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VIET NAM

Looking back after 20 years

After years of silence, we are finally starting to pay our Viet Nam veterans the respect they earned two decades ago. We have a national monument to the men who fought this war that wasn't a war, and Sacramento recently dedicated its own Viet Nam memorial. Movies, television and books are looking honestly at the war, the times, and the people who served. On these pages, a few veterans who work at McClatchy Newspapers talk candidly about their own memories.

Paul Vieira, job printing supervisor at The Sacramento Bee, was a Marine in Viet Nam from December 1967 to January 1969. He celebrated his 19th birthday there.

The Marines was something I always wanted to do. I felt there was a reason for the whole Viet Nam thing. I wanted to contribute the best possible way. That was the Marines.

The hard part to deal with for all of us was coming home. We weren't welcome home. Many of us weren't even welcomed by loved ones. You came home so changed, so different, the people you left no longer knew you.

I was nuts for five years after I got home. It takes you that long to get a grip on what's going on, especially in the turmoil of what was going on in the country at the time.

When I got home, the war was very unpopular. Vets were even more unpopular. Every time planes would come in there would be protesters. When I stepped off the airplane at Travis Air Force Base, I was faced with people in my own peer group, protesters, calling me baby killer. You immediately run into some kind of mental hiding.

After I'd been home for a couple of years, people would ask me if I was a

Viet Nam vet. It was the topic of everybody's conversation. I didn't want to hear about it. It was easier to say no.

How do you describe it unless you were actually there? There's no movies, no stories, no anything that is going to give you a true concept of what it was like. In the movie Platoon, there was nothing on the screen as bad as the real thing. I went to see Platoon. My reaction was, this is just Hollywood.

A lot of people don't realize this: I

don't care how big or small or old or young an enemy is, if they're coming at you with a weapon and if they're trying to kill you, you're going to kill them. A lot of people who were antagonistic about the war didn't think about that. All they thought about was the politics.

I feel fairly adjusted, but you go through periods when you see something, hear a song, the next thing you know, boom, you're right in the middle of a memory. You might hear a song that would remind



Paul Vieira

you of Viet Nam and for the next three or four days you're kind of in a time lapse, remembering things.

I don't know anybody who's been there that didn't lose somebody they cared about. After you lose the first close friend, you don't let yourself get too attached to anybody. One second, you have a living, breathing friend next to you. The next minute he's just simply gone.

I was a squad leader. Like most squad leaders, if you're worth anything, the squads really trusted you. There was a particular person, Bobby. We'd become really close, and I was starting to train him to take over the squad because he was the one I felt could do it. Bobby was from Louisiana, Shreveport. It was odd, because prior to that time I had never had a close black friend. But over there, you realize everyone bleeds the same. You have a tendency to forget all the superficial stuff when it gets real.

We were operating out of Da Nang. There was one little village we had to go through where we had always suspected Viet Cong movement but we never really saw anything.

I'm quite cautious. I kind of had a sixth sense in the bush. People always wanted to be in my squad because I just always knew — don't step there, don't look there, don't go there. I was always right. It kind of gives me chills.

One time we were getting ready to go through the village, and I remember stopping the squad and telling Bobby, you gotta feel what's going on, you gotta feel that air, you gotta look around. If you feel the least suspicious don't take any chances. If you feel something, call in for support.

The very next day I was called to go home. Right on the spot I turned the squad over to Bobby. He took the squad to the same village and was ambushed. Out of seven people, two were left, Bobby and his radio man. You're talking about guys that had been with me for at least eight months. In a matter of about 20 minutes, I'm happy I'm going home and then, boom. For many, many years, I had the feeling that if I had been there, would I have sensed it?

I saw Bobby after the battle. He was just devastated. The only thing he said to me, he said, I'm sorry. He felt like he'd killed my squad. I've never heard from him since. I have no idea how he's coped with it.

For me personally, one of the things I can never get rid of is the sound of artillery coming in, that shrieking sound. It would come in and then would just explode. There's an old saying, you never hear the round that hits you. That's true, because when you hear it, it's already gone past you.

