
My letter to Madame Julie came back. I went back to the Saigon Palace and Mrs. Xuan Phung Tran translated the Vietnamese postal clerk's notations. "This person has moved and left no forwarding address." I still have her business card, but it's just an artifact now.

31. Fourth of July, 1978

Another time in Albuquerque I was driving from the south valley to the northwest heights for a Fourth of July party when a boy threw a firecracker into the open driver's side window of my little Honda hatchback. I had just turned off Candelaria to small residential street. Ahead I saw a Circle K store. I wrenched the car into the parking lot with part of my mind screaming "Grenade!" The fuse sparked fuse hissed at my feet I forced myself to hold on the wheel and pump the brake. I felt an irresistible force to jump out of the car but I could see people inside the store and the car was going right for the plate glass window. Through the adrenaline blast I felt my foot on the brake. I gripped the steering wheel. Like a close range rifle shot the firecracker went off. The car bounced up on the curb, but stopped just short of...
the window. Heart racing, I turned off the ignition and sat with a white knuckled grip on the steering wheel. The inside of the car was covered with tiny fragments of a Chinese newspaper used to wrap the firecracker. People waiting in the checkout line didn't look up. Press the clutch in, turn the ignition, shift into reverse, look behind, back up. I couldn't explain what had happened when I arrived at the party.

32. A Wounded Veteran, 1986

I came home in one piece. I haven't come across many injured veterans, but in 1986 was teaching photography in the Southeast Center for Photographic Studies at Daytona Beach Community College and I had a disabled Vietnam veteran in my photojournalism class. He had been a combat engineer who drove one of the huge caterpillar tractors that cut roads during combat. His cat drove over a mine near Khe Sanh and he nearly lost a leg. He had over 20 operations since he'd been in Vietnam in 1968. A steel rod ran most of the length of his injured leg. Sometimes the pain was so intense he couldn't move. He lived for seventeen years with pain beyond my ability to imagine it. The rod had to be adjusted or replaced several times. Abscesses constantly needed draining. In seventeen years he had never been able to sleep without painkillers.

In the movies a character recovers from an injury in just a few minutes. And it's always worth the pain because the character is better off. He's come to peace with himself. His family take him back. He humiliates the VA. He is a righteous victor. My student had to drop out of school because he'd pushed himself too hard. His leg developed gangrene and, sinking rapidly, he was no longer able to talk. His wife told me that he was so weak that they
couldn't operate to take the leg off. She didn't know if he'd make it. I don't know if he's still alive because I was afraid to hear that he may have died after such a long struggle. I hated the indifference of students and faculty to him as if Vietnam were like bell bottom pants - too out of date for anyone to care. Every time I saw him grimace his way slowly down the hall with a cane, I felt my stomach cramp. I wanted to make every student and teacher line the hallway and watch every painful step.

33. March, 1991

I got up early this morning to get the Washington Post and read about the war with Iraq. Reading for three hours every item related to the war I was most affected by the reporter's description of American Commanding General Norman Schwartkopf, a Vietnam veteran of two tours who won his third silver star for rescuing an Army private trapped in a mine field. It seemed to the reporter that Schwartzkopf's other enemy was the ghost of Vietnam, the public perception of American military incompetence.

Yesterday I told my therapist how surprised I was about my compulsive fascination with the Iraqi war. I found myself unable to stop reading about the destruction or stop watching it repeatedly on CNN. I inwardly exulted at the scenes of large scale killing at the end of the war as Iraqi soldiers desperately tried to return home, but were caught in the open by American planes and killed by the thousands. I cheered television pictures of guided bombs exploding on targets.

I was so rabid in my rage that I had to admit there was no rational basis for it. As the rage began to deflate my therapist had me go back to Vietnam in my memory and notice how my attraction to high intensity and danger blotted out my fear of being powerless. She asked me what was I afraid of now. I was ready to admit that I was afraid of ----. I couldn't think of anything. I offered that I'm not too sure about the future, assuming that I must be afraid of
something after all there is much to be afraid of, isn't there? It gradually started seeping in that I wasn't really afraid of anything in my life now. My compulsive fascination with the Iraqi war did mask a real loss-- that I had numbed myself to my fear in Vietnam and that I wanted the Iraqis to pay for my pain. I wanted them to pay for me being a Vietnam veteran, for being a "loser" a "moral cripple," all the shit thrown on us by those who would rather have the soldiers take responsibility for the war than take it themselves. We took it and many of us killed ourselves back in the States under the burden. And some, like me, were a powder keg of anger waiting to go off. We were so cut off from those numbed out feelings that we didn't realize we were living every day on a rolling boil of buried rage. Amazing to me, my obsession with the Iraqi war was actually a kind of Vietnam flashback. Under stress something like this can happen again, but I don't think it will catch me so off balance.

34. July, 1991

July third. I got my hair cut this morning. Iris, who hasn't cut my hair before, told me her ex-husband was a Vietnam vet. She said a cousin of hers was killed in the war as well. I uneasily asked her how it had gone with her ex-husband. Not so well. She had never felt like getting married since. "I've been doing my own thing. But in the past couple of years I've begun to change. I don't want to get old alone, you know. Security, companionship look pretty good now."
Iris asked me if I was doing anything special on the 4th. I told her I was thinking of marching in a parade.

A friend in town invited me, but I'm a little nervous. I haven't marched since I left the army.

Coming back from Vietnam was so dismal and sad that even the thought of a parade then seemed foolish and weird. I did remember hoping that when we got off the plane at Travis AFB there might be a band and maybe a few USO people to say welcome home. But the army made it pretty clear they weren't too happy to see us. A wooden welcome home sign hanging over the door of the first building we entered after getting of the plane hadn't been painted in years and was hanging by a single nail. It seemed to say, "Hey suckers, ain't life a bitch!" We were wisked with uncommon efficiency into a processing center, carefully out of sight from the fresh group getting ready to go to Vietnam.

We were in fact a pretty surly group. In wandering around the center I got into the area of soldiers processing to go to Vietnam. I noticed a young lieutenant walk past and was surprised to hear him say, "Excuse me, soldier, don't you usually salute officers?" I turned around and gruffly said "No, I usually don't." What was he going to do, send me to Vietnam? He blinked and said "Lon Holmberg?"

"Yeah."

"Didn't you go to the Gunnery School in Washington, Connecticut? I'm _____"

My God, someone from prep school. This young officer had been a member of the photography club when I'd been president ten years before.

I couldn't make the jump. I remembered his face, but emotionally he was just a young insecure lieutenant that I had nothing in common with. I couldn't make polite conversation. "Look, I've got to get my orders straight," I said. "Good luck on your tour." Walking off in squeamish turmoil, I was sad and angry. I had thown my medals in a trash can at the processing center and I just wanted to get away from the army. My prep school friend was too far away.
When Iris finished she looked me in the eye and said "Have a nice fourth."

"Thanks," I said. "You, too."

While I knew at the same level I was going to march, I also vacillated about whether it was important. It seemed kind of silly -- middle aged men reliving lost youth. The parade was to celebrate the victorious conclusion to the Gulf War. 71 units were marching. I was looking for the Annapolis Area Vietnam Veterans, one of the smallest contingents.

I introduced myself to the other marchers. At first it looked like just five or six, but others stood around talking to parade organizers, friends and family. They were easy to spot as "the uniform for the day" was a blue blazer with some uniform insignia or medals over the left breast pocket and khaki slacks. These were vets as yuppies, for me a welcome contrast to the sad grey haired men stuffed into tattered and fading jungle fatigues that I see around the Wall. They were joking. I was the new guy. "Didn't you march on Memorial Day?"

"No, Eric just told me about this last week."

"Welcome aboard." Lots of handshakes already this was feeling good. One was the sports writer in the local paper. Another wrote a column and drew cartoons for the same paper. A third ran a marine engineering business. A fourth was a nurse and she had the most harrowing tales. We talked about where we were and what we did in Vietnam.

The parade finally began about 40 minutes late. Slowly the groups ahead of us began to move. We formed into five ranks of three with two in front holding the banner that identified us. On our right side was an ex sergeant with a still authentic voice for calling cadence. A fire truck and an emergency rescue truck belching their exhaust in front of us prompted memories of the diesel smog of Saigon. We let the trucks get a half a block ahead.

"Annapolis Vietnam Veterans, ATTENTION!" I thought that we were just going to walk down the street. My mind was racing, ATTENTION, ATTENTION, a distant alarm. My right leg slapped against my left calf. My body straightened and I looked ahead at the back of the neck of the man in front of me. What's happening? Families on the sidewalks, red
brick buildings, the other marchers began to fade away into a hazier consciousness. I saw trimmed red hair touching the collar of the blue blazer in front of me.

