"Our Country, Right or Wrong"

Defending the Vietnam War

Joseph E. Sintoni

Americans were deeply divided over U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. In a letter written as he was about to leave for Vietnam, where he later died, Joseph E. Sintoni justified the war to his fiancée.

Dear Angela,

This is by far the most difficult letter I shall ever write. What makes it so difficult is that you'll be reading it in the unhappy event of my death. You've already learned of my death; I hope the news was broken to you gently. God, Angie, I didn't want to die. I had so much to live for. You were my main reason for living. You're a jewel, a treasure. . . .

Please don't hate the war because it has taken me. I'm glad and proud that America has found me equal to the task of defending it.

Vietnam isn't a far-off country in a remote corner of the world. It is Sagamore, Brooklyn, Honolulu, or any other part of the world where there are Americans.

Vietnam is a test of the American spirit. I hope I have helped in a little way to pass the test.

The press, the television screen, the magazines are filled with the images of young men burning their draft cards to demonstrate their courage. Their rejection is of the ancient law that a male fights to protect his own people and his own land.

Does it take courage to flaunt the authorities and burn a draft card? Ask the men at Dak To, Con Tien, or Hill 875; they'll tell you how much courage it takes.

Most people never think of their freedom. They never think much about breathing, either, or blood circulating, except when these functions are checked by a doctor. Freedom, like breathing and circulating blood, is part of our being. Why must people take their freedom for granted? Why can't they support the men who are trying to protect their lifeblood, freedom?

Patriotism is more than fighting or dying for one's country. It is participating in its development, its progress, and its governmental processes. It is sharing the never fully paid price of the freedom which was bequeathed to us who enjoy it today. Not to squander, not to exploit, but to preserve and enhance for those who will follow after us.

Just as a man will stand by his family be it right or wrong, so will the patriot stand where Stephen Decatur stood when he offered the toast, "Our country, in her intercourse with foreign nations, may she always be in the right, but our country, right or wrong."

We must do the job God set down for us. It's up to every American to fight for the freedom we hold so dear. We must instruct the young in the ways of these great United States. We mustn't let them take these freedoms for granted.

I want you to go on to live a full, rich, productive life. I want you to share your love with someone. You may meet another man and bring up a family. Please bring up your children to be proud Americans. Don't worry about me, honey. God must have a special place for soldiers.

I've died as I've always hoped, protecting what I hold so dear to my heart. We will meet again in the future. We will. I'll be waiting for that day.

I'll be watching over you, Angie, and if it's possible to help you in some way, I will.

Feel some relief with the knowledge that you filled my short life with more happiness than most men know in a lifetime.

The inevitable, well, the last one: I love you with all my heart, and my love for you will survive into eternity.

Your Joey

"No Cause Other Than Our Own Survival"

Fighting a Different Kind of War

Philip Caputo

The Vietnam War presented a difficult challenge to the U.S. military. Instead of all-out campaigns, American soldiers were forced to fight a war of attrition against a largely unseen enemy, the Viet Cong—communist guerrillas in South Vietnam. Philip Caputo, a Marine lieutenant, describes the frustration of that kind of warfare.

For Americans who did not come of age in the early '60s, it may be hard to grasp what those years were like—the pride and overpowering self-assurance that prevailed. Most of the 3,500 men in our brigade, born during or immediately after World War II, were shaped by that era, the age of Kennedy's Camelot. We went overseas full of illusions, for which the intoxicating atmosphere of those years was as much to blame as our youth.

These soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division attempt to save the life of a wounded comrade in South Vietnam.

War is always attractive to young men who know nothing about it, but we had also been seduced into uniform by Kennedy's challenge to "ask what you can do for your country" and by the missionary idealism he had awakened in us. America seemed omnipotent then: The country could still claim it had never lost a war, and we believed we were ordained to play cop to the communists' robber and spread our own political faith around the world. . . .

So, when we marched into the rice paddies on that damp March afternoon, we carried, along with our packs and rifles, the implicit convictions that the Viet Cong would be quickly beaten and that we were doing something altogether noble and good. We kept the packs and rifles; the convictions, we lost.

