

WE WERE GHOSTS

A Vietnam Story





A U.S. Army UH-1D Huey helicopter prepares for a resupply mission for Company B, 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division, during Operation MacArthur in Dak To, South Vietnam, Dec. 16, 1967. (U.S. Army photo)

By Travis Maruska

This article veers from our normal format. When the NCO Journal team first reviewed it, it was almost a consensus, we should reject the submission because it doesn't meet our publication guidelines. It is not an academic article supported by research, only a subject interview, and it does not have a coherent thesis or provide an analyses of some sort. It is however a piece of history. An old Soldier's first-hand recounting of his experiences during the Vietnam War 57 years ago.

In 1989, fresh out of boot camp, I met an old warrior at an Army Navy surplus store. He saw my haircut, I saw his fading tattoos and we stopped to chat. He was a veteran of the Korean war, one of the "Chosin Few" or the "Frozen Chosin," a Marine involved in the fighting withdrawal from the Chosin Reservoir to the port of Hungnam in 1950. For nearly an hour he regaled me with stories of that experience, he showed me the missing fingers and toes lost to frostbite and a bullet wound scar. He wasn't shy, he seemed to relish the opportunity to talk about that part of his life ... even to a noob. It was as if the flood gates opened and he had to let it all out to the wide-eyed new guy.

The thing is, over the years the specifics of that random encounter have faded to the recesses of my memory. I clearly remember seeing the missing toes on one foot, he had a big toe and the one next to it and that was it. I remember the old man's ruddy skin, age spots showing through white hair in a receding hairline, the narrow walk space between shelves crowded with fascinating military items, but I don't remember the specifics of his stories.

Stories from former Soldiers can provide insight, inspiration, preserve their memory, and shed light on the part they played in the history of our country. They will help ensure Soldiers' legacies live on even when they're no longer with us and hopefully remind them of the difference they made during their service to our great country.

Lest we forget.

From the Managing Editor of the *NCO Journal*

Jerry is about my father's age, somewhere in his 70s. A short, stout man, well built, usually wearing a baseball cap. We became acquainted through a friend, exchanging the usual pleasantries and talking about frivolous subjects that I can't now recall.

During our conversations, Jerry told me he is a Vietnam War veteran. Special Forces, 1964 to 1965.

He told me the first person he ever killed was a teenager. A girl. She tried to kill him first, but that didn't make it any easier. He threw up immediately afterwards. After that first time, it got easier. And he didn't like that it got easier.

He told me this in a straightforward manner, as though he's worked a great deal on saying it out loud without letting it affect him too much. It affects me, of course. It's hard to talk to him about his past without being affected in some way.

Jerry's real name isn't Jerry, by the way. He agreed to speak with me as long as the stories remained anonymous, and he made it clear there were things he simply would not talk about. "Things in my mind that I've put way back," he said. "Things I don't want to relive." And then there were subjects Jerry couldn't talk about because they never happened. Most of what Jerry did in Vietnam was classified; and almost 60 years later, Jerry still isn't going to break that code.

he forged his parents' signature, an act that pretty much guaranteed an argument.

"The mail came through the mail slot... and my mother said to me, 'What's this?' and handed me the envelope. It was my orders to report for basic training. My mother and father were furious. They even tried to negate my enlistment. I said, 'Look, I don't have any choices here. I didn't think you'd approve. This is what I need to do.'"

His parents allowed him to go, but they didn't speak to him for two years.

Special Forces

Jerry originally enlisted in the Army Corps of Engineers, but after being sent out to a mountain to build a bridge only to blow it up, he was bored and needed a new challenge. He put in for a transfer to airborne and ranger school. Then he put in for Green Beret training at Fort Polk, Louisiana. For that, he had to sign a four-year commitment on top of the three-year obligation he was serving. Jerry loved Special Forces training. After a childhood of having to prove himself, the bar was suddenly raised. It was 16 weeks of what he called some pretty "tough crap." Trudging through Louisiana swamps. Pushing himself in ways he'd never had to.

"A lot of it was discipline," he said, "Physical and psychological. So, you became a complete package ... but

"You can shoot at anybody," he told me with a shrug. "The thing is, depending on the mission, you couldn't be shooting because you were outnumbered. Always. And it was noisy."

The Beginning

Jerry grew up in a small town in the Northeast, the second of three boys. His father was a tailor, and the family was relatively poor. Since his older brother kept mostly to himself and his younger brother had a "behavioral pattern problem" (Jerry said they didn't really have a name for it back then), he was pretty much on his own. His short stature and Jewish identity ensured he was met with a good deal of antagonism, but he learned to deal with it.

"I had to be tough in order to survive," he said, "And the ones that picked on me regretted it because I took care of business."

Jerry didn't have anyone in his immediate family who had served in the military, just an uncle who had served on the USS Honolulu at Pearl Harbor. But when he graduated high school in 1962, he didn't feel he had very many options. He couldn't afford college and scholarships weren't available to him, and he didn't want to be drafted because he had "no interest in the infantry." So, he enlisted, but because he was underage,

more people washed out than made it through."

