Chapter 8

Denouement

I spent two days in-processing at The 1st Cav Academy, the replacement center equivalent of the 199th Redcatcher Training Center, with my finance, personnel, dental, etc., records checked as if I were a new replacement. Between the myriad formations and make-work details, I was briefed on everything from mechanical ambushes to the glories of 1st Cav history. Needless to say, I couldn’t take any of it seriously. It was appropriate that the home base of the 1st Cav was Fort Hood, Texas. The Cav was like a caricature of the state of Texas—big, splashy, arrogant, pompous, and hardly all that it thought itself to be. Like a gigantic cattle ranch, its AO was immense, 122 miles by 82 miles in area stretching from the Cambodian border to the South China Sea, the largest working AO in the unit’s history. I could envision all the big yellow Cav patches on the nose of the myriad helicopters changed to an orange emblem of the state of Texas. It would have been appropriate.

Fortunately, the in-country replacements didn’t have to go through all the briefings and training. Otherwise, I could have spent my entire Cav tour merely in and out-processing. I was by far the replacement with the shortest time to go. In fact, I was so short that it was a joke to everyone. I expected to hang around the replacement center for my allotted time probably pulling guard duty and supervising harassment details for the newfers. The replacement center certainly was crammed with people, well over 200 by my estimate. Many were in-country transfers largely from the 199th and the 9th Division, but many FNG’s in their tell-tale brand-new fatigues were also present. My well-faded, whitened fatigues were quite a status symbol. I was mobbed by newfers, saying “Sarge, what’s it like in the field? Is it as bad as they say?” I didn’t have the heart to employ the rhetoric I well remembered from departing 82 Airborne personnel less than a year earlier. From my vast combat experience, I issued pearls of wisdom such as “You’re going to be okay.” “When you get in the boonies, listen to those who have been there; they’ll take care of you.” “The war is winding down, so you may not have to be here for a whole year.”

The big 1st Cav patch on my fatigues felt alien. I thought that it was a waste of effort and expense to move my Redcatcher patches to my right shoulder as if they were from an earlier tour and sew the Cav patches on my left shoulder. But Cav pride was quite intense, and even if it were for one day, I was to wear that big yellow patch. I had no idea of all the commentary that the 1st Cav patch on my field jacket would inspire when I later wore it in the States. More than one drunk in a bar thought it original to
repeat the tired cliche about “the horse they never rode, the line they never crossed, and the color speaks for itself.” Having no Cav pride, I could not have cared less. I did not take kindly to insults to Vietnam vets, but I would not have lifted a finger in defense of the 1st Air Calvary.

Unbelievably, I was assigned to the sensor program, so on October 15 with two weeks left in country, I was dispatched to 1st Cavalry Division Forward Headquarters at Phuoc Vinh, about 50 miles north of Saigon. I arrived in the late afternoon just in time for the Change of Command steak and beer party of the 191st MI Detachment under which the sensor program resided. With a large number of people in from remote sites for the party, finding a bed was not easy. I spent the night in three different bunks as I was bounced out when guard duty or work shifts changed. The next day, the First Sergeant caustically remarked that it had been stupid to send me to Phuoc Vinh. I was too short to be of any use, since I would be heading back to the rear to out-process in little more than a week. I certainly could not dispute his logic. He continued that I had an impressive record and had earned a break. Rather than keep me on detail and guard-duty, he suggested that I just disappear? He knew of an available bed in an underground bunker whose inhabitant was gone for a week. I didn’t need to be told twice.

I wandered around Phuoc Vinh to get some sense of the base. It was a very big place and quite spread out. The MI detachment, their hootches, and the mess hall were on one side of the base along a dirt road in a woods. The sensor operation was on the other side of base near the airfield in a huge barn with living quarters bunkers inside it. The sensor administrative office was somewhere in between. The distance was enough that a guy drove a truck all day transporting people around, including to all meals.

I never made it into the monitoring site, but I heard that it was overrun with operators. That would be consistent with what I had witnessed on Signal Mountain. The Cav did everything in exaggerated proportion, including its foul-ups. I heard enough stories from my old operators who had transferred to the Cav to make me thankful that I hadn’t spent my tour with that organization. My former colleagues told me the Cav had lost its master book of all sensors just a week before and the unit had recently sent a man on an implant mission but forgot to pick him up for several days. It was also common practice in the unit to fake missions by claiming to have put out sensors that they actually did not. All of this was unverified and may have been exaggerated or apocryphal. But it meshed with my observations during my brief time working with the Cav in our old AO and my limited encounters with the commanding officer of the sensor program. It was no wonder that Cav personnel always referred to the 199th sensor program as a model, even though I knew that assessment to be from reality.
Throughout Vietnam, Phuoc Vinh was known as “rocket city” second only to Lai Khe, the former headquarters of the 1st Infantry Division. I was told that eight people were injured when a rocket came through the roof of the sensor building earlier in the year and that mortar attacks against the base were common fare. The airfield had received 40 rounds last week. The second night I heard incoming not far away on the huge base. In explanation of why there was so much outgoing artillery, I was told that the artillery battery regularly dropped rounds just off base as a form of perimeter defense. I decided that my bunker was a good place to spend my few remaining days. Besides, I wanted to stay out of sight to avoid being tabbed for details. I found the base library and loaded up with reading matter to last me through my short tenure. Like a mole, I surfaced to eat and then quickly disappeared. In my brief appearances though, I did run into a few of my former 199th colleagues and gained more stories about 1st Cav sensor activities.