The discovery that the men we had scorned as peasant guerrillas were, in fact, a lethal, determined enemy and the casualty lists that lengthened each week with nothing to show for the blood being spilled broke our early confidence. By autumn, what had begun as an adventurous expedition had turned into an exhausting, indecisive war of attrition in which we fought for no cause other than our own survival.

Writing about this kind of warfare is not a simple task. Repeatedly, I have found myself wishing that I had been the veteran of a conventional war, with dramatic campaigns and historic battles for subject matter instead of a monotonous succession of ambushes and fire-fights. But there were no Normandies or Gettysburgs for us, no epic clashes that decided the fates of armies or nations. The war was mostly a matter of enduring weeks of expectant waiting and, at random intervals, of conducting vicious manhunts through jungles and swamps where snipers harassed us constantly and booby traps cut us down one by one.

The tedium was occasionally relieved by a large-scale search-and-destroy opera-

tion, but the exhilaration of riding the lead helicopter into a landing zone was usually followed by more of the same hot walking, with the mud sucking at our boots and the sun thudding against our helmets while an invisible enemy shot at us from distant tree lines. The rare instances when the VC [Viet Cong] chose to fight a set-piece battle provided the only excitement; not ordinary excitement, but the manic ecstasy of contact. Weeks of bottled-up tensions would be released in a few minutes of orgiastic violence, men screaming and shouting obscenities above the explosions of grenades and the rapid, rippling bursts of automatic rifles.

Beyond adding a few more corpses to the weekly body count, none of these encounters achieved anything; none will ever appear in military histories or be studied by cadets at West Point. Still, they changed us and taught us, the men who fought in them; in those obscure skirmishes we learned the old lessons about fear, cowardice, courage, suffering, cruelty, and comradeship. Most of all, we learned about death at an age when it is common to think of oneself as immortal. Everyone loses that illusion eventually, but in civilian life it is lost in installments over the years. We lost it all at once and, in the span of months passed from boyhood through manhood to a premature middle age. The knowledge of death, of the implacable limits placed on a man's existence, severed us from our youth as irrevocably as a surgeon's scissors had once severed us from the womb. And yet, few of us were past 25. We left Vietnam peculiar creatures, with young shoulders that bore rather old heads.

"We Lost the Race"

Helicopters to the Rescue

Robert Mason

Helicopters played a pivotal role in the Vietnam War, as they were often the only vehicles that could penetrate the dense jungle. Robert Mason flew more than 1,000 helicopter missions in Vietnam. Here, he describes a mission to pick up critically wounded soldiers.

We finished moving the squads around by noon and returned to the hilltop for lunch and to pick up our new mission. . . . I shut down and the rotors were still turning when an aide from the tent ran out with a message.

"You got to get back up. A Jeep was just mined five klicks [kilometers] from here."

Reacher, who had just opened the cowling of the turbine to check something, slammed it shut as the four of us jumped back into the Huey [helicopter] while I lighted the fire. A medic jumped in as we got light on the skids.

The medic briefed us by talking through Reacher's microphone as we cruised over the trees at 120 knots.

"The Jeep was carrying six men from the artillery brigade. The two that were in the front seats are alive. The other four are either hurt or dead. They've got a prick-ten radio (PRC-10), so they can talk to us."

I saw the smoke ahead at the spot that matched the coordinates scribbled in ballpoint on the medic's palm. "There they are," I said.

We landed in front of the Jeep, or what was left of it. It was twisted like a child's discarded toy. . . .

A sergeant ran up to my door. He told me through my extended microphone that two of the guys in the back were still alive. "Should we put the dead on board?" His eyes were wide.

We nodded. They started loading up. The two wounded were unconscious, torn and bloody and gray.

One of the dead had had his right leg blown off with his pants. I didn't see the other body yet. . . .

I was twisted around in my seat, watching them load, directing Reacher through the intercom. The man that had lost his leg . . . lay naked on his back with the ragged stump of his leg pointing out the side door. A clump of dirt had stuck on the end of the splintered bone. . . . Riker looked sick. I don't know what I looked like. I told Reacher to move him back from the door. He could fall out. The scurrying grunts tossed a foot-filled boot onto the cargo deck. Blood seeped through the torn wool sock at the top of the boot. The medic pushed it under the sling seat.