The good times that you had over there were great. I wouldn't trade them for anything. The whole time I was over there, the laughs I had over there were probably the best laughs I ever had in my entire life.

I remember one guy — we got there the same time — all he could say was, I'm going to make it, I know I'm going to make it. He was starting to get on people's nerves. This guy was going to the same base I was. I thought, oh, great, I gotta listen to this guy.

It was the end of the rainy season, and when we got to where we were going, I remember jumping off the truck and landing up to my waist in mud. It looked like red clay, but I was standing in deep mud.

We were fresh from the states, didn't know anything about anything. During our training no one ever said anything to us about the enemy having rockets. All of a sudden there was rocket fire and guys started scrambling. I figured I better get out of there. This guy just stood there, he just froze standing by the truck. The truck took a direct hit, and there was nothing of him left. He was just gone. I think that guy knew at the beginning what was going to happen to him.

Joe Stratton, printer for The Sacramento Bee, was an aerial intelligence specialist in Saigon in 1972. He was 23 at the time, and out of college. He was in Viet Nam when the peace accord was reached.

When I used to go to work, the peace envoys would go by every day and go to their meetings. It was like a big joke for us. We would think every week it was going to end, but it kept going on and on. Every day we would say, maybe it's today. It was like a big joke for us for several weeks.

My tour was timed perfectly. I had been there six and a half months when we pulled out. I had missed R&R because I hadn't been there long enough, and they wouldn't send me home because I hadn't been there long enough for that either. So I finished out my tour in Thailand. If I had been six months later, I wouldn't have had to go at all.

By the time I got there, the country was ugly. There was barbed wire everywhere. The war had pretty much wound down. The Vietnamese knew we were leaving, so they weren't the friendliest in the world. They weren't as happy or as friendly with us as they were in '68 and '69.

I worked in aerial intelligence. We'd look at aerial photographs and find things to bomb — troop movements, trucks, oil depots, aircraft on the ground, boats in the rivers, whatever we could find. We'd also compare photos before and after bombing raids. When we bombed Hanoi, that was our busiest time. We were working 16 to 18 hours a day during that time.

Everything was so secret it was strange. The building I worked in had a combination to get in. When I first got to Viet Nam, I couldn't find my office, and nobody could tell me where it was. I finally found it during a bombing raid. I was lying in a ditch while the bombs were going off, and the guy next to me knew I was assigned to the same unit he was and he said he'd take me there.

The fun thing about intelligence was that every time you'd see the government say, Well, we didn't do this, we're doing that, we were seeing what really happened. There was so much misinformation it was ridiculous. Sometimes you'd read the newspaper and just laugh.

Probably the most discouraging thing about being in intelligence was that you could see where the government was kind of scamming people.

We got bombed a couple of times while I was there, but I never really felt worried about it. They bombed us with rockets. The Vietnamese would carry rockets on their backs and would secretly run around and get as close as they could to the targets — runways, airplanes — then they'd launch the rockets and just take off. One time they set off one of our 10,000-pound bombs. I don't know how they did it. It was three miles from where we were, and it felt like an earthquake. Everybody was scrambling for whatever shelter they could find.

I didn't like Viet Nam. I didn't like the whole idea. After I was drafted, I joined the Air Force because in the Air Force you only see a rifle one time in military training and the others carry rifles around all the time. I was in six years and I never had to carry a gun. In the Air Force, only the MPs carry guns.

Earl Wright Jr. is editor of Fresno's Neighbors. He served two tours in Vietnam, first as a private in 1964-65, and later as a staff sergeant in 1968-69.

I was an American fighting with Vietnamese units in Kontum. There were probably 40 Americans, something like that. Any time there was a Vietnamese operation, there would be at least four Americans going out with them, maybe more. I went out occasionally. That was my first experience with dead bodies. After a while you get so used to it you get callous. But I never saw any of our own guys killed.

