

SitRep Negative

A Year in Vietnam

G. J. Lau

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Chapter 1: Feeling The Draft

“This curious indifference of the memory to values of time and space may be due to the extraordinary physical and mental stresses under which the impressions I am trying to chronicle were conceived. ... I am therefore forced to present an incoherent and rather piecemeal narrative of such episodes as forcibly impressed themselves on my mind . . .” —Fritz Kreisler

Memories fade. Forty years is a lot of time, a lot of water under the bridge. Everything I tell here happened, just maybe not in the exact sequence that I remember it. If I feel my recall of a detail may be suspect, I duly note it. This memoir is intended for my children and their children, and it is somewhat loosely structured, but it will give any interested reader some sense of what it was like to serve a tour of duty in Vietnam. The job I had gave me an excellent overview of how the gears of the war machine meshed together. I will try to convey this as best I can. One final caveat. Convicts have a saying to the effect that everyone does their own time. The same is true of a war. Every soldier does his own tour. What happened to me is what happened to me. The guy standing next to me might tell it differently.

My story begins in April 1968, when I was drafted into the U.S. Army. The preceding years had been filled with turmoil, highlighted by the assassinations of John F. Kennedy Jr. in November 1963, right after I began college, and Martin Luther King Jr. in April 1968, the same month I was to enter the Army. We were a country at war with ourselves and increasingly at war with a small country halfway around the world: Vietnam. I don't recall ever thinking about Vietnam when I enrolled at Georgetown University in 1963. By 1968, it was all any of us could think about.

The draft, or the possibility of the draft, put every young man's life on hold. (Women were not drafted, but 11,000 military women were stationed in Vietnam throughout the war.) Long-term thinking seemed a waste of time when you faced the prospect of dying in a war. Overly dramatic perhaps, but we were living in dramatic times. That's why I didn't give it much thought when a friend landed me a job at the Department of Agriculture shortly after I graduated from Georgetown. The government was one of the few places hiring draft-eligible young men. Taking that job turned out to be one of the smartest things I ever did. Despite all the patriotic rhetoric, most employers back then dropped you like a stone once you were inducted into the military. The best you could hope for was a promise to think about rehiring you, if the job was still there. The Federal government guaranteed you a job when you got out.

In the early spring of 1968, when I got my letter from the Selective Service Administration, I wasn't worrying about what would happen when I got out. I was far more concerned about my physical, which I was instructed to undergo forthwith at the date and time and place stated in the letter. I was still living in D.C. at the time, so I took my physical at Fort Holabird, an Army post near Baltimore that was also used to train Army spooks for military intelligence. Despite having a bad back, weak eyes, and flat feet, I passed with flying colors. The guy behind me was a college jock in perfect condition except for a bum knee he picked up in football. He was 4-F. Me, I was just what the Army was looking for. I received my induction notice soon thereafter. I was ordered to report for duty on April 14, 1968. My last day at work was April 5, the day that riots erupted in Washington D.C. in the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

I left work that day and walked into the worst traffic jam I have ever seen. It seemed as though every single commuter in Washington was fleeing home to the suburbs all at the same time. There was not a square inch of street or alley that did not have a car going nowhere fast. I walked from the Mall up to

some friends' house near Dupont Circle. They had somehow found a couple of large sheets of plywood and were busily hammering them over the front windows by the time I got there. Martial law was declared, and I was stranded there for the weekend, watching the drunks go into the DT's because all the liquor stores were closed. Did I mention that my friends were three girls from Hawaii? So it wasn't all bad.

Eventually, I made it home to my place in Glover Park and from there to Boston, where I wanted to spend my last days of freedom with my parents. I chose to be inducted at Boston so I could go to a northern boot camp. Even then I knew better than to go to some place like Fort Benning in Georgia, or worse yet, Fort Polk in Louisiana. I remember my father driving me to the draft board office in Quincy, where we waited for a bus to take me to Boston. It was pretty much a guy thing. Not much talk, no big emotional displays, just a stoic acceptance of the inevitable.

My mindset at the time was that it was better to be drafted for two years than volunteer for three years. Despite any promises that might be made, it was clear where we would all end up, so the only question was how many years you were in for. I never considered going to Canada. That would mean I would be living in constant fear of discovery, so in a way, I would always be in the Army no matter how long I hid out. I also knew I didn't want to be an officer. I wasn't ready for it, and I didn't want the lifetime commitment that came with being an officer. I don't recall thinking about all this at the time, but clearly I had given it a lot of thought if I had worked all this out in my head.

As for actually going in, I was kind of looking forward to it. I grew up in a culture that was still celebrating the victory of World War II. Racism in literature and comic books (filthy Japs, dirty Huns) was commonplace. There were off-beat portrayals of Army life, which I actually found more appealing and more realistic. "See Here, Private Hargrove" and "Captain Newman, MD" come to mind. Bottom line, I felt that going into the Army and seeing a war firsthand would be my one big adventure, and I didn't want to miss it. Of course, all the cautionary stuff in those books that hinted at the cost you could and would pay were ignored. You always assume those bad things will happen to someone else. Too late, wisdom arrives.