After two days of this rather pleasant existence, a sensor operator came to get me at my bunker and told me that the Captain needed to see me. Captain Walsh asked if I would help out for a few days as the Night Duty TOC Sensor NCO. Since the TOC was underground and well sandbagged in, it was as safe as anyplace on base. Actually I saw the opportunity as one last new Vietnam experience to add to my lore, and I figured that it would make the time pass a little faster. The first night, I just sat around trying to figure out what I was supposed to do. The next morning after finishing my shift, I was headed to breakfast before going to bed when I ran into Carl Ellis, one of the veteran operators from the 199th who spent most of his tour with one of the battalions. I always enjoyed Carl, a sharp-witted, iconoclastic sociology major with a Wyoming cowboy drawl. Carl, who had come in-country nine days after me, waved a piece of paper and announced that he was leaving for home that day. I forgot breakfast and ran for the Company headquarters.

I virtually attacked the office clerk with an inquisition of why Carl Ellis had orders to go home. The clerk shuffled through some papers and reported, “You have a drop, too. They have orders for you in the Rear to go home, but nobody knew where to find you.” He asked if I wanted the orders sent forward. “No, call back and tell them I’ll pick the orders up there; I’m leaving now,” I responded. He shrugged and said, “okay,” and I was gone. I raced back to the bunker, threw my things in my duffelbag and dropped off my books at the library on the way to the airfield to grab a chopper. The out-processing at Bien Hoa, which reversed what had just been done a few days before, was rather a blur in my mind. I reflected how absurd it had been for the U.S. Army to have devoted all this time processing me in and out and sending me forward all for one night of observing how to do a job.

Everyone had to have a fresh haircut to get on the “Freedom Bird” at Ton Son Nhut Air Base. A huge multi-chair barbershop at the airport reminiscent of those at the
Basic Training Center shaved off hair twenty-four hours a day. I opted for a minimum touch-up to qualify me for the flight but still maintain as much hair as possible to expedite my transition to civilian life. However, the Army was not going to overlook its last chance to harass me. The inspector of necks and sidewalls, who stationed himself at the bottom of the ramp to get on the plane, rejected my first hair cut and my second as well. With one more chance before missing the flight, I could not risk three strikes and out. I told the Vietnamese barber to make it GI issue. So angry that I could have slugged the “lifer,” I finally passed muster of “the guardian of military decorum” and was waved on board. I told myself that I had one more day to put up with this.

The stewardesses’ perfume smelled wonderful. They weren’t the sweet young things found on domestic flights in those days. These international flights went to more senior personnel. Nevertheless, they were attractive women, and people were flirting with them and making wisecrack remarks, all of which I found embarrassing. One stewardess said sweetly, “Sergeant, can I get you anything?” When spoken by a civilian, the title sounded very old and mature. I felt that I had aged more than the one year that had passed since I was on one of these flights. Yet only a few minutes earlier, I had been a scared kid over the possibility of missing the flight because of a haircut. Strangely, I had mixed emotions about leaving Vietnam. I had been quite comfortable there, and I had some trepidations about what I would face when I returned to graduate school.

Quite exhausted from no sleep for a couple of days, I had been running on nervous energy. As soon as the plane lifted off, I could not stay awake and I drifted in and out of sleep most of the trip. We stopped to refuel in Hawaii and got off the plane to walk around and stretch. It was warm and very muggy. Technically, I was back on American soil, although I really didn’t think that Hawaii qualified. When we touched down in Oakland, a thunderous applause erupted, and the stewardess confirmed, “Welcome Home, Guys”. Although I slept most of the trip or maybe because of it, I was groggy and my mind was in slow-motion mode. I think that I had purposefully placed myself in a suspended state to prevent getting excited too soon. The rather chaotic process of my final weeks in country and the unexpected rapid departure meant that I hadn’t pursued my original intention to take a layover in Japan. It didn’t seem important at the time, but I have regretted the missed opportunity since.

At Oakland, I spent the whole day processing out of the Army, my last day of long lines and hurry up and wait. I walked out of the building on October 23 to a lovely sunset. I was a civilian, although I was in my Class A uniform, which was required for the government to fly me home free. I had served 20 months and 6 days in the Army, six more than the minimum to get an early out. Had they found me earlier at Phouc Vinh, it might have been a few days sooner. My DD 214 (Discharge Papers) listed my MOS as “Censor” and gave the related civilian occupation for which I was qualified as a map
draftsman. To the very end, the Army’s bureaucratic incompetence never ceased to amaze me. I mused that I was about as qualified for the designated civilian occupation as I was for my specified MOS as an artillery recon sergeant or, for that matter, fire direction control in which I was originally trained. But none of that mattered anymore.

I took a cab to San Francisco International Airport where I had a red-eye flight that left after midnight. It had been several days since I had been in a bed and I was very tired physically and emotionally. I knew that if I fell asleep, I would be out totally and miss the call for my flight. Staying awake, though, was not easy. I walked around because every time I sat down, I started to doze off. Once on the plane, I collapsed. I arrived groggy and disoriented in St. Louis early in the morning.

My parents had no idea that I was on my way home. They still believed that I had another eight days in Vietnam. My plan was to catch a flight down to Cape Girardeau, take a cab into the city, and walk into my father’s dental laboratory, where my mother would be also, to surprise them. I regret that I didn’t follow through with the plan. However, I wasn’t sure that I could get a cab at the small airport early in the morning, and I guess that I was eager to announce my presence. In any case, I called my parents at home at 6:30 a.m. from St. Louis and told them that they might want to be at the airport at 8:00 a.m. They had to scramble to get ready and drive about 40 minutes to the airport.