I turned around and saw a confused-looking private walking through the swirling smoke with the head of someone he knew held by the hair.

"A head? Do we have to carry a head?" I asked Riker.

The kid looked at us, and Riker nodded. He tossed it inside with the other parts. The medic looked away as he pushed the bloody head under the seat. His heel kicked the nose.

"We can't find his body. I don't think we should stay to look for it. Is his head enough?" a grunt yelled.

"Absolutely. Plenty. Let's go," Riker answered.

I flew toward Pleiku as fast as the Huey could go. Reacher called from the pocket that "One-Leg" was sliding toward the edge of the deck. I had him tell the medic, who put his foot on One-Leg's bloody groin. That kept him from sliding out, but the torn skin of the stump flapped in the wind, spraying blood along the outside of the ship and all over Reacher as he sat behind his machine gun.

A grunt was crying. One of the wounded, his friend, had just died. The other was just barely alive. I wanted to fly at a thousand miles an hour.

Riker called ahead so we could land at Camp Holloway without delay. We went by the tower like a flash and landed on the red cross near the newly set up hospital tent. The stretcher bearers ran out to unload the cargo.

I could see that they had been busy lately. There was a pile of American bodies outside the hospital tent.

The other wounded man died.

We had lost the race.

"Helping Someone Die"

A Nurse's Trauma

Dusty

About 7,500 women served in Vietnam, more than three-fourths as nurses. One of these nurses—so traumatized by her experience that she is known only by her nickname in Vietnam, Dusty—recalls the intimacy of helping a young soldier face death.

When you are sitting there working on someone in the middle of the night, and it's a 19-year-old kid who's 10,000 miles from home, and you know that he's going to die before dawn—you're sitting there checking his vital signs for him and hanging blood for him and talking to him and holding his hand and looking into his face and touching his face, and you see his life just dripping away, and you know he wants his mother, and you know he wants his father and his family to be there, and you're the only one that he's got—I mean his life is just oozing away there—well, it oozes into your soul. There is nothing more intimate than sharing someone's dying with them. This kid should have had a chance to grow up and have grandkids; he should have had a chance to die in bed with his loving family around him. Instead, he's got this second lieutenant. When you've got to do that with someone and give that person, at the age of 19, a chance to say the last things they are ever going to get to say, that act of helping someone die is more intimate than sex, it is more intimate than childbirth, and once you have done that you can never be ordinary again.

"Could I Take That Kind of Torture?"

Life in the Hanoi Hilton

Eugene B. "Red" McDaniel

North Vietnamese prisoner-of-war camps were notoriously brutal. The most infamous of these was the "Hanoi Hilton." During his eighty-first combat mission, pilot Eugene B. "Red" McDaniel was shot down over Hanoi in 1967. Here, he tells how he survived six years as a POW.

I arrived in the Hanoi Hilton, the main American prison camp, at about 5:30 that Sunday morning. I was put into a room which was small, windowless, and musty-smelling. I heard the iron gates clang shut behind me, and I settled down hoping to get a few hours of sleep, because right then my mind and body ached for rest. Instead an officer came in, read the camp regulations, and made the point that I was not to communicate with fellow prisoners. I felt some spark of elation in knowing that there were American prisoners here, and I thought maybe I'd get to see some of my friends who'd been shot down earlier. After a while the officer went out, and I stayed seated on the floor. . . .

Then the interrogators were there again, and I tried to point out my injuries to them. They were unmoved. "You talk, medicine later," one of them said shortly. So they went to work trying to extract military information from me. When I wouldn't come through, they put me into the ropes, a treatment I was to know and dread in the long pull ahead. They tied my wrists tight, then pulled my arms high behind me, binding me so that my shoulder bones were ready to pop. Again they questioned. For forty-five minutes to perhaps more than an hour they kept me in the ropes, and the sweat ran off me in buckets as the pain in my shoulders reached the point of sheer agony. They loosened me for a few minutes to question me again; when I didn't give them anything, it was back into the ropes.

I pretended to pass out several times in hopes they would untie me and leave me alone. But they were wise to that. At times I would bite my shoulder hard to try to transfer the pain from one area to another. . . .