One piece of wisdom did arrive in time. In the week or so before I went to boot camp, I made the rounds of the relatives to say good-bye. I remember my Uncle Punchie, who had been a Marine, taking me aside and giving me some of the best advice I have ever received. He told me there would come a day when a drill sergeant would be standing in front of me red-faced and yelling at the top of his voice. The key to surviving that moment, and the many more like it that were sure to follow, was this mantra he taught me: "Think it, but don't say it." Those words of wisdom have served me very well over the decades since.

The day I was inducted was notable for two reasons. First, I almost got drafted into the Marines. The way they did it was they lined us up in a rudimentary formation of columns and rows, and an officer walked up to each of us and said our name, followed by, "You are hereby inducted into," and then he would look down at his paper, and it was either the Army or the Marines. The Army was one thing, the Marines quite another. I could only hope I wasn't being signed up for that. When I heard the word "Army," I breathed a huge sigh of relief. Second, we had our first desertion on the way to Fort Dix, in New Jersey. Being the Army, someone had to be in charge during the bus ride from Boston to Fort Dix, so they chose the tall, crew-cut, white boy and gave him a roster. We took a head count and hit the road. We stopped somewhere in Connecticut for a restroom break. When we got back on the bus, the kid sitting next to me was gone. I wasn't surprised. He was a hippie who had looked scared shitless in Boston. I offered him the seat next to me because no one else wanted to sit near him. So when he went AWOL, it was no big surprise for me. I remember feeling bad for the poor kid in charge of the bus. Day One of his career and he already had a major fuck-up on his record.

Chapter 2: Basic Training and Beyond

“Draft beer, not people.” —Bob Dylan

We got to Fort Dix by early afternoon. Located in central New Jersey, Fort Dix was 31,000 acres of barracks, parade fields, classrooms and pine trees growing in a sandy soil ideal for cultivating shin splints on long marches. All that lay ahead. The immediate task at hand was converting us from civilians to Army recruits. Right away, they began the process of stripping away our individuality. After we got us off the bus, the drill sergeants lined us up in formation and left us standing there for a couple of hours, during which it rained ... not that anyone gave a shit. Finally we were given billets in a large barracks with bunk beds. That night we had to do kitchen police, or KP as it is better known. I remember this huge dining room filled with hundreds of men eating supper with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Once they were done, we took the heavy metal trays back to the kitchen for washing in steam cleaners. Of course, we were still wearing our civilian clothes. The next day we got uniforms, haircuts, and shots. To get our shots, we walked a gauntlet of needle guns wielded by medics with an indifferent aim. Most of us ended up bleeding from at least one shot site. The haircut consisted of a one-minute buzz cut that left nicks and scrapes on my head. The picture staring back at me from my military ID card for the next two years would be a portrait of the young man as a soldier with no hair. Not pretty.

At some point we took an aptitude test. At the end of basic I was to learn the results. All I knew taking the test was that I hated the part where you had to look at a shape with dotted lines and imagine what it would be as a solid. My father would have done well on that, but I didn't inherit his ability to visualize solids. (He told me once he could look at a pile of lumber, assess each piece, choose the best one for this or that cut, and then fit them together, all in his mind's eye.)

Basic training was ninety days of exercise and training in the various necessary and unnecessary skills we would need as soldiers. (We learned to appreciate the phrase, “There is a right way, a wrong way, and the Army way.” To this day, I still fold my socks the Army way.) For a lot of guys, this was the first time they had to take care of themselves without mommy to look after them. I had lived on my own for a few years by then, so it wasn't as much of a jolt. We spent an inordinate amount of time learning how to arrange our personal possessions in the wooden foot locker (painted Army green, of course) that we were each issued upon arrival. Any deviance from the precise standards of placement that governed the location, say, of your toothbrush or your safety razor, would be dealt with severely. The phrase, “Drop and give me fifty,” as in push-ups, was a constant refrain throughout our training cycle.

Basic recruits were not allowed to leave the base. Not that there was anywhere to go. Wrightsville was a dinky little town; New York, an impossible dream. We were paid the princely sum of \$100 a month. (Some of the lifers grumbled about how \$100 a month was a ridiculous amount to pay raw recruits. During my two-year hitch in the Army I was paid a total of somewhere around \$3,500.) Our day began with an awful breakfast of runny scrambled eggs or creamed chipped beef on toast, an Army staple affectionately referred to as shit on a shingle. That was followed by exercise, a morning run, class work, and more exercise. After our last meal it was back to the barracks for a little breather before lights out. After weeks of this regimen, even I was starting to get into shape. The mid-term exam was a bivouac out in the New Jersey pine forests. I got sick on the first day and spent most of the time in the hospital undergoing a form of therapy that required drinking disturbingly large quantities of Kool-Aid.

How bad was it? We would hide pitchers of Kool-Aid under our bathrobes and sneak them into the bathroom to dump the contents down the sinks.