It was an emotional time as I walked down the ramp. I don’t think that I had ever seen my father cry before. It had been a hard year for my parents; I hadn’t truly understood just how much. I had done all that I could to reassure them throughout my tour, and the fact that I was obviously happy and content in Vietnam, as opposed to my bitter time Stateside, had helped. While my mother expressed it, my father probably had suffered even more. Within the next year, my mother’s best friend from college, my third grade teacher, lost her son in Vietnam, and the woman never truly recovered from it. My mother’s final Vietnam burden, albeit one that she was quite willing to bear, was that her son came home; her friend’s son did not.

When we arrived at home, the emotional auto-pilot that I had operated on from the moment that I left Phuoc Vinh hit the proverbial wall. I let myself collapse. I lay down for a few minutes to rest my eyes before lunch and woke up the next morning. After a few days at home, I headed to Columbia, Missouri, back to my real life at the University. I moved into the house that my brother and a couple of graduate school friends rented. I signed up as a substitute teacher in the public schools to keep busy until the new semester began. Although there were hundreds of people above me on the list, I started receiving offers immediately and was teaching almost every day in the public schools within three weeks after my return to the States. I continued to do this on a part-time basis for the
next year. I was back in graduate school and teaching freshman American history at the University when the second semester began in January 1971.
Chapter 9

Aftermath and Retrospect

I had no adjustment problems returning to regular life. During my entire time in the Army, I considered it a slight interruption of what my life was about, and I stepped back into graduate school as if I had never left. I didn’t talk much about Vietnam, not because I couldn’t, but because it wasn’t where my priorities were at the time. No one was particularly interested anyway, and my story wouldn’t have been easy to explain in a passing conversation. Deep within me I was proud to be a Vietnam veteran. However, given the academic climate that I witnessed nationwide, I suspected that it was going to be a handicap that I would have to overcome, maybe for the rest of my career. Basically, I just ignored the war. I didn’t read about it in the newspaper or pay much attention to it on the news. My focus was very clear. I was a Ph.D. student with lost time to make up, and I absorbed myself in reading and department politics.

A few of my colleagues looked at me with some suspicion as if I were some kind of damaged goods, and I made jokes about being a returned killer and an agent of U.S. imperialism. However, most of my friends just welcomed me back to the insular life of a graduate student. Since only two of us had been drafted out of the history department, Vietnam veterans were not a common commodity. The few times that I saw my former peer who had been drafted when I had, now in a wheel chair from spinal meningitis contacted in Basic Training, I felt very uncomfortable. However, since he had switched to library science, albeit taking some courses in the history department, I saw him only occasionally in passing. I merely nodded. I hadn’t really known him before I left, and I never had a conversation with him after I returned. I knew that I was manifesting a degree of survivor’s guilt.

Reflective of the times in 1971, I grew my hair long with muttonchop sideburns, and I experimented with a pathetically scraggly goatee. I wore my field jacket with all my patches as my regular coat and occasionally wore fatigue shirts and boots. That hardly made me stand out as this was the fashion statement of the day. My Marxist revolutionary friend Reggie Delwiche always dressed in a field jacket. I tried to act and speak a radical rhetoric with symbolic displays of not saluting the flag and other juvenile expressions. However, hidden not far beneath the surface, I was an sincere patriot. At the same time that I looked away from the flag and folded my arms to make a statement during the national anthem, I was still stirred almost to tears by the music. Barry Sadler’s “Ballad of the Green Berets” roused me greatly. Secretly, I took great pride in being a combat veteran, and at times I even missed aspects of Vietnam. I remembered fondly the
helicopter rides, the beauty of the country, and comfortable familiarity of daily office life. I had been spoiled by having everything taken care of for me—three good meals a day, my laundry, my bed made daily, and virtually everything free. Finally, I had become used to having considerable decision-making responsibility and authority.

However, even the very best experiences in Vietnam could not match the joy of returning to teaching in my classroom. It was what I had missed most and my enthusiasm for every subject with which we dealt was obvious. Although I tried to speak the radical rhetoric that predominated among TA's in the department, at heart I was simply a middle of the road liberal Democrat with foretastes of my more conservative perspective today. My radical friends called me a fascist. The fact that I had acquiesced to the draft and that I didn’t advocate revolution in the streets qualified me in their worldview. Of course, they tabbed almost everyone to their right by that term. In the classroom, I wanted my students to understand the importance of knowing the past, catch the joy of learning history, evaluate evidence and alternate interpretations of events, think clearly, and write with some facility. I lacked the political indoctrination imperative that motivated many others.

The freshman students that I taught were for the most part apolitical and knew relatively little about the war. Hippie dress was in style, but that was about as unconventional as they went. Missouri was not a radical center, and the students from the small towns and farms of the state were not potential revolutionaries. Those who cared at all knew that antiwar was the politically-correct stance; however, a high percentage of them could not have found Vietnam on a map and had absolutely no idea about any aspect of the war. For many of them, it was simply an article of faith that war was wrong. The only evidence needed was that students opposed it.

I didn’t talk about the war very much. I was more interested in debating progressivism, the New Deal, the origins of the Cold War, or the civil rights movement. Some students were able to recognize the patches on my field jacket and asked if I had been there. This led to an inquiry about my views on the subject. My standard mantra was something on the following order: “I didn’t consider the war morally wrong, just diplomatically and militarily stupid. I had done my thing and it was behind me. I hoped that it would be over soon so that they wouldn’t have to deal with it.” I didn’t refuse to talk about the war, but I didn’t encourage discussion either. I would guess that most of my students never knew that I had been in Vietnam, at least until the end of the term when we briefly discussed the war.