"FORWARD ....'HAR.' LEF, LEF, LEF, Right, LEF." My legs started to pivot from the knees, unlike walking where one steps forward with the leg straight, leading with the heel. In marching you step forward leading from the knee with the left foot gliding forward over the ground instead of rolling forward from the heel to the ball of the foot. How did I know this? I never marched in Vietnam, the last time I marched was over twenty years ago in basic training for eight weeks. But I was marching now.

Two black men were clapping on the left side of the road as we passed.

"MARK TIME....'HAR!'" We stopped as one, but continued marching in place.

"Hey, they shoulda' put those dudes first."

There were only about 20 other people around us as we waited to enter the parade route. The two black men were still clapping. One stopped. "I ain't quittin'," the other said and kept slapping his hands together. I smiled at him. Hey, Cherry, where are you now, man? He looked to be in his twenties about what we were in Vietnam. Our marching group only had one black member, yet these guys were clapping for us. I'm gonna loose it. I could feel the tears coming up a long way. We started moving again. The hell with trying to keep in step. My anxiety level redlined. Suddenly its a huge crowd noticing 17 Vietnam veterans out of a thousand marchers. A deep well of cheering rising as we pass. I hear everything, but the roar is strangely distant. I'm unaware of my legs and feet. We've stopped. Now we're moving again.

"ALRIGHT!" more clapping. More people. The sidewalk is filled. They're looking at us. Slowly they see the banner, then swelling applause, ringing loud, cheers, yells, whistles. Some men our age standing in salute as we passed. Others raising their fists or wiping their eyes. Mine have already overflowed. We march into a wall of sound, turn left on Church Circle and head down Main Street. People are climbing fences, sitting on shoulders, pointing their video cameras. Louder and louder, a deep roar of pain and release. I could still hear
LEF, LEF and surprisingly found several times that I was still in step, but I was floating. At each block the politely enthusiastic applause for the Desert Storm troops rose to a frenzy when they saw our banner. What is this? Guilt, joy, apology for not noticing us so many years ago? Whatever it is I'll take it.

Veterans in combat fatigues stood next to vacationing tourists and natty locals. Perhaps for some we are your past, but if you can cheer for us, maybe we are your future as well. Parents held children up and pointed to us, mouths against their children's ears needing to tell them a piece of history.

35. Ed Bradley, Al Rockoff, and Bill Smith
Ed Bradley's office wasn't hard to find. A non-descript metal and glass office building on Manhattan's west side. Sitting behind the large 60 Minutes logo on the glass wall of the waiting area I wondered if Bradley remembered Al Rockoff, a friend of mine from the 221st that Bradley had encountered in Cambodia in the '70's. Or if he would remember my friend Dave Ellis who had been in touch with him six years before when we had tried to make a documentary about Al, the quintessential combat photographer. The documentary fell through and it turned out that Bradley did not remember offering to break a ski vacation to talk about Al, but he did remember times with Al in Cambodia that reminded me of adventures I had with Al in Vietnam.

In Bradley's office I was struck by an 11"x14" black and white photo by David Hume Kennerly of Al, Ed and Ed's camera man Norman Lloyd on the veranda of a hotel in Phenom Penh. Bradley smiled and confessed to missing the "old days" of Lone Ranger journalism in dangerous situations.

Al had a moment of glory as he was played by John Malkovitch in the movie The Killing Fields, David Putnam's film about the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia. Al Rockoff was a dedicated war photographer, unfit for any other profession, but of surpassing excellence in this one. My acquaintance with him was accidental. I knew nothing of his reputation when I met him in 1971 in the 221st headquarters at Long Binh. I was a green horn fresh from the States, about to go into the field and eager for any source of helpful information. The other guys all said, "Talk to Rockoff." The field photographers were the elite of the 221st and the experienced veterans were pretty distant to "newbies," except for Al. He was always eager to talk and had no special concern for the status of lack of it of those he spent time with. His advice far more than any Army guidelines or directives served me well by suggesting units to go out with and how to prepare for filmmaking and still photography in combat.

Sitting in Ed Bradley's office, I though of squatting rain soaked in the mud in the jungles of the Ashau Valley hunting the North Vietnamese. I was filming with a hand-crank
Bell and Howell three turret Elmo 16 mm camera and Al was making stills with his own Nikon equipment, he long ago having distained the use of army cameras. Bradley talked about offering him rides into the country. Al had explored Cambodia since 1967 in his first tour as an army photographer. He became a part time guide, major domo and de facto military advisor to CBS. Bradley offered an assessment of Al that fit what I'd heard from others who knew him.

I think Al had a very special talent, insight, and courage that was often overlooked by some because he was such an odd guy. Al was often left out because he was so at odds with the establishment, and that meant the establishment politicians, the military, and the press for that matter. There were a lot of guys in the press corps who didn't like Al and whom Al didn't like. . . .

He was a good companion, a good friend, a good photographer, and a good reporter.

I don't suppose I went out with him more than six times — often in intelligence operations supporting the last major American campaign of the war, Lam Son 719 and its follow up in the Ashau Valley. Lom Son 719 was winding down in March when I arrived "up country" at Phu Bai to begin my field work. There were however many North Vietnamese units in the Ashan Valley which is where most of the operations I participated in with Al took place. The others were in Laos.

The Ashau was dense triple canopy jungle with steep ravines. It was virtually impenetrable except on the trails. The trails of course led themselves to ambush by both sides, but not going on the trails meant not only travelling very slowly through the jungle, but also increased likelihood of making noise with a machete hacking a path, twigs snapped, brush disturbed, easy to follow a fresh trail.

Al was an expert on jungle warfare. He seemed to have a second sense about where and when something was happening. "Something" of course for Al was "contact." and he wanted to be there. He had the greatest contempt for other photographers and army officers who didn't like combat. I can still see him declining to go out with one unit because he disparagingly pronounced the captain leading the operation "a little gun shy." There was
heavy sarcasm in his voice, as if God would have a hard time finding a hole in hell for such a disreputable worm. It didn't occur to me at the time that being "a little gun shy" might be a rational response in an irrational world.

Al hadn't left Vietnam easily. He did three tours. Once when the Army tried to send him home, he flew from Saigon to Tokyo then in Tokyo wrangled his way on a military flight back to Saigon. He was finally discharged but in 1975 managed to get back to Asia, this time to Phnom Penh where the Khmer Rouge were in the process of assassinating nearly two million of their own people.

He was wounded 11 times in the next three years. Once when he was hit close to the heart with a grenade fragment and his chest was cut open with a Swiss army knife to massage his heart and repair the wound, he was back in the field photographing six weeks later. He possessed an uncanny survival skill, but he didn't escape without the damage of having the war always with him.

The Vietnam War was for Al simply a prologue to the insanity in Cambodia. He has continued to document the terror of the Khmer Rouge for twenty years, flying back to Bangkok then crossing the border into Cambodia whenever he could raise the money for a plane ticket, which has been practically every year since 1975. He's the only American journalist who has stayed on the Cambodian tragedy all this time. I can't forget one of his pictures of a cyclo driver hit by a mortar fragment in Phnom Penh. In the photograph a man lies on his back in the middle of a street cut in half at the waist, his legs completely blown off and not visible in the picture. A stream of blood spurts from the severed trunk. His eyes are clamped shut, his mouth squeezed in pain. In 1995 Al plans to complete his Cambodian coverage and edit a book of the pictures he made there.

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I thanked Bradley for taking time to see me and share his recollections and made my way through the maze of corridors to the elevator and the street. The sun was bright. Office
workers were outside in dresses and shirtsleeves eating their bag lunches on the stone entrance to the building or holding hot dogs and cokes on the sidewalk.

I walked to Central Park to listen to the audio tape I'd made of Bradley's comments. Not long after I settled under a tree, put on my headphones and adjusted the volume, a man leaned over me in the sun and asked what I was doing. When I told him I was working on a book about Vietnam, his eyes tightened slightly, "Were you there?" "Yeah," I replied giving my unit and year. He squatted on the grass next to me and began to free the stories that lived inside. I asked him if I could tape, he gave his assent, then drifted away to when he was an 18 year old coxswain driving a Navy landing craft.