Five days after torture, they let me out of the leg irons and threw me into an adjoining area outside that was called the wash area, where prisoners bathed or washed their clothes. . . .

I was six hours in that wash area trying to get some sleep, trying to ignore the pain from the irons that had clamped hard on my ankles and the ropes. . . . The question I had to face now was: Could I take that kind of torture again? And, of course, the other question: Was it so important that I refuse to answer their questions anyway? In the hours and days ahead, I was to feel this nagging question even more strongly as I listened to the screams of my fellow pilots going through the same torture, some maybe even worse. I had more coming too; I knew it. . . .

One thing I knew I had to have: communication with my own people here. I knew there were American flyers here like myself facing the same grim future and fearing the worst, either ending up telling what they did not want to tell or dying in the process of holding out. These were people like myself who wanted to live through this if at all possible. For us to do that, we had to communicate with each other, to let each other know that we were together, come what may.

Communication with each other, however, was the one occurrence that the North Vietnamese captors were taking the greatest pains to prevent. They knew, as well as I and the others did, that a man can stand more pain if he is linked with his

own kind in that suffering. The lone, isolated being becomes weak, vulnerable. I knew then that I had to make contact, no matter what it cost, and this would be my first resource. . . .

Early in June I got the camp code from Ralph Gaither and Mike Cronin by talking to them in the washroom—which, of course, was forbidden. The guards caught us. . . . But I had the code, even though much later I was to find out that both Gaither and Cronin spent seventeen days in torture for their part in that. . . .

In all of this, we simply had to take each day and move with the schedule and the routine, looking for our opportunities to communicate with others. Every day started with the morning gong at 5:00 a.m.—6:00 in the winter—and we would get up and make our bedrolls, do some exercising in the room, and be ready at 8:00 for whatever the camp commander had for us in the way of work activities. . . .

At about 10:00 we would get our first "meal," which broke nearly twenty hours of fasting—but which really didn't break it by much. It was a watery soup with a little rice. This meager food made us more tense, more conscious of our dwindling energy, more aware of how small our chances of survival were. With this demoralizing aspect of our lives, our motivation to communicate was often lessened. Food became our constant preoccupation—in our dreams, in our conversation. . . .

Any time between 2:00 and 4:00 p.m. we had our second meal of the same soup. Then the doors were locked, and we settled down. . . . And that opened those long evening hours, when we thought the most about our families, so much so that we had to find things to do or sink into total depression. . . .

On [some] nights we would get together as a group, rather than retreat to our beds and mosquito nets, and one man would host the rest of the room for the evening. We would fantasize going to his house, and there he would serve hors d'oeuvres, then the meal—a menu we would all lovingly concoct in our imaginations. . . .

Sometimes we would take an imaginary trip in the early evening, and we would go to a city one of us had visited. Sometimes we would take our wives out, and we would go through the entire evening in our imagination—what we ate, what we did for entertainment. We learned a lot of geography then, and after a while we began to call on men in the groups who had knowledge in various fields that they could share with us, even teach us. . . .

Some nights I would retreat inside my mosquito net and count the holes in it, from right to left, up and down. I remember counting ninety-eight little squares from one end to the other on one side; each square had four hundred tiny holes. The top from left to right—the small side—had thirty-eight squares. Down the sides, forty-two squares. The holes in all these squares ran into the millions.

"No Crime Is a Crime Durin' War"

Witnessing Atrocities on Both Sides

Arthur E. "Gene" Woodley, Jr.

The year 1968 was a turning point in the Vietnam War. In January, the Viet Cong launched the Tet offensive throughout South Vietnam, even penetrating the U.S. embassy in Saigon temporarily. Although the offensive was ultimately defeated, it convinced many Americans that the war was no longer winnable.

In March 1968, troops led by Lieutenant William Calley killed 200-500 unarmed civilians in the hamlet of My Lai, even though the troops had not been fired upon. Many of the civilian bodies were found lying in a ditch, in an execution-style slaying. Calley was court-martialed in 1971 and sentenced to twenty years in prison.

While serving in Vietnam, Arthur E. "Gene" Woodley, Jr., witnessed many My Lai-type atrocities—on both sides. He describes some of the horrors that still haunt him.