I found most of the campus antiwar crowd shallow and tiresome. Their overinflated rhetoric and absurd charges turned me off. Their cliches, chants, and substitution of profanity, vulgarity, and name calling for rational discourse was the
antithesis of what I believed education to be about. I was quite willing to discuss or debate policy questions with my friends, who ran the gamut from conservatives to Marxist revolutionaries, as long as the discourse was rational rather than emotional tirades. When the name calling and posturing began, I usually walked away. I purposefully adopted a smug air of “I have been there, and what do you know?” Although I ordinarily hated such arrogant attitudes, this protected me from dealing with things that I preferred to avoid. In truth, I knew that I didn’t know that much about the origins, evolution, and various perspectives about the war, and I was too much the good graduate student to approach a subject without first being conversant with the literature. Fortunately, within my circle, conversation was dominated by campus and departmental politics and never-ending debates about teaching. To me, that was far more fertile ground for discussion than wrangling about the war.

Within the history department, my Ph.D. advisors, Walter V. Scholes and Richard S. Kirkendall, abhorred cheap emotional rhetoric and demanded careful methodical logic. These two dominant individuals set the tone for the department, and junior faculty and graduate students were shaped by their model. Thus the war never became as divisive within the department as it did at other places. Politics were never allowed to displace education. My Marxist revolutionary friend Reggie and I had long debates and disagreed about almost everything. Reggie called me a fascist who would be swept away in the revolution, and I told him that he was a ersatz, armchair revolutionary, a compulsive ideologue who would grow up someday. Beneath all the rhetoric, we respected each other and our arguments were challenging intellectual exercises. Most importantly, we never let our ongoing debate interfere with the serious business of weekly poker games. As it turned out, I didn’t get swept away with the revolution, and Reggie, the eternal ideologue, today views the world from the perspective of an equally convinced and vocal conservative who now rails against affirmative action, Native American priority fishing rights in his home state of Wisconsin, and students who do not understand the basic principles of the free enterprise system.

During the spring semester of 1971, I had classes only a couple of days a week, so I continued to substitute teach in the public schools and I did this on a more limited basis through the next academic year. Unlike the university where I avoided the subject, I invoked my Vietnam combat experience readily in the public schools. I could intimidate virtually any unruly class by threatening them that I was just back from Vietnam, “Where I have been killing people, and I was not about to put up with any of their foolishness.” I usually wore my field jacket and I carried a short leather strap which I slammed down on a desk top if things became unruly. My General George Patton impersonation may have been all posture and bluff, but it worked even in one school which was so bad that the police patrolled the halls. I maintained order and I had a lore of war stories with which to entertain. In the public schools of mid-Missouri at least, a Vietnam veteran was still an
object of some fascination and respect. I was popular with the students and, because I kept the classroom under control, with the administration as well.

My teaching assignments were not limited to history and social studies. As I established my reputation, I was invited to substitute for teachers in subjects as diverse as English, math, music, health, shop, art, and drivers training. One junior high called on me for almost every substitute opening that they had without regard to subject. I spent so many days there that I was invited to the end-of-the-year faculty picnic. I taught the subject material when I could. Otherwise, I maintained quiet and order and required the students to complete whatever assignment the teacher had left for them. I got an amazing amount of my own reading done during this time. I enjoyed my days in the schools. I could walk out at 3:00 p.m. with a day’s pay and still have time to do my own work.

Most of the phone calls to substitute roused me from a deep sleep early in the morning. I often had to ask the caller what day of the week it was before I could respond whether or not I was available. Since I was doing virtually all subjects, I didn’t pay much attention to what I was invited to teach. I would find that out once I arrived. One morning quite early, I received a call from a school just south of town. Although I had not taught there, I knew the place, a rural grade school that went up through the eighth grade. I assumed that I would be doing something in the junior high. I reported to the principal’s office and he walked me down to my classroom. I was wearing my standard uniform of jeans and field jacket, and we talked about Vietnam as we headed down the hall. I was absorbed in the conversation and not paying full attention to where we headed. However, when he turned me into a second grade room, the shock registered on my face. Seeing my consternation, he remarked, “I did tell you that you would be teaching the second grade, didn’t I?” In all honesty, I had no idea.

Neither did I have a clue of what I was supposed to do with twenty-something second graders. The principal handed me the regular teacher’s instructions for the day and left me on my own. To remark that it was the most challenging day of my teaching career would be gross understatement. I sat in tiny chairs and had reading groups of robins, wrens, cardinals, and blue jays. We had arithmetic, spelling, art, and who knows what else. The class was out of control all day. They talked incessantly, laughed and shouted, and ran around the room at will. I would get one group settled down as anarchy erupted in another corner of the room. All of my intimidation techniques were useless. The first hour seemed a week long. I did succeed in getting them lined up to march outside for recess and later to the lunchroom. I told them that they were soldiers who had to mind my orders, and we sang songs as we marched. The kids enjoyed it, and for a brief moment I had them under some degree of control. They drew pictures of me in my field jacket with my long sideburns and goatee. In truth, I was an unusual sight and a theatrical happening in the school. Other teachers came by at lunch and in the afternoon.
to tell me that the kids loved me. I mused to myself that I probably could survive the day, but these teachers did this everyday. I wasn’t strong enough.