"We always dropped them off at night. What I saw first of all was a lot of scared men. I seen guys about three, four hundred pounds scared to death, know what I mean? Cause I mean sometimes I felt that I should be in their place. It was kind of thrilling to me, being that you're in the Navy you know and the repetition of just going out, dropping them off then going back to the ship. You feel kinda like left out, you know. There was one time, one pacific (sic) day when I went to the beach and this is about the only incident I remember. The first time in my life, I was about 18 years old. I was a coxswain and I drove over there to the beach and all of a sudden there was a line of fire there, but it wasn't in my path. You could see the mortar shells and the streams hanging down there in the sky. When I landed Marines I seen a soldier on a cross like Jesus Christ right on the beach. That was about the only incident that I remember anything of. He was on the cross. He had the nails and everything hammered in his hands. When I saw that it, you know, kinda frightened me. It sent kinda chills down my back there, you know. From a distance when I was landing this was about the first sight that I've seen, you know, cause it was like they wanted you to see this guy hang up on the cross here. I don't know what they were trying to do.

"I talked to a lot a Marines by them coming back to the ship, because some of them came back to the ship wounded and everything like that. We take them to the medical ship that's out there in the fleet. And it's a lot of stories they used to tell me and some stories I
didn't believe, for instance, I don't know if you know but in the fields, in the rice paddies they
get snakes. They got very big snakes and this is one of the instances one of the Marines told
me. He says they would make bamboo type of traps there for you alright and you trigger off
the traps and the traps would just trap you and hold you, right? and then you would look down
on the ground and you would see snakes comin' right up the bamboo cage. This guy was
telling me that these snakes attacked and when they got going on an individual, I mean first of
all they strangle you to death. This was one of the incidents I've heard from the Marines.

"My tour in Vietnam was total hell because I never knew when one of those shells was
going to hit me. I never knew. I guess that my praying and everything did that, but one thing
about Vietnam was the morale of people, the morale you know. When you came back when
the fighting was temporarily ended there and you went to a town and everything like that there
and we're talking about sailors goin' to a specific town where you had marines fightin' in the
jungle, but they took a break and they were goin' drinking like that and there used to be a lot of
fights with Marines and sailors because the Marines felt the sailors wasn't out there
participating. The sailors was anchored out there just - they called us pussies and the Army,
too. They called us the cowards and we were only doin' our job, they called us cowards.

"When I came back I felt a little proud when I first came back then after I started to each
and every day I started to walk around and all of a sudden the pride started to be, you know,
people were like, you know, "you can't be too proud," because this was after a while, you
know. "You can't be too proud because you didn't win."

"I still feel a little affected by it because a lot of the Marines I picked up off the beach
are walking around today with one leg, one arm, one eye, both eyes blind, know what I mean?
When I see 'em out here on the street, you know, civilians, I look at them and I sorta reenact
what happened and things like that. I can imagine what happened to 'em and I say to myself, I
says, you know, was it worth it? Which I don't think it was worth it. I think Vietnam was a
total waste of time.
"I found myself going to a job and I'd put down on an application Vietnam Vet and I felt that by me putting down Vietnam Vet I felt that whatever application I filled out I felt that I was supposed to have first preference and I put down Vietnam Vet and I found myself being turned down for jobs, I mean you know, regular jobs. It was like people were like, you know, I guess because they didn't feel we won the war.

"When I was going to jobs it was like well, 'you guys didn't win.' You started hearing that 'you guys didn't win. You went over there you let the fucking Viet Cong do this to you, do that to you.'

"I don't care who you are, you're not going to have the same mind if you go in constantly fearing for your life you will never have the same mind when you come home. Never. I don't care how strong you think you are, you'll never be the same. Never. When you're constantly fearing for your life, that's no joke.

"Right now I'm going through some very trying times in my life, you know, I'm going through, even though the Vietnam era was way back, kinda far, as far, you know as the past tense, but the effect is still there in me emotionally. I'll always be disturbed, emotionally.

"The love that I used to have I don't have any more. It takes a while for me to adjust to love now. It takes a while for me to see people as people because I'm so self conscious of myself, self conscious of, I felt like I did somethin' wrong with the Vietnam war. I felt like I did something wrong.

"Right now I'm going through a little homelessness and things like that and the government's not really helpin' me the way he should help me. I still have my legs and everything but still what if I didn't have my legs? I don't feel the government should treat us the way he's treating us. I don't think no Vietnam veteran should be homeless on the street.

"Something happens to you psychologically. You're never the same. Never. You're constantly in fear of your life every day. It's like me being 18 years old and I wake up the next day, boom I'm in Vietnam. I'm, in Saigon, you know, all of a sudden, you know, I have to transport these Marines and I have to, you know, and and and I'm risking my life and things
like that and I can die and the Captain is tellin' me this, you know, 'We're going to put you out there, but listen be careful and everything like that. You can die. You can get killed.' It was like you constantly seein' people brought back to the boat with missin' ligaments (sic) and everything like that. It was scary to you. But it was like you didn't want to show it, you wanted to be a proud American, you know you wanted to get on there, 'well yeah Captain,' you know, but all the time you shakin'. You want to be tough in front of their eyes, but deep down inside I seen the toughest cry down. I seen the toughest, I seen two hundred and fifty pound guys cry. I seen 'em cry like babies. Vietnam was no joke, man, let me tell you that.

"In life I did have things goin' for me at one time, but I don't know what it was, but it's like I said emotionally I'm a little disturbed there, you know, because the job I had and things like that there, you know, and these people knew I was a Vietnam Vet and everything like that, you know, and I felt like they were pickin' on me, things like that, you know, and I started drinkin' and things like that and that didn't help so I stopped drinkin' and I still went to the job sober, but at one point I was going to the job drunk.

"Right now I'm getting an emotional disability check, but I went through a divorce and the whole check goes to my two kids. I only get like $600 a month and that goes to my two kids. So I don't see that, but when my kids get eighteen, you know, then the check comes back to me. So, it's one of those things. So I figure I sacrifice for my two kids, you know, because I did fight the war. You know what I mean, for my two kids to be able to walk around in liberty, justice for all, and stand up for what the Constitution teaches."

That was what he said. Then he gathered himself up. I gave him some money. We shook hands. And the man who called himself Bill Smith disappeared among the joggers and lunch break walkers.
Drained after talking with Bill Smith, I walked back to the entrance of Central Park and down Eighth Ave. A cluster of Thai restaurants kept me thinking of Vietnam. In the evening I was to see Miss Saigon which I thought might refresh memories of night life in Vietnam. I had
relished opportunities to put aside my military duties and uniform and to wander along the
dock, have tea with Madame Julie, or strawberry tarts at the patisserie across from the
Continental Palace, to walk among the rich display of black market goods arrayed on
downtown sidewalks.

At night the escape from the military was more intense. Brightened by both neon and
colored paper lanterns, energized by marijuana, opium and gin and fired by eager young
women working in bars, the night was an attraction to which we were pulled, Vietnamese and
Americans. Money, intoxication, music, and sex combined in an opalescent swirl which
seemed to float through the streets like an evening fog.

When I took my plush theater seat in New York I was unprepared for the impact of
memories I had thought of as fading. Special theater tour buses had unloaded cheerful
suburbanites clutching their programs and comfortably talking about the perfect spring
weather, the show, the substitute of one singer for another in the program notes. My program
was rolled up and clutched in my damp palm. I could practically have stayed another night at
the hotel for the cost of this ticket. I was skeptical that a glitzy musical theater production could
touch me. I wasn't sure I wanted to see Vietnam turned into Oklahoma! But when the curtain
went up I returned in a time warp jolt to the night time world of Saigon bars. A glint of blue
light. Vietnamese rock bands playing The Doors and Led Zeppelin. Dancing miniskirted
women in gogo boots, their long black hair flying behind them. Strobe lights freezing their
spangled and fringed costumes. The room not bright enough to read a menu, and an amazing
property of the black light—tonic water glowing the most beautiful pale blue. I used to love
simply holding tall, narrow gin and tonics and not drinking, mesmerized by their
phosphorescent glow.

Among the various bars I had gone to the Catacomb Emporium drifted up from
memory most clearly. I wish I'd photographed there but I remember I didn't because my
camera might have made me bait for thieves.
The mood of the Catacomb was sweeter than the raucous bar scenes in *Miss Saigon*. There were polished mahogany veneer panels on the walls, a long black marble bar, mirrors behind the bar with shelves of neatly stacked glasses. The women, bar girls to us then, could be heard above the sound system playing Pink Floyd, The Who, The Doors, Quicksilver Messenger Service. They were so pretty in their short silk dresses, sitting in our laps barely able to speak English. They were visions of beauty in the midst of filth and smells of rotten garbage and raw sewage, people sleeping in gutters, or in homes made of flattened beer cans or pieces of cardboard stitched together with scraps of wire. The Catacomb was a refuge where I went as often as I could afford it — usually several times a week.