I was scared a lot. I can remember being in a foxhole at two or three in the morning and just throwing up I was so scared. It's the anticipation more than the fire, I think. In the fire, you're too busy to get scared.

You come close to eating it so many times. We were in a Huey, flying over a creek bed to keep from drawing fire. They can't see you if you're down low. All of a sudden, the creek ended and the helicopter crashed into a tree. But we just kept right on going — it didn't knock us out of the air. As soon as we pulled it up, we started taking fire.

In my first tour, I was in the jungle. It was real different. We would run into tigers and leopards. There were all kinds of monkeys. They were mean.

If they got used to humans at all, they would throw rocks at us.

I was crossing a river one time in a barge and the Vietnamese started talking really fast. You could tell they were really excited. I looked up the river and thought I saw logs floating. It was an anaconda floating in the river — it was huge, really huge.

You got to remember when I first went there, in 1964, there were only 16,000 Americans. So we hadn't corrupted Viet Nam yet. There was a way to fight that war and win it. We could have won it pretty easily. But it would not have been politically expedient.

After my second tour, I was against the war. I took a look and said, this is nuts. It was a waste — a waste of money, a waste of lives, a waste of time. The Vietnamese in charge were corrupt, the Americans in charge were corrupt. So much politics were involved, it was stupid. There was no glory in it. After I got out, I didn't get a haircut for three years.

Most Viet Nam vets are finding out that there was a certain group of us that got out, looked straight ahead, took off and never looked back. You basically forget about Viet Nam, and you think all that time you weren't affected. Then you hit that 20-year period and you find out you really were affected. Something for some reason triggers it. For one of my friends it was all the Viet Nam movies coming out. For me, I'm not sure. But a lot of people I talk to lately all thought the same thing.

For a period, I was going through the guilt trip of why did I survive while others didn't, but now I think I feel good that I survived. To have done it and survived gives me a sense of satisfaction.

I always think back on that time. I don't want to sound romantic or anything like that, but you're young, you're invincible — it's like everything is right with the world. People my age who didn't experience it, I think they really missed something. Of course, they're probably happy they missed it. But I wouldn't trade the experience.



Earl Wright Jr.



Al Truax, advertising manager for The Modesto Bee, was a radio operator in Viet Nam in 1968 and '69. He celebrated his 21st birthday there.

I actually had a good time over there. Well, I never had hand-to-hand combat with anybody. We would get bombed a lot — rocketed a lot — but I never had to point a gun at anybody. It's something I don't know if I could have done, anyway.

I was stationed in Nah Trang, south of Camrahn Bay, on the beach. We lived in downtown Nah Trang. It was like living right downtown in America. We ate very well, had great food. It was a small unit, and we were always barbecuing steaks, going to the beach. For fun, I'd get in the jeep, even though I had access to flying, and I would drive to Camrahn Bay, 80 or 90 or 100 miles away, just because it was fun going through the jungle. I thought it was a beautiful country. In fact, I have a desire to go back.

I really ran into a lot of nice people there, both Americans and Vietnamese. You meet people from all over the country that you know for such a short time, yet you develop such strong friendships because you're over there sharing this thing together. Some guys you'll know for

Dave Dunlap



Alan Truax

six months, some guys you'll only know for maybe a month, and yet you'll still get close to them.

It was kind of a growing time for me, realizing that everything is not the same as the suburbs USA. As it turned out, it was a positive experience in my life — certainly not what was happening over there, but how it impacted me.



Dave Dunlap, camera operator for The Sacramento Bee, was stationed in the Central Highlands of Viet Nam during 1967 and 1968. He was 19 when he went off to war.

I left for Viet Nam on Mother's Day. I had heard a little bit about Viet Nam, but I didn't know that much about it. Then I get in the service, they're teaching you how to kill, how to survive, telling you what's going to happen if you don't listen. They said, 90 percent of you are going to Viet Nam. We just said, what's Viet Nam? All of a sudden we're coming from the civilian world into the jungle and the first vehicle we're getting into is a bus with bars on the windows.