I thought that the day would never end. When 3:00 p.m. finally came, I dropped by the office to check out. Often I was paid on the spot or at least I left my address to send me my check. The principal was effusive with praise and exclaimed, “See you tomorrow morning.” He responded to the look of bewilderment or terror on my face, “I thought that I told you this morning that the teacher would be out for several days.” I blubbered a lie, “No, I can’t; I have commitments for the rest of the week.” He replied that he was sorry about that, but he would call on me again. I retorted that I didn’t think that the elementary grades were my calling and I should stick to junior high and above in the future. He countered that I exhibited a genuine talent to relate to young children. I thanked him for his kind remarks, but silently I begged to differ and I determined that I would always be busy if he called again. He did, but after several refusals, he gave up. The day remains one of the more memorable in my teaching career, an event, undoubtedly hyperbolized, that I have recounted many times to my classes over the years. I like to emphasize that the range of my teaching experience has stretched from the second grade to graduate students.

Driven to make up lost time, I took my Ph.D. written and oral comprehensive exams in the spring of 1972 before many of the peers that I had started with in the program, and I got married a few days after my oral exams. My wife had been a secretary in the history department when I returned. She had dated my brother who was a graduate student in the department. From him and others, she had heard stories about this rather flamboyant character who would return from Vietnam soon, and she had checked out my department records. I noticed her immediately when I returned to the department; the attraction was mutual. We didn’t get off to an auspicious start as I exhibited a more macho attitude than necessary. However, we began dating and after being married for more than 25 years, she remains the central figure in my life. I gave myself the mandate to complete my dissertation in one year, and with my wife’s help, starting with a honeymoon/research trip, I met my goal.

Consumed with my dissertation and teaching, I paid scant attention to the end of the war in January 1973 and the return of the POWs. The job market in history had dried up in the early 1970s, and 1973, the highpoint of production of history Ph.D.s, was a particularly bad year. I was very fortunate to be one of only two from our department that year who received a job offer. With my doctorate in hand for only a few days, I joined the University of Maryland’s Overseas Division in Europe in August 1973, where I taught both history and political science on U.S. military bases. I started out in Athens, Greece, and went from there to Karamursel, Turkey, with later assignments in Rota and Zaragoza, Spain, and numerous locations in Germany. I taught a wide range of courses,
including my specialities in American foreign policy, recent U.S. history, and Soviet studies.

In fall 1974 during my second year with Maryland, Joe Arden, who served in effect as the academic dean, approached me about teaching a course on the Vietnam War. Joe was a Vietnam veteran and had taught with Maryland’s program on military bases in Vietnam during the war. I asked, “Why me?,” since I had no particular preparation on the subject. Joe responded that I was the obvious person. I had the right fields—diplomatic history and American foreign policy, military history, recent U.S. political history, and the cold war, but more importantly my Vietnam veteran status would be a significant asset before the military audience. With all my other preparations, the idea of another course which would entail a tremendous amount of work was not appealing, but I agreed to give it a try. I began to read as much as I could about Vietnam and I started writing lectures. I offered “The Vietnam War” for the first time on the U.S. Navy Base at Rota, Spain, and for the next two years I taught it at many locations, including Air Force bases in Bitburg and Rhein-Main, Germany and Karamursel, Turkey and on Army bases in Heidelberg, Mannheim, and Hanau, Germany.

The younger enlisted personnel were post-Vietnam. I could have been teaching the American Civil War or the Second Punic War for all that they knew about the subject. The older NCOs and several “mustang officers” (individuals who had started their careers as NCOs before entering the officer corps and who were obligated to finish college degrees to keep their officer status) were Vietnam veterans, and many had very strong opinions on the subject. I never mentioned that I was a Vietnam veteran at the beginning of the course, and my long hair obviously sent signals to many that my orientation might be that of the antiwar protestors. At the first session, I usually had a strong-minded veteran who challenged the right of a long-haired academic to say anything about a war that he had fought and knew intimately. Often this was accompanied by an outburst against the protestors with implications that all academics fit into that category. I consistently responded that the course would be a challenging academic enterprise emphasizing the long historical background and evolution of the conflict. My perspective would be irrelevant. I tried to get as far into the course as possible before my status was revealed. However, once the fact got out to one person, soon it was known by the whole class, and the inevitable question was why didn’t I present my credentials at the beginning. Playing naive, I asked why it made a difference. In that context, however, it clearly did.

I continued to read assiduously on the subject and my knowledge base and expertise grew each time that I taught the course. The offering developed into a very demanding exercise in the history of American involvement and policymaking, with primary focus on how and why we made the decisions that we did. As an historian, I
spent considerable time on Vietnamese culture and society in the French colonial period and devoted significant attention to the evolution of American involvement from World War II to the early 1960s. To the frustration of many who wanted to tell war stories, the smallest portion of the course treated the war after 1965. To a large degree, this was because I knew less about that, and the kinds of dispassionate scholarly studies that I sought to develop my expertise were in limited supply at this early point.

I came to like the course very much and enrollments were high. I already enjoyed a strong teaching reputation within the Maryland community and as word spread about the course, many bases asked to have me come to teach it at their location. I had numerous interesting classroom experiences, and in my devil's advocate and provocateur role, I engaged in spirited debates. I remember vividly one exchange with a particularly obnoxious and not-very-bright senior Army sergeant. He had been getting on my nerves for several sessions with his increasingly belligerent, needlessly inflammatory, and just outright stupid commentary. I noticed that he liked to make illusions to his purported combat experience. Having worn his Class A uniform to class one night, I had surveyed the line of ribbons with some care. I was prepared. On the evening in question, in the midst of an *ad hominem* diatribe about all those whom he did not like, he chose to include me in his net of "long-haired, pinko, M-F'ing college kids" versus "those of us who did their duty in Vietnam." Admittedly, the "of us" was vague enough to be interpreted as those in the U.S. Army, but in his enthusiasm of the moment, the sergeant's inflection clearly included himself in that number. Then and now, I have very little tolerance for that group of individuals who for whatever psychological reason make the false claim to be a Vietnam veteran.