One night Chuck brought in his entire month’s pay, plopped it down, surrounded with squealing, giggling women. He said, "This is for everyone, just be nice to me this month" and that for the rest of the month he had a different woman every night. He was Prince of the Catacombs. The women were so struck by the nobility of his gesture that long after the money ran out he was treated with special favors.

But after that month, Chuck began to go to the Catacombs less frequently. He had fallen in love with a Vietnamese secretary in the MACV Headquarters building where he and I worked. He visited her home. Her parents surprisingly liked him. They planned to get married. The army, however, anticipating such romances as the war was winding down, created a bureaucratic obstacle course. Chuck couldn’t get all the forms completed before his departure date. She was wonderful and they loved each other very much. Chuck went back to the States. He planned to return. It was sad for everyone in the office especially the other Vietnamese women who were deeply moved by tragic love stories.

Chuck was discharged shortly after he returned to the States. He was an attractive young single man with a quiet charm. He went to parties. He began to date. It wasn’t long before he met Judy and a few months later they were engaged. I was an usher at their wedding. When I moved to New Mexico I lost track of Chuck. Years later I heard that he and Judy were divorced. It’s been over twenty years since I last saw Chuck, but walking back to
my hotel after the performance I remembered him again and the joy I saw in his face when he was with My Lin.

37. This is the Picture

In July, 1992, I drove six hours across Maryland to Lady Borton's farm house in southeast Ohio. Lady was a health care worker with a Quaker relief organization in Vietnam in 1971. She has become an outspoken activist on behalf of Vietnam in the subsequent years. She has written a book about her experiences, Sensing the Enemy, 1984, pieces for the New
York Times Sunday Magazine as well as pieces for National Public Radio. Every other year for the eight years she organized a summer gathering for others working on Vietnam related issues. I met Lady through one of her former students, Patti White who wrote and co-produced my AIDS film. Patti thought Lady and I would enjoy meeting each other. She was tight. I think Lady respected my stubbornness about bringing my book to fruition and I respected her simple life and her dedication to the people of Vietnam.

The green rolling countryside and the stifling heat reminded us all of Vietnam. Since I was camping out my memories of Vietnam were enhanced by sleeping in a small tent in a field at the edge of a tree line and by a violent rainstorm reminiscent of the drenching monsoon rains that poured over Vietnam.

One evening we stood on Lady's porch talking and enjoying the rain pounding the tin roof above us and turning the country lane to mud. In an odd way, it felt like the veranda of the Continental Palace in Saigon. As I went to sleep that night with the rain still tapping on my backpacker's tent, I felt comforted and encouraged to continue this exploration of my past in Vietnam.

The next morning still soggy, we gathered for breakfast. Others planned a trip to a nearby lake. Not being a party to shared memories of the other participants, I was drawn to Ohio University library a few miles away in Athens. When I settled in the lounge of the library with a cup of coffee I started to speculate about what it was I had been doing in Vietnam. I had recently seen Lost Images of War, a BBC documentary shown on the PBS series Point of View, which dealt with freelance photojournalists covering the war in Afghanistan. One of the characters was a British television journalist who accompanied an Afghan rebel group on an ambush. We see the journalist's tape showing the approach of a small soviet tank up a narrow mountain road. He shows us the rebels firing their anti-tank bazooka which hits the tanks and stops it in a shower of flames. The cameraperson walks closer and a few moments later a Soviet soldier struggles out of the turret and stumbles off the tank. Then he notices the photographer and starts crawling toward him, his hand extended, and his eyes piteously
seeking help. The photographer zooms in tight on the man's terror stricken face and keeps recording the scene. His voice over says that the man's face would continue to haunt him forever.

My purpose is not to condemn the photographer, but to attend more closely to what is forbidden. The photographer has a "reason" to indulge our secret fantasy of watching death overcome a living human face. This is the ultimate picture. From the bodies of the Crimean War in 1856 and the American Civil War, there has been a rich history of photographs of the dead and dying. Such pictures seem to hold more fascination than those of the living, but we feel guilty looking at them.

Often our first reaction as we pour over the images is to criticize the depraved morals of the photographer who made them. Yet we have made the photographer our panderer who has brought us "something unusual and interesting" as proprietors of victorian whore houses said with lascivious smiles to describe what is beyond the bound of propriety, perhaps an "adventure with beautiful young boys" or with "especially talented little girls." Of course the images are obscene, but still we look in horror, unable to remove our gaze from the survivors of Nazi death camps, execution pictures of criminals, gangland murders, and highway crash victims. Isn't it to feed this obsession that the 11:00 pm news so frequently begins with "a 27 year old woman/man was stabbed today..." followed by pictures of lights flashing on police cars, a body being wheeled on a gurney and perhaps a blood stain on concrete. Blood on asphalt is worthless because it can't be seen by the TV camera. But before we condemn "the media", let us examine our own lust for these images.

For it is our lust for the forbidden images of death that causes them to be made, that cause the photographers to risk and sometimes lose their lives to secure them as the British photographer did when he was killed in Afghanistan shortly after his sensational images were broadcast on the BBC.

Richard Seltzer in Mortal Lessons: Notes in the Art of Surgery, describes the shock of his first encounter as a surgeon with seeing that which we should not see, in his case the
interior of the human body laid open by the scalpel. He soon learned to manage his feelings and become interested in developing the skill of technical proficiency. So, too, the photographer becomes used to the scenes of horror which may provide his living, but he or she continues to photograph such scenes also for the adrenaline rush. They are as compelling for the makers as for the viewers, actually they are far more compelling and once a photographer has developed a taste for this kind of work, it is very difficult to then photograph politicians, scientists, poets. They seem so dull and flat.

Again I don't condemn, I have felt this attraction myself and I think in retrospect it is a natural, if unexamined attitude. It was toward the end of my field work in Vietnam when the opportunity came for me to photograph a distraught mother holding her napalmed baby. something gave way inside me and I no longer felt the lust. She was sobbing and screaming. She wanted the world to know what had been done to her baby. There were good journalistic reasons to make the picture, I just couldn't do it. She passed me lost in her grief. I remembered the rule I had been taught - you had to arrive at a scene of violence within approximately 15 minutes or grief would no longer show on faces. I knew this was no longer work I could do with the enthusiasm and persistence it takes to be excellent.

I still refuse to settle this argument. The British photographer's Afghan film helped to show viewers in human terms both what war is like as well as tell the story of what was going on in Afghanistan, just as equally horrible pictures from Vietnam contributed to the United States withdrawal.

But there is another aspect of this work that deserves to be considered. Despite the lust that draws us to watch suffering and death is the possibility of transformation it offers. It is possible to be graced by death, as it is by birth.

Some years after returning from Vietnam I visited my father, immobilized by Parkinson's disease. My mother had not told me that my father was near death. She didn't believe he was. She had been taking care of him as he slowly declined over eight years and assumed his recent refusal to eat was temporary, the result of the flu. Dad couldn't talk. He
had lost one third of his body weight. He couldn't get out of bed. His skin was soft and clammy, and his bones were steadily stiffening from the disease.

Mother ordered me to feed him some soup she had been unable to get him to swallow. I held Dad up and poured a tablespoon of soup between his clenched teeth. Half dribbled down his stubbled chin, the other half went into his mouth and he choked and coughed. I put the spoon aside. I held his hand and told him I loved him. He smiled so sweetly at me I felt I was in the presence of an angel. I felt such love and harmony that later I was astonished—my relationship with my father had always been rocky and rebellious.

The experience at my father's death was almost identical with what I felt as I for the first time photographed a childbirth. The coldness of the operating room, the baby coming in pain covered with blood and amniotic fluid, shrivelled up, looking oddly like a corpse, all these couldn't obscure the radiance of the moment. A nurse scooped fluid from the baby's mouth and lightly slapped its back. Suddenly it squealed as if it were irritated at being disturbed from a good dream.