I went to Vietnam as a basic naive young man of 18. Before I reached my 19th birthday, I was a animal. When I went home . . . , even my mother was scared of me. . . .

Being from a hard-core neighborhood, I decided I was gonna volunteer for the toughest combat training they had. I went to jump school, Ranger school, and Special Forces training. I figured I was just what my country needed. A black patriot who could do any physical job they could come up with. Six feet, 190 pounds, and healthy. . . .

I didn't ask no questions about the war. I thought communism was spreading, and as an American citizen, it was my part to do as much as I could to defeat the communists from coming here. Whatever America states is correct was the tradition that I was brought up in. . . .

Then came the second week of February of '69.

This was like three days after we had a helicopter go down in some very heavy foliage where they couldn't find no survivors from the air. . . . We were directed to find the wreckage, report back. Then see if we can find any enemy movement and find any prisoners.

We're headin' north. It took us ten hours to get to the location. The helicopter, it was stripped. All the weaponry was gone. There was no bodies. It looked like the helicopter had been shot out of the air. It had numerous bullet holes in it. But it hadn't exploded. The major frame was still intact. . . .

We recon this area, and we came across this fella, a white guy, who was staked to the ground. His arms and legs tied down to stakes. And he had a band around his neck that's staked in the ground so he couldn't move his head to the left or right.

He had numerous scars on his face where he might have been beaten and mutilated. And he had been peeled from his upper part of chest to down to his waist. Skinned. Like they slit your skin with a knife. And they take a pair of pliers or a instrument similar, and they just peel the skin off your body and expose it to the elements.

I came to the conclusion that he had maybe no significant value to them. So they tortured him and just left him out to die.

The man was within a couple of hours of dying on his own.

And we didn't know what to do, because we couldn't move him. There was no means. We had no stretcher. There was only six of us. And we went out with the basic idea that it was no survivors. We was even afraid to unstake him from the stakes, because the maggots and flies were eating at the exposed flesh so much.

The man had maggots in his armpits and maggots in his throat and maggots in his stomach. You can actually see in the open wounds parts of his intestines and parts of his inner workings bein' exposed to the weather. You can see the flesh holes that the animals—wild dogs, rats, field mice, anything—and insects had eaten through his body. With the blood loss that he had, it was a miracle that the man still alive. The man was just a shell of a person.

The things that he went through for those three days. In all that humidity, too. I wouldn't want another human being to have to go through that.

It was a heavy shock on all of us to find that guy staked out still alive. With an open belly wound, we could not give him water. And we didn't have morphine.

And he start to cryin', beggin' to die.

He said, "I can't go back like this. I can't live like this. I'm dying. You can't leave me here like this, dying."

It was a situation where it had to be remove him from his bondage or remove him from his suffering. Movin' him from this bondage was unfeasible. It would have put him in more pain than he had ever endured. There wasn't even no use talkin' 'bout tryin' and takin' him back, because there was nothing left of him. It was that or kill the brother, and I use the term "brother" because in a war circumstance, we all brothers.

The man pleaded not only to myself but to other members of my team to end his suffering. He made the plea for about half an hour, because we couldn't decide what to do.

"More Blacks Were Dying"

An African-American Soldier's Experience

Don F. Browne

America experienced upheaval at home as well as abroad in 1968. Civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., was murdered in April, and race riots erupted in several U.S. cities. Don F. Browne, an African-American sergeant in the Army, tells how King's assassination affected him—and the Viet Cong military strategy.

When I heard that Martin Luther King was assassinated, my first inclination was to run out and punch the first white guy I saw. I was very hurt. All I wanted to do was to go home. I even wrote Lyndon Johnson a letter. I said that I didn't understand how I could be trying to protect foreigners in their country with the possibility of losing my life wherein in my own country people who are my hero, like Martin Luther King, can't even walk the streets in a safe manner. I didn't get an answer from the president, but I got an answer from the White House. It was a wonderful letter, wonderful in terms of the way it looked. It wanted to assure me that the president was doing everything in his power to bring about racial equality, especially in the armed forces. A typical bureaucratic answer. . . .