In a monotone aside, I sarcastically noted that I declined his invitation to be defined within the group to which I had been arbitrarily assigned. In fact, I had been too busy with other obligations elsewhere to be involved in that number. Moreover, as an artillery sergeant, I had an excuse for not wearing a CIB, which I had indeed earned as I had earned the air medal that I did wear. However, I was unable to understand how an "infantry trooper," to quote his own words, failed to be adored with the CIB or any other combat distinction, including the Vietnam Service or the Vietnam Campaign Medals. However, I would be glad to let him see mine if he wanted to know what they looked like.

I then continued, "but to return to the relevant lecture...," and proceeded as if nothing had happened. The looks around the class said it all. The sergeant may not have been very bright, but he was perceptive enough to know that he had publically humiliated himself badly. He disappeared at the break never to return again--much to the pleasure of the rest of the class. I felt remorse for what I had done to the man, but I tried to justify to
myself that I had offered him an important lesson in presumptuousness, arrogance, and precision. Other such exchanges along this line were less dramatic.

Teaching the Vietnam course at Bitburg Air Force Base in the spring of 1975 was very emotional for me as I watched the final battle of the war at Xuan Loc on television. The destruction of the city that I knew so well was painful, and a general miasma hung over me. Teaching the course had engendered an interest in the country that I hadn't felt as strongly even when I was there. The plight of the refugees, especially the boat people, was anguishing. Long gone was any trace of my earlier radical rhetoric from graduate school days and even my mainstream liberal centralism was gradually shifting toward a more conservative orientation. In truth, I had always been a cold war warrior in the tradition of Harry Truman through John Kennedy, and the communist oppression in Indochina over the next years sharpened my intensity against that evil political system.

By the time that I left the University of Maryland to accept a position at Converse College in the fall of 1976, I had the beginning of some proficiency in teaching a Vietnam War course, although I doubted that I would be doing it any more. It wasn't because Converse was a small women's liberal arts college, but the fact that Vietnam War courses weren't being taught at that time. In the wake of defeat, the subject virtually disappeared from academia as a best-forgotten tragedy. Although I had taught a wide range of courses with Maryland, my responsibilities at Converse were even greater and the number of different preparations was very time consuming. In my second year, when I found that I had an opening in my schedule for a special topics course, I wanted to do something that didn't require more basic preparation. I decided to try the Vietnam course on a one-time basis.

I had established a strong following, so I knew that students would sign up for anything that I offered. However, I was surprised by the large enrollment for the advanced senior-level political science Vietnam War course. The class attracted so much attention that it was as much an event as a course and virtually everyone on campus knew about it. To put it mildly, the course was a total success. Many students asked when I would teach it again. Since all of the senior-level courses in the department were offered on a biannual basis, I scheduled a special topics on Vietnam again in two years and enjoyed even larger enthusiasm. At this point, I determined that the course should be elevated from special topics to a regular component of the department curriculum and my teaching schedule. I encountered resistance, however, as some department members complained that the subject was "trendy," and it would be an embarrassment to list a regular course "of such fleeting significance." I finally got the course adopted as a regular political science offering, but failed to get it cross-listed as history, where with my teaching orientation, it appropriately belonged. I bided my time on that front.
One of my strengths in graduate school was an affinity for bibliography. I loved bibliographic essays and read every one that I could on my areas of interest. The literature and range of interpretations on specific areas or issues came easily for me. Many students feared the Ph.D. comprehensive’s bibliographic questions, but I found them the most interesting and challenging. As I continued to immerse myself in the Vietnam War literature, I was intrigued by the similarities of patterns of historical interpretation between the origins of the cold war debate, a subject that I had concentrated on in graduate school, and that of the Vietnam War. I resolved to write an article on the subject. Since I was conversant with the origins of the cold war bibliography, I decided to try to organize the extant literature on the Vietnam War into a coherent pattern so that I could compare the development of the two literatures.

As I got into the project, I was overwhelmed by the huge volume of Vietnam literature at this early stage and I determined that trying to make sense of this body alone was enough to undertake. I shelved the comparative aspect for the moment. The organizational effort resulted in an article, “In Search of Lessons: The Development of a Vietnam Historiography,” published in Parameters: The Journal of the U.S. Army War College (December 1979), which I thought was an appropriate forum for such an piece. As interest in the Vietnam War revived in the 1980s, Parameters became a center of significant interpretative essays on the subject. In 1987, the editors collected the most important pieces on the war that had appeared in the journal during the last decade and published them as a book. I was pleased to be included, along with policymakers such as Walt Rostow, Paul Kattenburg, and General Michael Davidson, as well as scholars such as Douglas Pike, Harry Summers, and Guenter Lewy. By the time that the article first appeared, I had started doing book reviews on Vietnam, at first primarily in military journals but then branching into other scholarly journals. This was the beginning of a fascination with Vietnam War bibliography and a career of book reviewing which at the time of this writing now exceeds 350 individual reviews, including well over 200 on Vietnam, as well as many bibliographic essays.

In 1981, I published one of the first articles on teaching a Vietnam War course. In the essay in Teaching History, I advocated approaching the subject from a broad perspective with ample attention to Vietnamese history, culture, and society preparatory to dealing with the long evolution of American involvement. The article ended with a call for teaching the war as a course, stating that the subject was as legitimate and important as any other period in American history. Not many Vietnam courses existed in 1981, but that soon changed as an explosion of offerings emerged in the mid-1980s, many spurred by the Public Broadcasting System’s “Vietnam: A Television History” (1983).