In both these cases my presence was requested so I did not confront the feeling of violation the journalist encounters as a professional burden. I did, however, feel a strong desire to practice my trade. The childbirth I was asked to photograph was one of my peak experiences as a photographer. I believe photographers are drawn to war from a yearning to be present at stupendous moments. Within our craving fixation with death and injury is the knowledge that something important is going on, something at the limits of human experience. The feeling of obscenity, of the forbidden partly validated that assumption of importance. Unfortunately, war photographs substitute horror and fascination for a larger human understanding. We yearn for illumination and rightfully feel betrayed when all we receive instead are pictures of violence and abuse. Patti also came to Lady's that weekend, bringing her two sons, Timmy and Trevor, and her business partner Michael with whom she was developing a film idea based on Lady's life. When I returned from the library that evening I played football with Timmy and Trevor while a Vietnamese feast was prepared by Mrs. Xuan.
Lan Nguyen. Lady told me Mrs. Xuan's father had been a mandarin in the Imperial Court at Hue. I hoped to talk with her about the experience I had at the tomb of Minh Mang. However, she was so busy with cooking that she was unable to answer my questions so I asked permission to write to her a letter. She encouraged me so when I got back to Annapolis I wrote asking her about the colors of a mandarin costume, whether the emperor was likely to have spent time in his garden before his death and anything she could tell me about court life. Due to an illness, Mrs. Xuan Lan asked her daughter to answer my letter. She wrote:

"Before I went to the United States in 1989, in order to understand our language and culture, I had studied in Han-Viet, ancient Chinese that is pronounced in Vietnamese (this special language had been used in Vietnam as an official language, in offices, schools, and literature before the 20th century). In 1987, my teacher took my class to Hue and taught us the meanings of poems, words, statements, etc., that were carved on pagodas, temples, imperial tombs, and palaces. Our group traveled by boat up the Perfume river to visit Linh Mu Pagoda, Emperor Gia-Long's tomb, and Emperor Minh-Mang's tomb. We also rode bicycles to Emperor Tu-Duc's, Emperor Khai-Dinh's, Emperor Thieu-Tri's, pagodas, and so on. Recalling my emotions in front of the "architectural poetry" and the special spiritual silence at those beautiful places, I think I can partially understand your feelings when you stood behind fan-shaped windows looking across a lake and gardens at the tomb of Emperor Minh Mang.

"I really appreciate your interest in the beauty of my country. However, I am very sorry that I can't help you at all. What you asked my mother were the facts and events that I knew only through verbal and nonverbal communications with my people and teachers, not from documents or books. When I grew up and became mature enough to strongly desire to learn about our culture, my country suffered a painful historic change. We have lacked everything, especially books and knowledge. What you wanted to write about will help introduce my country to American people, and I think those facts need to be accurate or withdrawn from trustworthy references, such as valuable books or respectful scholars. In California, there are some former famous Vietnamese publishers such as Van-Nghe; many
Vietnamese books were translated into English; and many well-known Vietnamese scholars are living in the United States. In addition, the last Nguyen Emperor, Bao Dai, along with his family is living in France. If you want to get exact information about my country's history, I suggest you contact them.

"I am glad that you visited Emperor Minh-Mang's tomb. I also stood behind the fan-shaped windows of the Pavilion of Light, wondering what the emperor felt when he stood there enjoying a moonlit night. Did you visit other imperial tombs and compare the differences among them, especially the differences in your feelings towards their differences? Emperor Minh-Mang was one of the respectful emperors of my country. Because he built the Imperial Citadel, his tomb and the Citadel reflect the same ideal and spirit. As you may recall, the buildings, the lakes, the bridges, and other structures of the Citadel and his tombs, from the gate to the real tomb, were built basically on straight lines. His ideal as an emperor should be great honesty different from the ideal of his grandson, Emperor Tu-Duc, that should be modesty. Emperor Minh-Mang must have believed (sic) that with honesty, justice, and intelligence, a great emperor could bring peaceful, harmonious, and happy life to his people. My teacher told us that his ideal could be understood through these statements, (honest, open, moderate, truly peaceful), that were carved in front of the Palace of Full Peace of the Citadel. I don't think I am able to correctly translate the statements and the names carved in the imperial tombs and palaces into English. They reflect each emperor's ideal and philosophy, that were strongly affected by "Yi Ching" and many ancient Chinese philosophers. Most of the tombs of the Nguyen Emperors were not only a place to bury the emperor after he died but also a private place where the Emperor spent days, weeks, or months whenever he wanted to feel relaxed and to enjoy the beauty of his country. I think each tomb is also of one of the poems created by the emperor himself.

"Even though the Vietnamese culture and the Chinese culture are originated from or affected by the same sources, we the Vietnamese are quite different from the Chinese. We
express our feelings, ideas, and experiences in different ways. I think Beijing and Hue must be very different. Even though we were invaded by Chinese for about 1000 years, our ancestors managed to make us mentally independent on China by reading Chinese characters in Vietnamese (Han-Viet) and creating the written Vietnamese language (Chu Nom), that was transformed into our current language. Since Han-Viet used to be the main written language taught in schools, many poets created poems in Han-Viet, but many others also created poems in Chu Nom. Do you know that in every examination to select mandarins, the main subject was always literature. From elementary schools to high schools to colleges, students learned how to write poems and essays. Students taking national exams for the BS, MS or PhD. degree in all majors were required to write poems and essays. That explains why mandarins, who had passed the exams were usually talented poets and vice versa.

"The Nguyen emperors and mandarins wore Vietnamese silk dresses, called traditional ao dai, usually in colors (red, blue, green, etc.), that you could see some bridegrooms wear in Vietnamese customary weddings. Before 1975, you must have seen Vietnamese women wear ao dai whenever they went out of their house, to school, to work, to church, to pagoda, to friend's house, and even to the market. Ao dai for men were shorter, wider, and usually in silk black. In Vietnam, ao dai for emperors, queens, princes, princesses, mandarins, men and women, the poor and the rich, all have had the same basic style; only materials and colors are different (e.g., yellow clothes used to be worn only by the imperial families).

"Please allow me to stop here, sir. I am glad that I have a chance to talk to you about my country. Thank you for reading this long letter. Even though this letter must not help you at all and is already too long, don't you know that I still keep thinking of my country and still want to share those thoughts? That is because I miss my people and my country so much. The day that I can return to where I belong is very distant. At first, I have to study before I can do something for my people. In addition, I am thirsty for knowledge and freedom, at least the freedom of thought and expressing thought.
Again, please forgive me for writing this letter too late. I am looking forward to reading your book very soon. I wish you and your family much health and happiness.

Best wishes,

Doan Hanh-Noan"
Before I went to the field, Friday or Saturday nights at Long Binh often were occasions for psychedelic alternatives to the suffocating presence of Vietnam. These times provided momentary relief from incarceration in a bulldozed red dirt sauna surrounded by concertina wire.

These flights were liberating and while largely recreational, occasionally became significant in important ways. Two experiences stand out. One was an unusual out of body travel experience in which I was standing next to a friend in his room and while looking at a record album cover slipped into a reverie for the course of the album and found myself meeting my friend coming out of the subway at 59th and Madison in New York. As I came out of the subway I spotted him and smiled. Not willing to talk and perhaps burst the bubble of the fantasy, he winked and walked past me. I remember walking to 5th Ave. turning left walking by the Plaza and going into FAO Schwartz, the mega toy store. The album finished and I felt myself return to Vietnam. I looked over at my friend and said, "I've just had the most amazing experience. What have you been thinking about?"

"Well, first of all New York, then running into you at the 59th Street subway station." I can't remember my response, but "Far out!" would probably be close. While the implication of such travel could have been unsettling, I chose not to think about it and it was not repeated. There was, however, another experience I chose not to examine at the time, but which has remained with me and has become more significant in recent years.

Like my out of body travel adventure, this one was also LSD assisted and took place on a hot Saturday night at Long Binh.

Sitting on a blanket in the dirt outside the corrugated metal "hootch" where my bunk remained an oven until late in the evening, I was listening to Pink Floyd's *Atom, Heart, Mother*. I lay back on the blanket and looked up at the clear night sky. I must have drifted off because sometime later I opened my eyes and noticed that the blanket was circled by six wild dogs. This was unusual because dogs were a delicacy in Vietnam, but they were known to run in packs. I'd even heard stories of an American officer killed in Saigon by a pack of wild
dogs. I was frightened when I looked at their red eyes and mangy bodies spotted with sores. But they didn't move and soon I began to relax. Then I felt I was receiving a message from them, a kind of greeting. I returned it and looked each of them in the eyes. Then I felt very tired and lay back on the blanket and closed my eyes. When I opened them again, the dogs were gone.

It was a clear night and I was able to see many stars. They seemed more beautiful and closer than I'd ever seen them. Then I observed an interesting effect. Here and there I saw a star go out. This, too, became part of the beauty and I was not overly worried. Some time later, however, I noticed that many stars had gone out. There were large dark gaps in the sky. The sky was still clear and there were no clouds. I was uneasy and as I saw more and more extinguish I began to worry what would happen when they all went out.