With the world focused on the King assassination and the riots that followed in the United States, the North Vietnamese, being politically astute, schooled the Viet Cong to go on a campaign of psychological warfare against the American forces.

At the time, more blacks were dying in combat than whites, proportionately, mainly because more blacks were in combat-oriented units, proportionately, than whites. To play on the sympathy of the black soldier, the Viet Cong would shoot at a white guy, then let the black guy behind him go through, then shoot at the next white guy.

It didn't take long for that kind of word to get out. And the reaction in some companies was to arrange your personnel where you had an all-black or nearly all-black unit to send out.

"There Aren't Any Rules"

Photographing an Execution

Eddie Adams

On a Saigon street at the height of the Tet offensive, Associated Press photographer Eddie Adams captured the execution of a Viet Cong soldier by Nguyen Ngoc Loan, chief of the South Vietnamese National Police. The photograph illustrated the media's frontline role in Vietnam, bringing the brutality of the war into America's livingrooms.

Nguyen Ngoc Loan executes a Viet Cong suspect in this photograph by Eddie Adams, which won a Pulitzer Prize.

We were walking down the street when we saw the South Vietnamese police walking with this guy. We started following him because it was a prisoner, and like any photographer, you stay with a prisoner until he's out of sight. They stopped on the corner, and I was thinking, "This is boring." Just then Loan walked in out of nowhere and I saw him load his pistol. And I thought he was going to threaten the prisoner, which they always do. As soon as he raised his pistol, I raised my camera. Well, later on the U.S. military studied the picture and it turned out the moment he pulled the trigger, I pushed the shutter of my camera. It was all an accident. I just took it because I thought he was going to threaten him.

After Loan shot him, he walked over to us and said, "They killed many of my men and many of your people," and he walked away. The prisoner was later identified as a Viet Cong lieutenant. . . .

There were things a hell of a lot worse that happened in Vietnam. We had pictures that we never released. There were pictures of Americans holding heads of Viet Cong they'd chopped off. . . . Very gruesome, but this is a war. People are dying, your friends are getting blown away. In the next two minutes you could be dead. Everything is fair in love and war. There aren't any rules. It's just war.

He kept saying, "The mother———s did this to me. Please kill me. I'm in pain. I'm in agony. Kill me. You got to find 'em. You got to find 'em. Kill them sorry bastards. Kill them mother———s."

I called headquarters and told them basically the condition of the man, the pleas that the man was giving me, and our situation at that time. We had no way of bringin' him back. They couldn't get to us fast enough. We had another mission to go on.

Headquarters stated it was up to me what had to be done because I was in charge. They just said, "It's your responsibility."

I asked the team to leave.

It took me somewhere close to twenty minutes to get my mind together. Not because I was squeamish about killing someone, because I had at that time numerous body counts. Killing someone wasn't the issue. It was killing another American citizen, another GI. . . .

I put myself in his situation. In his place. I had to be as strong as he was, because he was askin' me to kill him, to wipe out his life. He had to be a hell of a man to do that. I don't think I would be a hell of a man enough to be able to do that. I said to myself, I couldn't show him my weakness, because he was showin' me his strength.

The only thing that I could see that had to be done is that the man's sufferin' had to be ended.

I put my M-16 next to his head. Next to his temple.

I said, "You sure you want me to do this?"

He said, "Man, kill me. Thank you."

I stopped thinking. I just pulled the trigger. I cancelled his suffering.

When the team came back, we talked nothing about it.

We buried him. We buried him. Very deep.

Then I cried. . . .

When we first started going into the fields, I would not wear a finger, ear, or mutilate another person's body. Until I had the misfortune to come upon [some] American soldiers who were castrated. Then it got to be a game between the communists and ourselves to see how many fingers and ears that we could capture from each other. After a kill we would cut his finger or ear off as a trophy, stuff our unit patch in his mouth, and let him die.

I collected about fourteen ears and fingers. With them strung on a piece of leather around my neck, I would go downtown, and you would get free drugs, free booze, free [sex] because they wouldn't wanna bother with you 'cause this man's a killer. It symbolized that I'm a killer. And it was, so to speak, a symbol of combat-type manhood. . . .