Over the next decade and a half, I carved out a small niche for myself as a knowledgeable individual on the literature and teaching of Vietnam. I continued to
review books, write bibliographic essays and articles on teaching, make innumerable presentations at conferences, conduct teaching workshops, train high school teachers to deal with the war at my own Vietnam War Institute, appear in the national media, and I wrote a short book, *Teaching the Vietnam War: Resources and Assessments* (1991). However, Vietnam was only one of the several areas in which I taught and wrote. I also developed a new field for myself and established a local reputation on the Middle East and I edited a book on the American South. My desire had always been to be at a small liberal arts college, where indeed I was a generalist rather than a specialist. The small college academic lives in an almost entirely different world than peers at the large university.

Although I thought that my military career was over when I left the Army in late 1970, I returned for a brief fling in 1977-78. The South Carolina Army National Guard undertook a recruitment drive in early 1977 encouraging veterans to try the Guard for one year at their former rank. As we prepared to buy a house at the time, the extra money sounded attractive, and I admit that the idea of playing sergeant again on a limited basis one week-end a month had momentary appeal. The National Guard Armory was only a couple of blocks from the apartment where we lived, so I walked over to talk with them. The commanding officer liked the idea of a Vietnam vet. The unit was comprised primarily of those who had joined to avoid the draft and the war so I would be the only Vietnam vet in the unit. Since it was a signal battalion, I wondered what I would do in it. The CO assured me that they needed someone with my administrative skills, and I could be the administrative sergeant for the unit, working with a Chief Warrant Officer who was permanent personnel between training week-ends. Since my military obligation, both active duty and inactive reserves, was fulfilled, I could walk away at any time that I wanted. It sounded okay to me. It was not one of the wiser decisions of my life.

I didn’t mind the work. Keeping records, typing, administrative duties, and generally supervising the headquarters office reminded me of the early days in Vietnam. In some ways it was fun to be back in uniform and “playing” at soldiering. It was all so artificial that I couldn’t take the whole thing seriously. The unit was composed of the educated elite who used the Guard to escape the war. Many had stayed on as officers or NCOs after their initial enlistment. If I had found the artificiality of rank hard to take in Vietnam, it was even more absurd from my perspective in the Guard. I knew many of the individuals in the unit in their civilian capacity. These included college professors, a dean, and even a college president, as well as bankers, lawyers, teachers, etc. I found it as ridiculous to salute a high school teacher lieutenant who was a graduate student in my class as to tell a prominent businessman whom I outranked to wash a truck or sweep the floor. To me, it was all just play acting.
The money was a nice addition to the resources of a young junior faculty member. I also enjoyed a couple occasions of taking helicopter rides to subordinate units in surrounding towns. This definitely brought back memories. However, I hadn’t fully contemplated how inconvenient it was to tie up one week-end per month, and it always seemed to fall when I need to be at a college week-end function. More importantly, I did not like going to the field, whether on exercises or to the firing range. My attitude was “been there, done that, and don’t want to do it anymore.” Nevertheless, I contemplated staying around after my year was up and even investigated the possibility of gaining a commission. However, when I injured my ear drum during a trip to the rifle range, I quickly lost any interest in the Guard. As I learned later, my ear canals apparently are larger than normal, so the earplugs to protect them on the firing range did not perform adequately. I returned from the range with a swollen and painful ear drum that ultimately resulted in some hearing loss.

I asked myself why was I doing this. I had spent every minute during my active duty focused on the day of my release, and clearly the merits of my present involvement did not outweigh the hassles. I finished out my year and departed the military for a second time. My brief time in the National Guard, however, did give me some insight into how Vietnam had affected the guard and reserve units. I was in the Guard during a period when the reserve forces were being accorded higher and higher responsibilities for deployment during a war. I had grave question about the ability of this particular unit to perform that role. Obviously, the condition improved over the next decade since this unit was in fact deployed to Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War in 1991. I had friends who had stayed in the unit for years as a source of extra income, who got the shock of actually having to go to war. This was something that most of them had never seriously contemplated as a real possibility.

Before, during, and after Vietnam, my self definition was always that of academic and classroom teacher. My Vietnam tour was bounded in that context. At many Vietnam conferences, I witness what I call the “unreconstructed Vietnam veterans” and “professional veterans.” I am very ill at ease with these people. Both categories have several variants. One manifestation are the POW/MIA types with their T-shirts, flags, and other distinctive attire. These individuals run a gamut from dedicated, sincere believers, through some charlatans, to several “mental cases.” The more generic group of unreconstructed veterans, though, are individuals who largely have defined themselves in terms of their years in Vietnam, the singular experience of their lives. Many suffered gravely and the lasting effects explain why they are locked into this time frame. For others, their Vietnam experience, whether bad or good, simply was the most meaningful thing that they have done. Their lives since pale in comparison.
I am sympathetic to all of these veterans. I know that my Vietnam experience was a most fortunate one, and only by the grace of God am I not one of their number. I saw quite limited combat, I did not hump the boonies and witness death and destruction daily, I faced few moral dilemmas, and I carried back no ghosts to live with for the rest of my life. Even though I had the advantage of being considerably older and more educated than the normal low-ranking enlisted soldier, I am well aware that that could have been meaningless had I experienced the horrors that were possible in Vietnam. I was a combat REMF, and a very privileged one. We all need to walk in someone else's boots before we judge.