I rejoined the bivouac near the end, just in time to endure the long march back to the barracks. The tall guys were placed up front, and the shortest guys were in the rear. Given that the taller guys had a much longer pace than every one else, we soon found ourselves out of synch. The rows of marching recruits would bunch up, so those of us in the back would have to slow down. Then all of a sudden the leading rows would seem to accelerate ahead, and those of us in the back would have to half-trot to catch up. After a couple of hours of this I was in full “fuck it” mode. The drill sergeants walked alongside me, yelling at me to keep up. I thought to myself, *“What are you going to do, send to me Vietnam? Oh yeah, actually you are, so fuck it.”* Not productive thinking, perhaps, but indicative of a stubborn streak that I was just beginning to discover within myself.

There was a lot more time spent in classrooms than I would have thought going in. Some of it was actually interesting. Most of the time it was a struggle to stay awake. One segment I still recall was on the character and responsibilities of the American soldier. We were told that other armies preached blind obedience to the orders of an officer. The American soldier was expected to think for himself, the idea being that in a combat situation, if there wasn't an officer left to give orders, any soldier should be able to think independently enough to deal with the situation. The other thing they emphasized was that we were not obligated to follow an unlawful order. Of course, you better guess right as to what was or was not an unlawful order. Choose wrong and you faced hard time at Fort Leavenworth. I wonder if they still teach that in today's Army?

There were parts of basic training that were actually fun. The rifle range was cool. We drilled with M-1 rifles but on the range we got to use M-16's. I was an indifferent rifleman, although I did qualify. Learning the ins and outs of sighting and windage was interesting enough. Mostly I remember the awkwardness of being left-handed while firing a rifle made for right-handers. It resulted in the brass flying across your field of vision, which was most disturbing. Equally unpleasant was the deafness and ringing in the ears from the noise of the weapon. Hearing protectors? Not hardly. They didn't issue them in combat, either. (Very few artillerymen emerged from their tour of duty with their hearing intact.)

Another fun thing was learning how to drive combat style. We were given either jeeps or ¾-ton pick-up trucks to drive. One exercise had us driving at night without headlights. Our only visual cue was a pair of very dim red tail lights on the vehicle ahead of us. We had to drive quite a distance apart (presumably so only one vehicle would be taken out at any given time by a mortar or land mine), but if you got too far apart you couldn't see the red lights of the vehicle ahead of you. Given that we had no clue where we were in the thousands of acres of anonymous pine forests, that would have been ugly. Much more fun was speed driving through the pine barrens. We were told to retreat and to drive hell bent for leather through the woods without hitting anything. Probably the most fun of anything I did during my whole two years.

I managed to make it through basic and the final physical test, a day-long marathon designed to make sure we were fit enough for the rigors of combat. I was wretched at running the mile, coming in dead last. We also had the 100-yard man carry, which was exactly what the name implies. You hoisted another guy on your back in a fireman's carry and then ran one hundred yards on a cinder track. If you fell to your knees, the weight of the guy on your back drove those cinders deep into your knee caps. And despite the rigors of basic training, some of the guys were still kind of on the large side. Not good.

Truth be told, I have to say I never felt better than I did at the end of basic training. My backaches were cured by the hundreds of sit-ups and push-ups I did every day. I lost about twenty-five pounds and had more stamina than ever. The one down side was my smoking. By the end of my time in the Army I was

up to five packs a day, a habit that would prove very hard to break.

After basic, we went on to Advanced Infantry Training (AIT), where we would learn the details of our MOS (Military Occupational Skill). Based on the results of the aptitude test, I was assigned as an 05B20 (in Army-speak, an 05Bravo) or radio/teletype operator (RTO). I spent weeks learning Morse code and how to hand-tune these complicated radios with lots of dials like you would see in movies where some guy is up in the Arctic frantically trying to radio a message before *The Thing* swallows him whole. Looking back, I can see how closely linked we still were to the way war was fought in WWII and Korea. A veteran from those wars would feel right at home with the equipment we used, right down to the hand-cranked telephones that you could ring by whistling into the receiver, a technique known as “whistling down,” as in, “*Hey, whistle down the CP.*” I look at Iraq where everything is laptops and cell phones and think damn, I really am getting old. The MOS 05B doesn’t even exist any more as far as I can tell.

Life in AIT was much more relaxed than in Basic. We could actually get a weekend pass, which was usually spent in New York City on Times Square, back when Times Square was still pretty sleazy. You could get hard liquor when you were 18, and we took full advantage of that. Other than that, life was pretty routine. Mostly, just day classes learning things I would never use once I got in Vietnam. I only ever saw one Morse Code key my whole time in Vietnam, and by then I had forgotten everything except how to pound out SOS, which come to think of it was probably all I ever needed to know anyway.

At the end of AIT we received our orders. I don’t remember the details, but I do recall looking at them and not having any real clue what all the acronyms meant. I knew enough to know that I was headed for the First Infantry Division in Vietnam. By then it was fall, and after 30 days leave, which I spent at home, I departed for San Francisco. Sometime during the first week of October, I boarded a plane that took a great circle route from San Francisco (heaven) to Anchorage (snowing like hell) then Tokyo (hot as hell, but I got to see Mt. Fuji in all its serene majesty), then Bien Hoa Airbase (hell).