In the Special Forces, the emphasis was to kill expediently and quietly, Jerry said. He discussed the act of killing (or "eliminating," as he calls it) like a mechanic might describe fixing an engine. Jerry used words like procedure or tactic, and when I asked him if he could be more specific, he simply said knives or blades were "adequate tools," and that they usually needed to be quiet. His job wasn't just to end life in order to accomplish his mission. He had to do it in a way nobody noticed.

"You can shoot at anybody," he told me with a shrug. "The thing is, depending on the mission, you couldn't be shooting because you were outnumbered. Always. And it was noisy."

Jerry found that because of his short stature, he had to be twice as good as those around him. Again, that was something he was used to.

"I was the shortest Green Beret. I swear," he said, laughing.

But his small stature made him ideal for getting into

places bigger guys couldn't. It also made him easier to overlook in situations where he didn't want to be noticed. When he finished training, he was assigned to a unit specializing in Search and Destroy (S&D) Operations.

Deployment to Vietnam

In early 1964, Jerry flew into the Quang Tri Province in South Vietnam, right at the border. At this point, the war had not yet heated up, so his job was to (a) train the South Vietnamese, "who were not particularly interested in being trained," and (b) gather as much data as possible from enemy territory, specifically Dak To in the Kon Tum Province, 30 miles north of the border. It was the area in North Vietnam where enemy troops would train, move west toward the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and then harass or murder villagers. Jerry's job was to get in and out of that enemy territory unnoticed and provide valuable intelligence to his superiors. His group consisted of six to 15 men, depending on the mission. They would either parachute by night or be dropped off by helicopter closer to the target. Dak To have several rice paddies and plenty of jungle, like most of Vietnam, so cover was never far away.

"We were looking for data," Jerry said. "Computers weren't invented yet, so there was only one way to get it. Get somebody in there. Put eyes on. Bring back material."

His group reported troop movements, supply lines, and the number of people in an area. The intel was collected by memory and then radioed in or sent up in reports. The information was used to bomb small airports, communications, supply lines, and bridges.

"You can't get a truck across a bridge if the bridge isn't there," Jerry added.

But Jerry's work wasn't always as simple as sneaking in and sneaking out again. Despite their best efforts, his group was spotted. This forced them to either engage or evade. When this came up, I asked him how often his group suffered casualties.

"Virtually every mission," he said. "There was always trouble." multipronged attack on several fronts instead of solely targeting Moscow. Regardless of his choice, Hitler determined the objectives and explained the ways to accomplish the mission.

It Changes You

Because of the nature and sensitivity of his work, "We were ghosts," he told me. "We were left alone. We did not exist. Our names were correct. Our ranks were correct. Our MOS [military occupational specialties] were not correct. I was a 'clerk.'"

Their work involved a lot of

movement and some improvisation. To get from place to place, they confiscated uniforms, stole vehicles, or hustled more than 20 miles in a day, much of it running. They avoided direct contact as much as possible since they were almost always grossly outnumbered.

Gathering information also involved infiltrating enemy camps which often required not just stealth, but a certain level of acting. Jerry and his group could speak the language fluently and wore enemy uniforms to avoid detection. Outside of an encampment, they would usually split up.

"You couldn't go in as a cluster. [We would say] your function is this, my function is that...you could get by [individually], keeping your head down...and dirty, always being dirty so they don't see the light skin," he told me with a smile. "Being small, I blended in better than some of the guys who were 6'5'"

Most infiltration was done at night, and there weren't a lot of floodlights around, so the darkness helped. But getting into structures, he told me, "You may have had to take out a couple of [North Vietnamese]."

But that doesn't mean it was easy, especially psychologically.

"No amount of training can take you to the point where you've taken a life. When you've eliminated the first human, even the first several...it changes you." He brought up the teenager he first had to eliminate. "She was a sniper, and a reasonably good shot. When I took her down, I ended up heaving my guts out. A sergeant who had been there longer than I came over and said, 'You see that weapon? It's better than the one you've got. You just got off a better shot. She would have taken you out without blinking an eye.' From that point on, it became a part of the job."



U.S. Special Forces patrol a village with a company of Camp Plei Mrong Strike Force Soldiers in Vietnam on Aug. 07, 1964. (U.S. Army photo)

Don't Let Them Take Me

Out of necessity, Jerry learned very quickly not to view the people he eliminated as human. Doing so might cause him to hesitate or make a mistake that got him killed, or more importantly, his buddies.

"They became an obstacle. They were not a person – [just something] that had to be removed," he said.

But an even more difficult aspect of the job was dealing with casualties on his own side. In his line of work, there was a good deal of turnover, but Soldiers weren't disappearing because they had a better job opportunity. They were disappearing because they were being killed and replaced with someone new. This was a regular occurrence.

"He begged me, 'Don't let them (the North Vietnamese) take me. You've got to do something.' And I did. I couldn't leave him there alive."

"You lose one, you get a replacement," Jerry said distantly.

As a result, he had no interest in getting to know the guys he worked with. He only wanted to know what they were capable of.