This seemed a question I had to solve before the sky became completely black. As the final stars were vanishing it came to me that I had to face my own fears of obliteration. As this realization blossomed and I accepted my own extinction, the sky cracked open and through the jagged opening I floated up into a brilliant sun drenched space above a beautiful mountain valley. A stream wandered along the valley's floor. Floating in a space above the valley was the gigantic figure of a man. His arms were spread over the valley and because I accepted annihilation I had caused the sky to crack and thus was connected to this beautiful figure. He and I were one. I was overwhelmed by a feeling of spiritual blessing. The wasr was over. Peace was at hand. Much later, I was able to sleep and woke up the next morning in some shock to find I was still in Vietnam. The vision was too large for me to grasp, so I put it away.

A year and a half after returning from Vietnam in 1971 I went to graduate school at the University of New Mexico and took hiking trips in northern New Mexico with friends. A favorite camping place was a box canyon north of Chama. We visited several times in the autumn when the aspen leaves turned the valley and mountain sides yellow.

In 1982 I was teaching English and photography at Western State College in Gunnison, Colorado. My secon wife, Marcy, was an experienced backpacker and I thought I'd impress
her by taking her to see the Chama Canyon. We started from the parking area by a stream at 8,500 feet and then hiked six miles into the valley gaining 2,000 feet in elevation. The last part of the hike was brutal, gaining 1,000 feet in a mile of steep switchbacks on an abandoned cattle trail.

It seemed insane to do this hike in one day, but we only had a long weekend for the whole trip. My knees turned to putty. I stumbled along the trail. This was worse than basic training. I hardly noticed the view. Marcy, however, was inspired, fueled by an inexhaustible source of energy, she kept me moving. "We can camp at the top," she said cheerfully. I remembered crawling up a muddy hillside in Vietnam in the middle of the night and collapsing when our unit was so totally lost it was pointless to go farther. We made it to the top of the ridge at the head of the valley just before sunset and threw up the tent. In an exhausted daze I looked across the view that wowed Marcy.

It was summer as I remember the intense mosquitoes. The next day we moved our campsite to be near a lake just over the ridge. Mosquitoes continued to pester us that afternoon and early evening. We decided to keep moving by taking a walk past the lake. We climbed on a 12,000 foot ridge that connected several mountains. We were about 500 feet above the tree line, so as we walked away from the lake and the valley, we walked directly onto the southern branch of the Rocky Mountains. Having spent most of the previous day hiking through a forest that covered much of the valley, it was unsettling to walk so in the open and at such elevation that it was easily possible to see mountain peaks over 75 miles away. It felt like we had been teleported into the Alps. The mosquitoes left us alone as we walked further and the light faded. We stopped for a few minutes at one particularly breathtaking view. Several mountains still covered with snow at their peaks rose above the others.

Across a chasm on a ledge to our left I noticed a slight movement. Scanning the rocks I saw nothing move, then I spotted a grey fur tail and the husky body of a large coyote, frozen, staring directly at us. I locked eyes with him for I don't know how long. There was a magical
quality to this moment at the light began to fade. It became hard to distinguish his features or separate him from the background, but I never lost contact with his green incandescent eyes.

This wasn't the only clue on the trip which should have alerted me to the special connection I had with this place. The following day on the return hike down the mountain, I had a flashback. As we walked through a patch of ice plants I found myself looking at the ground for two pound test fishing line used for trip wires to set off mines. I knew my eyes were not experienced enough to notice a tiny monofilament fishing line among the thick leaves and bushes along the trail. Suddenly the knowledge hit me that there were no trip wires on hiking trails in New Mexico. Tears of joy flowed down my cheeks as I unhooked my pack and flopped in the grass looking up at a cloudless mountain sky.

Not until writing this in 1992 did I finally realize that the Chama Box Canyon may have been the valley I saw in my vision. As soon as I made the connection, I knew I had to go back.

It was an unusual premise for a trip, a 21 year old moment of grace still etched in memory. Due to a bout of Legionnaire's disease in 1985 I lost a third of my lung capacity, so I wondered if I'd be able to breathe at 11,000 feet, to say nothing of the six mile hike into the valley from the trailhead. I had intended this as a solo adventure, but as I thought more about it, I had to recognize that I was afraid. I asked my partner, Sandy, to join me. She agreed and was enthusiastic while I had more and more doubts. Was this a wise trip for a couple of middle aged flatlanders?

If we were going to do this trip, it made sense to prepare. Each afternoon for three weeks we slung on our fully loaded backpacks and hiked three miles around the Naval Academy. We got some stares - my favorite was a midshipman jogging over a wooden bridge as we were crossing the other way. He evidently thought we were hippies left over from the sixties who planned to protest war on the Academy grounds. He waved a split fingered "V" known in the sixties as the peace sign. I couldn't think of anything appropriately sixties to say, so I just smiled and waved back.
We went over every item we planned to carry to cut the weight down a few ounces here and there. Our plan was to make camp at 9,000 feet for a day to acclimate to the altitude. The next day we would begin our hike into the box canyon.

Despite afternoon rains, our preparation paid off. While heavy, our packs were manageable. We slept well the first night and were eager as well as anxious about the next leg of the journey. As rain clouds began to build up late in the afternoon of the second day, we found a campsite. We'd hiked all day going just four miles but with 1,000 feet of elevation. The third day we tried for the peak. As we reached the head of the valley and I again saw the stream running through its center and the leaves green with summer bloom, I knew for sure this was the spot that I had envisioned years ago. We found the mountain trail and began the ascent. Fortunately we carried only day packs, but our pace was still very slow. Gradually we came out above the trees and I could look back into the valley. This was the place.

We continued to climb until we reached the highest overlook above the valley, about 11,400 feet according to our maps. Tired, we sat on some rocks for a quick lunch. Amazingly my breath came back to me easily. I had no problem breathing on the climb, other than normal fatigue in making a steep high elevation ascent.

Clouds were building above the mountain and I thought we should start down to avoid getting caught on the mountain in the afternoon storm. First Sandy photographed me with the valley in the background, then we started down.
I talked to my friend Ric Haynes in Boston yesterday. It was New Year's Day and it felt good to be in contact. He's an artist and an art therapist. He told me that several Crow Indian therapists had visited him recently. They worked as he did with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD in veterans. This disorder defies the logic of common sense which says the pain of old wounds fades away with time. That may be true with love affairs, but for women who have been raped or for those who have undergone life threatening stress, the impacts don't go away; they may actually get stronger, as many World War II veterans are now recognizing. The Crow therapists had those in their groups making bows and arrows. At first it seemed strange to have those traumatized by the war making weapons, but thinking about it made sense. The veterans could certainly connect bows and arrows with meaningful activity they had experienced as well as with the traditions of their culture in which being a warrior is honored. Ric's story stayed in my mind. I, too, have tried to find ways to honor my experience as a warrior without apology or defense. Hence my marching in Annapolis Memorial Day parades, and re-ordering the medals I had coming but which I threw away when I got off the plane from Vietnam at Travis Air Base.

In addition to replacing medals, I've participated in dances for veterans held at Native American pow wows at Deep Creek Lake in western Maryland. At first I felt odd participating in a ritual from a different culture. Yet I felt a powerful sense of honor and pride, stronger than at many traditional veteran's functions. After the completion of the veteran's dance, the tribal master of ceremonies would step forward and shake hands with every participant whether white or Indian. Many Indians turned and shook my hand as well. There was a firmness in those handshakes that I haven't forgotten. To have been a soldier is to feel a tie across our cultures. Who else do I have a bond with as a Vietnam veteran?
40. Lost Warriors

Last week I was struck with asthma for the first time in over 30 years. The frightening constriction of breathing has removed the daily clutter from my mind. A day in the emergency room hooked to an IV convinced me to obey orders to go home and stay in bed for four days or return to the hospital. I’ve also been working on another film. This one is about homeless veterans. I was drawn to the subject when I met documentary producer Jim Forsher at a conference on Vietnam. I wanted to see what happened to the war as it made a transition into the academic world.

I told Jim about meeting Bill Smith in Central Park. He convinced me that there was a film in the material. This documentary, Lost Warriors, has brought me to thinking about Vietnam in different ways than simply plumbing the depths of my memory. It involved flying to Boston and spending the Memorial Day weekend visiting the New England Shelter for Homeless Veterans. At first I was afraid to visit people who I imagined were so different from me, then I was shocked to discover how comfortable I felt talking with them. During a ceremony inside the shelter a color guard marched into the common area and on command fired their rifles. I stood next to them recording the scene on video tape. The smell of cordite cut the years as swiftly as a sharp knife slitting the gut of a stream caught trout. Basic training on the rifle range at Ft. Lewis, Washington, came back to me as well as cold, foggy mornings marching across the bridge over route one to the range in the sand dunes at Ft. Ord.

