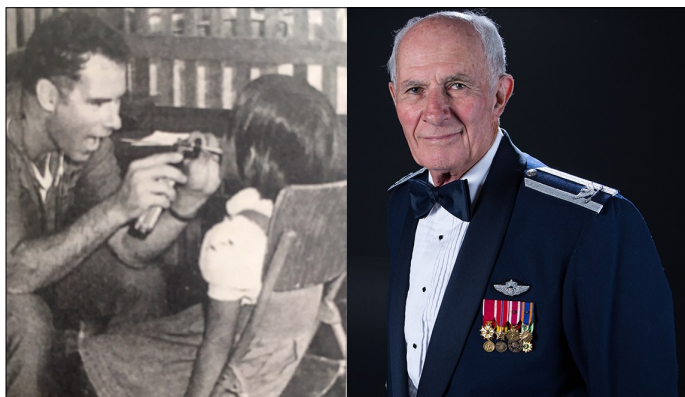
We learn nothing.



Vietnam Veterans Remember the War

As National Vietnam War Veterans Day approaches, memories and opinions remain strong

The Vietnam War helped shape a generation of Americans, none more than the 2.7 million who served in Southeast Asia. In honor of National Vietnam War Veterans Day on March 29, veterans share their most vivid memories — and about what they want Americans today to know or remember.



Len Kirchner, M.D., 83, of Litchfield Park, Ariz.

Kirchner entered the Air Force in 1961 at age 25. He served in Southeast Asia as a physician and in combat missions from 1965 to 1971.

Most vivid memory: his first time landing in Vietnam, after being stationed in Tokyo

“We had flown a 10-hour reconnaissance mission from Okinawa, along the coast of China, then into the Gulf of Tonkin, and did reconnaissance between Haiphong and Hainan Island, which was Chinese.

When we landed at 2 in the morning, we got out of that airplane — and understand, this is my first trip to Vietnam. It’s hot and it’s sticky. The Marines are on Monkey Mountain, artillery is firing out into the jungle, there are flare ships dropping flares. I got a sidearm and bandolier ammunition. And to be frank, when I think back, I think, How did I get into this John Wayne movie, anyway?”

What Americans should know: Wandering into war doesn’t always end well.

“I think the most important thing is that going to war is such an important decision made by our political leaders. And when you think back during my lifetime, World War II, clearly the Japanese attack on Honolulu precipitated that. The second nation conflict was Korea, and Harry Truman made a decision to stop the aggression from the North into the South. Vietnam, that was something that we just kind of wandered into over a period of years. So going to war, I think, is one of those critical things that a president and Congress does. And we haven’t done a decent job, since World War II and Korea, in debating and articulating what the mission was and what our goal was and what our strategy was.”

Keith Harman, 72, of Delphos, Ohio

Harman was drafted in 1967 and served in Vietnam in 1969, as a crew chief and door gunner on a “Huey” helicopter for the Army. He was the Veterans of Foreign Wars national commander from 2017 to 2018.

Most vivid memory: being caught under fire in his helicopter on his first mission

“I remember my maintenance sergeant trying to talk me out of becoming a crew chief, but I wasn’t listening.”



“On my first assault mission, my aircraft was badly shot up, but we didn’t go down. The first thought that came to mind was, Maybe I should have listened to my maintenance sergeant. I had a good guardian angel and continued to fly for the remainder of my tour.”

What Americans should know: Servicemen did what was asked and looked after one another.

“When you serve in the military, you are taught discipline. The company that I served with was told that we were going to Vietnam, so off we went. We did what was asked of us, and we looked after those that we served with. I have been back to Vietnam, and it is altogether different from when I left 49 years ago.”

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Mike Tharp, 73, of Plano, Texas

Tharp served in the Army from 1969 to 1970 and was a correspondent for an Army magazine called the Hurricane.

Most vivid memory: being shot at for the first time
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“I was on guard in a wooden tower on the front perimeter which faced Highway 1, which ran into Saigon about 30 miles south. There was fire coming from the Vietnamese village across Highway 1.”

“I was in the bunker, the elevated bunker, and every eighth or ninth round was a tracer round — red or green. So you know when you saw tracers, there were a lot of bullets you didn’t see. The tracers started coming over the guard shack where I was standing, 20 feet above the ground or so. And I bent down below the sandbags with just my head and my helmet peering over, and I peed my pants.”