Personally, however, I identify better with Vietnam veterans who returned from their war, whatever it was, and settled back into living normal, meaningful lives. Statistics demonstrate unquestionably that this represents the great majority of Vietnam vets. Like our grandfathers and fathers who fought in earlier wars, we returned to families, jobs, school, and community, often playing leading roles. Most of us consider our service honorable, no matter what we may think of the war. Some join veterans organizations and keep their experience alive. Others prefer to shelve it away as irrelevant or immaterial to who they are today. Although I am not the veteran's organization type, I did become active in the Vietnam Veteran's Institute, an organization composed primarily of professional and academic veterans. I serve on their Board of Scholars and regularly make presentations at their annual scholarly conference.

The change of national climate after the mid 1980's that allowed Vietnam veterans to be respected was a healthful and needed correction. The debates over the war and the roles of participants in and against it will go on at least as long as this generation lives. So many people are so intimately defined in their roles. However, we seem to have reached consensus that our soldiers were not the enemy. An increasing common bonding among many former warriors on both sides, American and communist Vietnamese, demonstrates the truth that political figures make the decisions and young men and women are the pawns who go out to die for policies, ideologies, and causes which often they do not understand.

Of the war I fought, I make modest claims of understanding. Like everyone of the almost three million who served in the Indochina theater, we each saw only a tiny piece through our individual participation. Easy as it is to extrapolate, as I have done in part in this book, this must be done with caution. Over the years, I have had my students interview family members and friends who served in Vietnam. As the students report on their interviews, I am constantly struck that much of what they relate is very suspect. Some things are simply factually inaccurate. Units were not where people place them in country. Chronology is very skewed. Some revelations simply did not and could not have happened as reported. Memory is selective and fickle, especially over this amount
of time. Personal account is invaluable, especially when based on records for authenticity; however, it is also quite fallible. We must rely on scholarly investigation to put the larger story in context.

My own scholarly interpretation is always subject to reconsideration. Being open to new information, new perspective, and new interpretation is the hallmark of scholarly disposition. The following is a brief synopsis of my interpretation as it stands at the moment. There was nothing sinister about our involvement in Vietnam. We got entangled for the noblest of reasons. We genuinely believed that saving the Vietnamese from communism was a worthy cause, and at every point we underestimated the cost of attempting to achieve this goal. Although the goal may have been honorable, we would have been hard pressed to find a worse place to make this stand. We entered a revolutionary situation that we neither appreciated nor understood, and we had too much past history to overcome. The situation was not as black and white as we proposed; the reality was definitely a mosaic of grays. We attempted a military solution to a political problem because we had no ready political answer. Hubris and arrogance characterized our every action in the country from the early 1950's on, and in pursuit of the golden time to extricate gracefully, we sank deeper into the quagmire.

The military strategy adopted was inappropriate and ultimately counterproductive. During the war, we weren't outfought, but we were often outthought. Both military and civilian leadership share the blame. Robert McNamara is certainly a culprit who managed to misread virtually everything not only at the time, but more pathetically in his retrospective lament. He was hardly the only one. Lyndon Johnson may well be the poorest wartime leader in the American experience, and the most disingenuous. The Joint Chiefs of Staff bear grave fault as well. Although the claim is true that they were not allowed to pursue the policies and actions which based upon their experience and expertise they believed were necessary for success, they themselves to a significant degree were responsible for their own marginality. The inter-service rivalries and maneuvering for position, the interpersonal dynamics within the group, and a decided lack of moral courage were all factors. The military leadership can be justly faulted for failure to recognize that we didn't need more firepower but more brainpower. They continued to pursue policies which they considered ineffective for lack of alternative and ingenuity. Attrition was a recipe for stalemate. By the time that we got serious about a strategy with a chance of long-term success, it was probably too late. Pacification and Vietnamization were essential components of any lasting political stability. In retrospect, it is clear that the U.S. decision to push the South Vietnamese aside and take over the big campaign war, thus de-legitimizing our ally, had severe consequences; and the American casualty costs of the war that the U.S. assumed had tremendous domestic implications. As John Kennedy once said, "Ultimately, it was their war to win or lose. We cannot do it for them." Would that he had listened to himself. Nevertheless, despite doing virtually
everything wrong, we still came very close to military success anyway. North
Vietnamese strategic and tactical failures in the Tet 1968 Offensive and again in the
Spring 1972 Offensive provided the United States an opportunity to salvage success from
defeat. We failed at those junctures as well.

The final denouement was not our finest hour either. Although the so-called
antiwar movement may have encouraged North Vietnam’s morale, it was not, contrary to
some of the mythology today, a decisive factor in the ultimate outcome of the conflict.
Richard Nixon’s agenda, including a new relationship with the Chinese and Soviets and
his first priority of trying to save himself from the Watergate debacle, were more
important. The United States agreed to a dismal peace agreement virtually destined to
mean disaster for our ally. In the end, we achieved neither war nor peace with honor.

Although my analysis above is the product of years of academic study and
reflection, I was attuned to many of the elements of our failure from my lowly vantage
point while I was still in Vietnam. The squandering of manpower was daily apparent to
me, as was the overemphasis on the opulence of the Rear. The hubris and emphasis on
show rather than substance were standards. The costs of the policy of the one-year tour
could be seen daily. Ticket punching by officers who rotated from position to position
only beginning to understand their job in time to move on to the next one and the quest
for the perfect OER, as much through image and politics as performance, had a constant,
direct dilatory affect on the war. I was perceptive enough to observe and participate in
these things.

I also knew that the 199th sensor program was a perfect microcosm of many of the
war’s ills, and I was a part and player in the show and charade. Vietnam was a desk
warrior’s dream. As an archetype combat REMF, I was part of the nightmare.