Camrahn Bay was amazing. Here you are in this country torn by war and it was just like being stationed someplace in the U.S. They had big elaborate bases for the military, a big huge airport, everything was spit and polished most of the time. They had beautiful beaches, some gorgeous beaches over there. Camrahn Bay was all secured. When you were in Camrahn Bay, it was like you were stateside. It was like everything else was shut out.

I never experienced rain like I experienced there. It was unbelievable. I can remember standing underneath a building letting the rain run off the roof into a



50-gallon drum and getting into the drum to take a bath.

Our water was either flown in or trucked in. We had no fresh water. During the rainy season, when you couldn't get the trucks up the mountain and you couldn't get the helicopter in, we would have enough for cooking and drinking, but as far as showers, we just stood out underneath the rain and took a bar of soap. Or we would catch water in the drum and all take turns taking baths.

We built a shower from a pontoon off an airplane. We filled it with water, then put a heater up underneath it and heated it up.

I still get teary-eyed when I think about Viet Nam. Like when they put up the wall in Washington or the memorial in Sacramento. That first article in *The Bee* about the memorial in Sacramento, it had a picture of a lady with a picture of her son on the mantel. I knew her son. We were in elementary school together, Boy Scouts together. He lived right around the corner from me.

I feel very fortunate. I was in communications in a little outpost near Dalat. We were stationed on a mountain. We were pretty secure up there. I never saw the jungle and I was never in combat. In a lot of ways I can't even fathom the things that some of those guys have gone through. We could hear stuff going on all around us. In my particular situation, if you didn't hear, then you didn't think about it much. You'd try to carry on from day to day and put it out of your mind.

We had these short-timer calendars. As you colored off each day, a picture would form. You know, typical GI stuff. Toward the end, when you've got a calendar and you're counting the days, the closer you got to finishing it, you started thinking more about the fact that you're going home.

The night before I was leaving, I was lying in my bunk thinking, I've been here 12 months and I'm going home tomorrow. I can hear grenades. I can hear machine gun fire just outside the compound. I don't really know what's going to happen. After all this time, you had to get back to someplace to get out. The helicopter could have been shot down, too.

Terry Breiting, a technician with the Tacoma News Tribune, was in Viet Nam from September 1968 to September 1969. He was stationed in Vinh Long in the Mekong Delta. He turned 19 while he was there.

I got to do a lot of flying in Viet Nam. I did test pilot work. Whenever we made repairs on helicopters, we'd have to go out and do a test flight to make sure everything worked. I flew all over the delta and to Saigon.

I was in eight crashes — four were mechanical failures, four were being shot down. When you make test flights, you stay real close to the base. We'd yell, May Day, May Day, all the way down and usually somebody would be there to rescue us by the time you got down. It was scary but you didn't have time to think about it. I never got hurt. I had a few bruises but never broke anything.

It was terrible living over there. It's the only place in the world that you can stand waist-deep in mud and have sand blown in your face. It was sand and mud everywhere. The whole delta is like a swamp and the high spots are sandy. They have torrential rains. That's when the mud gets really deep, four or five feet deep.

Our barracks were all tents until a few months before I left. The water tasted bad, the food was terrible. It wasn't very often that we got fresh meat or fresh milk. The enlisted people weren't fed very well, I don't think. All the officers got fed a lot better. On Christmas and Thanksgiving, by the time we got to eat, there'd be no meat left.

It was really bad coming back. People just have a different attitude about you. I was a different person when I came home. I had matured, I know that. The friends that I went to school with were still kids. I was a different person. I suppose.

I had delayed post-Vietnam stress syndrome. I kind of had fits of anger, became violent. Not physically violent, just violent. And nightmares. I was not getting it out of my system or talking about it. It was really hard on my wife.

About seven years ago, I went into a vets counseling program. My wife went with me. That really helped. It helped calm me down and make me more rational. It helped my wife understand how I felt and acted sometimes.