One night we were out in the field on maneuvers, and we seen some lights. We were investigating the lights, and we found out it was a Vietn'ese girl going from one location to another. We caught her and did what they call gang-rape her. She submitted freely because she felt if she had submitted freely she wouldn't have got killed. We couldn't do anything else but kill her because we couldn't jeopardize the mission. It was either kill her or be killed yourself the next day. If you let her go, then she's gonna warn someone that you in the area, and then your cover is blown, your mission is blown. Nothin' comes before this mission. Nothin'. You could kill [a] thousand folks, but you still had to complete your mission. The mission is your ultimate goal, and if you failed in that mission, then you failed as a soldier. And we were told there would be no prisoners. So we eliminated her. Cut her throat so you wouldn't be heard. So the enemy wouldn't know that you was in the area. . . .

After a while, it really bothered me. I started saying to myself, what would I do if someone would do something like this to my child? To my mother? I would kill 'im. Or I would say, why in the hell did I take this? Why in the hell did I do that? Because I basically became a animal. Not to say that I was involved . . . , but I had turned my back, which made me just as guilty as everybody else. 'Cause I was in charge. I was in charge of a group of animals, and I had to be the biggest animal there. I allowed things to happen. I had learned not to care. And I didn't care. . . .

With eighty-nine days left in country, I came out of the field.

At the time you are in the field you don't feel anything about what you are doin'. It's the time you have to yourself that you sit back and you sort and ponder.

What I now felt was emptiness.

Here I am. I'm still 18 years old, a young man with basically everything in his life to look forward to over here in a foreign country with people who have everything that I think I should have. They have the right to fight. . . . They fought for what they thought was right.

I started to recapture some of my old values. I was a passionate young man before I came into the Army. I believed that you respect other people's lives just as much as I respect my own. I got to thinkin' that I done killed around forty people personally and maybe some others I haven't seen in the firefights. I was really thinkin' there are people who won't ever see their children, their grandchildren.

I started seeing the atrocities that we caused each other as human beings. I came to the realization that I was committing crimes against humanity and myself. That I really didn't believe in these things I was doin'. I changed.

I stopped wearing the ears and fingers. . . .

Before I got out [of] the service, the My Lai stuff came out in the papers. Some of who had been in similar incidents in combat units felt that we were next. We were afraid that we were gonna be the next ones that was gonna be court-martialed or called upon to testify against someone or against themselves. A lot of us wiped out whole villages. We didn't put 'em in a ditch per se, but when you dead, you dead. If you kill thirty people and somebody else kills twenty-nine, and they happen to be in a ditch and the other thirty happen to be on top, who's guilty of the biggest atrocity? So all of us were scared. I was scared for a long time.

I got out January '71. Honorable discharge. Five Bronze Stars for valor. . . .

I couldn't discuss the war with my father, even though he had two tours in Vietnam and was stationed in the Mekong Delta when I was there. . . . He had a disease he caught from the service called alcoholism. He died of alcoholism. And we never talked about Vietnam.

But my moms, she brought me back 'cause she loved me. And I think because I loved her. She kept reminding me what type of person I was before I left. Of the dreams I had promised her before I left. To help her buy a home and make sure that we was secure in life.

And she made me see the faces again. See Vietnam. See the incidents. She made me really get ashamed of myself doin' the things I had done. You think no crime is a crime durin' war, 'specially when you get away with it. And when she made me look back at it, it just didn't seem it was possible for me to be able to do those things to other people, because I value life. That's what moms and grandmoms taught me as a child. . . .

I still cry.

I still cry for the white brother that was staked out.

I still cry because I'm destined to suffer the knowledge that I have taken someone else's life not in a combat situation.

I think I suffered just as much as he did. And still do. I think at times that he's the winner, not the loser.

I still have the nightmare twelve years later. And I will have the nightmare twelve years from now. Because I don't wanna forget. I don't think I should. I think that I made it back here and am able to sit here and talk because he died for me. And I'm livin' for him.

I still have the nightmare. I still cry.

I see me in the nightmare. I see me staked out. I see me in the circumstances when I have to be man enough to ask someone to end my suffering as he did.

I can't see the face of the person pointing the gun.

I ask him to pull the trigger. I ask him over and over.

He won't pull the trigger.

I wake up.

Every time.