What Americans should know: Too many lives, both American and Vietnamese, were lost.
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“We should have never gone into that war. We went in there in Vietnam and wasted 58,000 American lives and hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese. And when I speak of Agent Orange, about 4 million Vietnamese were exposed to Agent Orange, and several hundred thousand of them died, and many of their children and grandchildren are messed up because of it. I think the bottom-line lesson is that we should not go to war unless it is clearly in our national interest, and there are very few places that would qualify for that in the world.”

John Rivers, 73, of Paradise Valley, Ariz.

Rivers served from 1969 to 1971, as an Army infantry officer advising a Vietnamese military infantry unit.

Most vivid memory: personal relationships with Vietnamese soldiers and families

“We pretty much lived and worked with the Vietnamese. And that gave us, in most cases, a significantly different view of the war than people who were in your typical American units, who simply viewed the Vietnamese as ‘the other guys,’ so to speak. I developed great respect and affection for the Vietnamese when I was there. Primarily because I had so much exposure to them and their families.”



What Americans should know: Vietnam veterans served with as much sacrifice as any in American history.

“The men and women who served in Vietnam were as important to our country as veterans who have ever served since the time of the American Revolution. Those who did not come back alive made as great a sacrifice as any soldier who died at Iwo Jima or Omaha Beach or any of the other major battles of World War II. The grief and the sorrow of their families was as profound as the grief of any family who lost a family member at Guadalcanal or the Battle of the Bulge or any of the other battlefields of our wars. For those of us who served, our experiences as soldiers was very similar in many respects to the soldiers who fought in other wars.”

Jim Doyle, 70, of Fresno, Calif.

Doyle served from 1969 to 1970, as an Army infantry soldier, to “seek out, close with and destroy the enemy.”

Most vivid memory: being wounded in a blast on patrol, along with a wartime buddy, Willie Henry, and not knowing what happened to his friend until 26 years later.



“After two to three weeks of recovery, I was back out in the field and never did find out what happened to Willie. For years and years, I didn’t know how to get a hold of him. I didn’t know anything. And so when the [Vietnam] memorial was built, I looked for his name, didn’t find his name, which was a good clue that he was still alive. And for some reason, I thought he was from Chicago. So every time I traveled through O’Hare, I would grab the phone book, back in the days when they still had phone books and pay phones, and I called every Henry in the Chicago phone book and relay the story: ‘So, do you know this guy, I’m trying to find him.’ ‘No, never heard of him.’

“So in ‘96, a friend of mine was appointed to a job at the Department of Veterans Affairs as a deputy or assistant secretary for something or other. And I relayed the story to him, and he says, ‘Well, look, I can’t give you any information. But if you send me a letter addressed to Willie, I will forward it to him. And if he wants to contact you, he can do that.’ So I did that, and about a month later I was in D.C. I was on the board of Vietnam Veterans of America at that time. And I was in my hotel room, and the phone rang, and it was my wife.

“She says, ‘You got a message on your machine that I think you’re gonna want to hear.’ So she held the phone over the machine, and it was Willie, who called and said, ‘I got your letter.’ I called him and left a message on his machine. About an hour later, he called me back at the hotel, and that was when we connected, 26 years later.” [Willie, it turns out, was in Chattanooga, Tenn.]

What Americans should know: The men who fought didn’t create the war.

“All the people who fought the war weren’t responsible for making the war. If there is anything we’ve learned from the Vietnam War, it is that we haven’t learned anything from the Vietnam War.”



Times Have Changed

If you look closely at these photos you can see they are from the same perspective. One was taken in 1965 and the other in 2019.

I guess you can’t stop progress but I find the change amazing. I have never gone back to Vietnam nor do I have any desire to. But, this is incredible.

NEW AVEL, AVIONICS AND VIETNAM VETERANS REGISTERED

None Submitted

TAPS

Bill Bascom

Avel North

Bill died on 7 December 2018. He was 71 years old.

PHOTOS

None Submitted

CHANGE OF ADDRESS/EMAIL/PHONE

Jim Ringle (Avel Central) has a new email address: contact@jimaring.com

IN-COUNTRY



NOT GOING ANYWHERE FOR A WHILE?
(APOLOGIES TO SNICKERS)



INSTA: @COLMSCOMICS



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January 2020 Newsletter