There was no longer any separation between me and the middle aged men around me. They were my brothers and they always would be. The connection could never be shed. It was permanent. Just as there was no “getting over” Vietnam so there was no “outgrowing” these men. I had wanted to put them behind me. I had seen these homeless veterans as losers, but in that rifle shot I saw the loser in myself. Sadness welled in my eyes.

So today an autumn rain beats against the windows and I’m thinking of theses things and thankful to be working this film. Breathing slowly and wheezing I’m also thinking of mortality and reading I Can’t Get Over This, a book on post traumatic stress disorder, one of...
the major impacts on the lives of homeless veterans. The self diagnosis questions sorted themselves out, like the rifle shots in the shelter. I, too, have PTSD. Therapy, a men's group, and 12 step programs have diminished its influence in my life, yet it amazes me that I never suspected I had it. I was too smart, a good survivor. Sure, I had a job or several jobs. I am in a relationship now, but there were four unsuccessful ones which preceeded it. I have lived in five states in the twenty-three years since I've been back from Vietnam. And now finally I can accept that I am not so different from the homeless veterans who are the "subjects" of the film I am working on. Somehow it seems like a cosmic joke. I ended up making a film about myself.

41. Fear Comes Home
I've been looking at fear differently in the last few years. For example, I remember football practice in the fall of 1962 at the Gunnery School in Washington, Connecticut. My roommate junior year, Chris Armstrong, convinced me to go out for the varsity football team, even though I had no chance of making it. He convinced me I'd get in better shape coming back to school several weeks early in the fall and thus do better on the junior varsity team when I was inevitably cut. A good strategy, perhaps for a more serious athlete, but I was more interested in photographing varsity games than playing in the j.v. games.

I took Chris' advice and in a way I'm glad I did. It helped prepare me for basic training. Varsity tackling practice brought me into a daily encounter with fear. The players would form a gauntlet and one of the backs would run the gauntlet and one of the defensive players would run towards him and make the tackle. Occasionally the back would break the tackle to the humiliation of the tackler. I was more determined to avoid humiliation than to learn how to tackle, so when it was my turn I faced my opponent and ran into him and hung on until he fell, frequently on my head. Team mates would venture comments on my courage while joking about my technique. I usually had a headache for hours after practice. I can still remember the fear of facing the gauntlet and having no idea what to do, but run, hang on, fall and get slammed in the head.

In Vietnam fear was different. I felt it throughout my body. My pulse pounded. My breath came in quick, short gulps. My mind warped with paranoid fantasies at some times, reruns of old World War II movies (it looks bad now, but in just seconds hundreds of choppers will be swarming out of the sky to save our asses just time for a commercial.)

On every patrol I imagined sniper shots ahead on the trail, or every so many steps I'd feel with absolute certainty that the next one would trip a wire too fine for me to see or my foot would feel the sickening click of an armed mine that would explode when I lifted my foot for the succeeding step. Usually I went into the field with experienced units looking for contact. I felt a bit like that boy at football practice. I didn't know what to look for, but I wanted to photograph and I didn't want to be humiliated, so I tried to insulate myself from fear. I
imagined my leg being blown off, or being hit with bullets. I repeated the Plains Indian warrior's prayer, "Today is a good day to die" over and over.

Incredibly, I was successful in facing fear. Somehow my ritual of fantasizing disaster allowed me to put one foot in front of the other and keep some attention on the trail I was following to not lose the man in front of me. When I remember dangerous moments, they recur to me as images - accidentally crossing a mine field, walking behind a helicopter rotor, feeling the rush of air and realizing that I came within inches of walking into the spinning but invisible rear rotor. When I recall these scenes they appear as fragments without a feeling of horror or danger. They are simply pictures in my mind.

I would like to say that over time the real fears of these and other moments in Vietnam have come back to me, but that hasn't happened. Instead, several years ago I started noticing new fears spring up. The first one I remember was about seven years ago when I moved to Florida for a few years. I began to be terrified by snakes.

True, my mother had been afraid of snakes, but as a boy I had been fascinated with them in zoos. I remember going on a Boy Scout rattlesnake hunt. We only saw one snake, I'm not sure if it even was a rattlesnake, but I recall an excited tension of adventure. Once in Vietnam I encountered a snake on the walk I took back to my barracks at MACV. It was late at night and I had been drinking. There were still puddles in the mud from the afternoon rain. I stopped when I saw a snake slowly crawling across my path. It wasn't very big. It looked damaged. In my haze I bent over to take a closer look. It didn't coil or pay any attention to me; it just kept crawling toward the bushes. In my own diminished state of mind I had what seemed a flash of wit: 'In this country even the snakes are fucked up.'

However, when I moved to Florida in 1985, I developed a full blown phobia. Walking with my wife in the evening along rural roads we'd sometimes come across small snakes in the road and I would be unable to move, frozen in my fear, my heart pounding. At times I thought I would have a heart attack. One night the fear hit me when we encountered a dark two
foot snake writhing on the asphalt after being run over by a car. That fear is still with me although it has lessened appreciably.

A few years later I developed a fear of flying. I have always loved to fly and I especially enjoyed photographing from helicopters in Vietnam. But several years ago I found myself panicked on a commercial airliner. That fear lasted for about a year, then it, too, dissolved just as mysteriously as it appeared.

A third phobia developed in Florida: a fear of being with unfamiliar people. This one not only made it hard for me to travel, but made it very uncomfortable to even visit a shopping mall. That one has also largely evaporated in roughly the same time period as the others. I was beginning a time of free fall that included the death of both my parents, another divorce, an affair, and leaving teaching which had been my profession for thirteen years.

I began therapy and work on Mending Hearts. That film introduced me to people living in the close proximity of death who were maintaining relationships and even enjoying their lives on the days when they felt well. Over the months and gradually years I began to trust myself again.

Friends thought I was becoming too placid. To me it felt like I was riding a wave through mid-life, noticing the turbulent feelings passing through me, being less anxious over times of depression, learning that even in times of boredom I could face the challenge of not running away. In earlier years it seemed that I was standing on the shore and being pounded by breaker after breaker - dramatic and exciting but debilitating and disorienting as well.

Fear itself had begun to change. Take for example the trip to the valley in Northern New Mexico I spoke of earlier. While the experience of the valley was one of ecstatic recognition, the hike out was very different. As we descended from the 11,000 foot cliffs at the top of the valley to the floor at about 10,000 feet and from there to the slow walk with 30 pound packs down a gradually descending six mile trail.

We were making good time. I was already imagining a soak in a hotel tub. Along the descent, however, I lost the trail. It gradually became apparent that we were walking uphill
instead of down. I simply pushed harder to keep up the pace. I remembered some uphills on the return, but finally I admitted to myself and then to Sandy, "I think we're off the trail." I suggested we go ahead since I had no idea where I had made the mistake until we had backtracked a lot of trail. I didn't want to prolong the return hike.

I am feeling panicky. Not an experienced outdoor person, I find myself doubting my sense impressions— as we go uphill I can't be sure if we're really climbing. Cattle sporadically cross our path and the occasional bull gets my heart pumping. However, the herd is more interested in eating than in us and the cattle soon return to grazing.

Still, nothing looks familiar. Where are we? We enter a forest following a cow and deer path. Where does this go? I can't see any patches of light. A half mile further there's an opening into a sun splashed meadow. I still can't see any markers. We agree it's best to stick on the trail. A few meadows further I glimpse the other side of the valley through the trees. My heart sinks. We're nearly at the top of a ridge on the opposite side of the valley - we had gained at least 1,000 feet of elevation when we should have descended 1,000 feet. Now we'd need to drop an extra half mile and we'd still be several miles off the trail. The next bad news was not unexpected. We came to a cliff. I was starting to feel weak from fatigue. Sandy thought we could traverse back and forth beneath the cliff to a patch of trees several hundred feet below. She believes we can make it. Standing at the top, we plotted our way down. A misstep could lead to a tumbling fall to the trees. A fall was not likely to be fatal, but a broken limb at 10,000 feet while we were lost twenty miles from a small town, would be a serious problem. Suddenly there was a shift and I wasn't the leader anymore; we were both just trying to survive. Being in charge became a hindrance since my judgment was no longer clear and fear of disaster was making it hard to make choices.

From the view at the top of the cliff, I roughly identified where we were. Sandy believed that with the help of our walking sticks could get down the steep pile of scree. It was easy for me to be her supporter. We talk to each other on each traverse, taking several rests in place to survey our progress. We finally make it to the trees, but still have a long distance to
get back down to the valley. Again we're in the trees and the only direction we can determine is forward, down. We discuss whether to slant left or right to avoid a thick patch of bushes. It becomes easier to hear my hunches. I sense a path through the trees, feeling that it was better for us to slant this time to the right. Sometimes I choose, sometimes she does. We don't argue. It's clear, tired as I am, that Sandy's eyes and intuition enhance mine. Talking through our panic helps us make better choices. We descend like this - with hunches from one or the other of us going back and forth, trusting whoever has the clearest feeling at a given point. Instinctively I feel we should cut through a small opening in a clump of bushes rather than follow a relatively open path. Sandy has doubts, but she follows. Going through the bushes, in front of me I find a wooden sign: "No snowmobiles beyond this point." I remember it from the hike up. It was right in the middle of the trail we were looking for. We found our way home.

Panic receded and the trip began to feel like an adventure again. The magic had been to let fear let out of the darkness and transform it simply by telling each other the truth about what we were feeling. We were giddy and excited like this was the best thing that ever happened to us, even though I was so weak that I wondered how I was going to make it the last few miles to the car.

I see fear now becoming an ally rather than an enemy. Repeated testing by talking about what I'm most afraid of has surprisingly lead Sandy to trust me more because she knows I'll tell the truth. I never expected such a gift from terror.
42. Socorro, New Mexico, 1994

I've just returned from a trip to New Mexico to see John Viebranz. We've known each other for twenty three years since the days in Saigon when he edited The Observer, the Army newspaper for Vietnam. He lives now in Socorro where he practices law and is the chief aide to the New Mexico house majority whip, Michael Olguin, during the yearly legislative session. As we drove in his '83 Volvo to the town of San Acacia, we each tried to explain to Sandy how we met. It turns out that we met in either the men's room at MACV or in a hallway outside our offices and either I spoke first or John did. Ultimately we agreed that John invited me to his office after work one afternoon. I showed up (John's version) with one or two gigantic joints. John had not smoked that much of the local Vietnamese marijuana and I guess neither had the others in the office as everyone became totally wrecked. I'm thinking back as John is telling the story and it rings true. Did I actually do this? Did I bring marijuana into MACV headquarters practically under General Abrams office? Was I also the one that met Melvin Laird, Henry Kissinger and did all my work with General Abrams wearing a patch that said "Official Army Pornographer"? I still have the patch. I remember also adjusting military etiquette to salute only officers ranking major and above. How did I get away with this? How could I not have been aware of my own hostility?

Yet I also remember being excited that General Abrams was interested in having me document more of his activities than simply award ceremonies. I passionately loved my
photography. And John reminded me that with the General I was an extremely STRAC trooper. I no longer remember exactly what this acronym meant, except that in general it meant someone who looked sharply military. It was true my uniform fit, my hair was cut the proper length, my mustache trimmed and I carried myself with a certain *elan* in the general's reflected glory. I even purchased custom made fatigues. Ironically this was against regulations and General Abrams wore the standard issue fatigues which indifferently fit him.

Driving though the sage spotted New Mexico hills, I wondered if I had really been an arrogant smartass, always ready to party. This goes so against my picture of myself as a quiet intellectual. Truth must be in between - perhaps I was less the good time Charlie John remembers, yet more angry than I remember. But something has changed with John.

I wanted to ask him how Vietnam has affected his life and when we stopped at the Coyote Cafe I did. He answered by recalling his childhood in Albuquerque. His father had been a New Deal Democrat and the politics of hard times provided dinner table conversation and fired John's imagination. Then it was on to Columbia with a scholarship during the antiwar demonstrations in the late 60's. When his turn came for the Army, he entered with considerable ambivalence, volunteering in response to a low and likely to be called draft number in order to get a rear echelon job in journalism. He got the job in the air conditioned office, but the year in Vietnam had had a corrosive effect he hadn't looked at until recently. With his office in MACV, John could see up close foolish mistakes, confusion and defensive retaliation against the civilian press. Not surprisingly he became cynical. It was interesting to hear John talk about this because I was not very interested in the large issues surrounding Vietnam when I was there. I was interested in the personalities of the people I was working with and what was happening in front of my camera. Before going to Vietnam, John had planned to go to law school at the University of New Mexico and enter politics in his home state, but Vietnam intervened before law school. When he got out of the Army he did in fact go to UNM law school, however his old enthusiasm for the political system was gone. He worked instead as a public defender for several years, then became a partner in a large
Albuquerque law firm. Unsatisfied, he quit, left Albuquerque and began a practice in Socorro where he has remained for the last 13 years. He was attracted to the simpler, quieter life of a small rural town. He hasn't completely given up politics as he spends the yearly legislative session in Santa Fe assisting the House Majority Whip, but the ambition which would have lead to Congress was gone.

I was touched when John admitted that he had even considered going back into the Army during a particularly flat period after his discharge. I well remember considering that my ambition also seemed short circuited. After working a depressing year as a photographer's assistant in Chicago, I, too, considered going back into the Army, where at least the needs of life were taken care of and where I had found a way to be. Civilian life was so grey and dull, nothing seemed worth striving for. Somehow the Army seemed safer and paradoxically less intrusive in my personal life. John's disclosure that he had also considered going back in the service made me feel closer to him.

On this trip we were talking about the war in a different way than we ever had before. John knew virtually everyone in the cafe. People came up to say hello or he stopped with his plate full of burrito fixings to visit with friends. Self reflection and the courage to share insecurity and doubt has added a new layer to our friendship separate from our lives in Vietnam.

When we finally got to San Acacia, John showed me the grave of Joe D. Boca a hunter and trapper who lived in the tiny New Mexico town of Quemado during the 70's. I used to visit friends there and met Joe D. who became a friend and guide to the area. He was a tough old survivor and a wonderful storyteller, one of the few men I admired at the time. John then guided us up a steep footpath rising behind the cemetery to the ruins of a pueblo built 1,000 years ago. Silently we wandered over the mounds of stones occasionally recognizing features like water holding basins or wall foundations. Patterly shards were everywhere. Below the site of the pueblo was a steep rock face with many petroglyphs. I saw how comfortably John fit here.
He's not waiting for "a break," saving for retirement, or wishing he were someplace else. He's simply here in Socorro, New Mexico, living each day with the amused tolerance for human foibles that rural life brings. The plumbing froze on the day we were to leave so he left a note for us to turn off the heater that was blasting at the pipes under the bathroom sink. The night before he told me that he was planning to tear up the old cracked linoleum floor in his house so his books which are in storage won't need to be moved twice, but he's been in this house two years now and he'll get to it when he's finished renovating the tenant apartment that pays his rent. What I like so much about seeing John at home now is the feeling I have that we've both finally found our real lives.

43. Buddha Returns

It's January a year after visiting John in New Mexico. I'm lying under a sheet waiting for Jeff Millison to enter the room and pierce my skin with acupuncture needles.

Weak afternoon sun bathes the walls with light reflected from partially open blinds. It feels strange to be lying here thinking of the Buddhist hospital in Vietnam. There are no statues of Buddha but the walls are covered with charts in Chinese and English describing "The Meridans of Chi Energy," "Anterior Torso," "Posterior Torso," anterior, posterior, and lateral views of the whole body with a detailed insert of the head. Acupuncture is useful practice in a country that can't afford the technology of Western medicine.

It works by balancing life energy or chi without reference to a particular
illness. Whether someone has asthma, gall stones, or depression the acupuncturist seeks only to rebalance the chi. In so doing not only is the healing of the original medical problem enhanced, but others both emotional and physical are often healed in addition.

I like the notion of a three thousand year old medical practice accepted by insurance companies in this land of info tech and nanosecond fashion. It’s amusing to imagine a grey bearded sage in a brocaded robe popping out of the men's room to offer quotations from Lao Tzu or readings from the I Ching while just plain folks that you'd see in a mall are making appointments and writing checks.

Earlier Jeff had been talking about acupuncture being based on the ancient conception that rhythms and qualities you see in nature exist within us as well. So winter is a time of going inward for us as it is for animals that hibernate. And our winter challenge as humans is to sink down and connect with our deeper self.

Soon he’ll be back in the room and he will insert the needles as I breathe deeply. Now I'm smelling the incense used in other treatment rooms and my eyes wander to the fragmented tree branches sliced into even strips of fading blue by the window blinds.