"I knew their name, what training they had. But I didn't give a [care] who they were personally," Jerry said.

If he didn't get to know them, he wouldn't care as much when they died. His voice caught a bit as he shared the day he learned this tough lesson.

"A friend of mine [and I] went through all of our training together," he said. "He was severely wounded in 'Nam—practically, completely eviscerated, but still breathing. He begged me, 'Don't let them (the North Vietnamese) take me. You've got to do something.' And I did. I couldn't leave him there alive.

From that point on, I would never get close to anybody. That's the primary reason why I had no military buddies."

Even today, Jerry has no contact with anyone with whom he served, no way of finding them, and has no interest in doing so.

Dog Tags

Out in the field, missions would occasionally not be completed because information was no longer accurate. Troops were positioned where they shouldn't be, bases were better guarded than they'd expected, or the situation was simply too risky. At that point, it was a matter of (a) Do we go ahead and try it? (b) Do we back out and see what is going on at a different time; or (C) Do we report it could not be completed? It was usually an officer who had to make that call. Jerry would give him his recommendation for the situation, the lieutenant would radio it in, and they would get orders on what to do next.

Most of the time, Jerry's read on a situation was taken seriously, but sometimes they would go into a situation that, in Jerry's mind, wasn't worth the risk.

"Sometimes we were lucky," he said. "Other times we suffered losses...I felt were unnecessary."

Either way, he couldn't override an officer's decision.

For the most part, Jerry got along with the officers assigned to his unit, apart from a stubborn second lieutenant who argued over minor things like dress code. But Jerry told me his group found themselves under sniper fire during a mission and "[the second lieutenant] froze with his weapon, you know, kind of aiming it, but he froze," Jerry said. "I took out the sniper," he said, but not before the sniper took out

the second lieutenant. Jerry had to bring back his dog tags that day.

I Wasn't Ready to Die

At the end of 1964, as his tour was supposed to end, Jerry found out he was going to be in Vietnam for a while longer.

"They pulled a convenience of the government on me. They can extend anything, including length of service. It wasn't totally unexpected," he said.

His time there was extended another seven months. He had to put his emotions aside and try to remain focused on the job at hand.

"I didn't want to get out of there in a body bag," he said.

I ask Jerry whether fear was a factor for him. He told me that fear was always with him, from the moment he got there, but that it was a good thing.

"It kept me keen and sharp. I knew there was danger, and that danger converts to injury or death. I wasn't ready to die. The fear was a motivator," he explained.

On one occasion, as Jerry was infiltrating an encampment, he had to take cover in a "rabbit hole" in order to avoid detection. He waited for the enemy to move on so he could escape. Minutes turned to hours, and hours turned to days. Ultimately, he waited 10 days in a hole not much bigger than a midsize vehicle. During that time, he ate "whatever happened to be crawling by." Insect. Lizard. Small mammal. All without the luxury of a cooking fire. He prayed for rain so he wouldn't have to drink his precious reserve. He played mental games to avoid driving himself crazy. He told himself, "The weather sucks today, so I wouldn't want to be out in the rain anyway." One corner of the hole was designated as a latrine, and he hoped the smell kept

away any attention. As I listened to the story, I remembered the psychological discipline he referred to when he discussed his training. I couldn't think of very many people who could remain in a hole for 10 days without making a desperate, and likely suicidal, run for it.

Eventually, the enemy camp moved on and so did Jerry. He walked out as casually as he walked in and radioed his position. He was picked up and reunited with his group, who had assumed he was dead. There were some hugs and pats on the back but not too much. After all, the next operation would likely bring another set of challenges.

But there were consequences to being so detached. At this point, killing had become routine. Jerry was used to it. Maybe too used to it, and that bothered him a great deal.

"You have to remember that they were people too. They were doing their job," he said.

By that point, Jerry was counting the days until his end of tour.

In August of 1964, the Gulf of Tonkin incident escalated the war. Soon, hundreds of thousands of troops were deployed by President Lyndon B. Johnson. On the ground, Jerry could already tell things were heating up.

"There was more activity coming closer to the borders. A lot more rocket fires, missile fires—that type of thing. They'd come in, burn down a little village, shoot a bunch of folks, leave a bunch of kids dead, and then head on back," he said.

Once the Marines arrived to "grunt it out," Jerry was finally allowed to leave. He was sent to Korea for 13 months to identify bodies before they were sent home. It was "sucky" work, but he didn't miss Vietnam at all

and had no wish to return.

He was sent stateside in late '66 and stationed on the West Coast. A little over a year later, in early '68, he was slated to go back to the war. Then the Tet Offensive was launched, and 60 percent of his group came back in body bags. Naturally, Jerry did not want to return.

At the time, Jerry's father was dying of cancer, and he obtained a compassionate transfer back to the Northeast to be with his family. There he trained young Soldiers in Special Operations, the first thing he actually enjoyed in a long time.

Life After

In 1969, Jerry's obligation to the military ended, and he had already decided not to reenlist.

"I had fulfilled my personal obligation," he said. "There wasn't any need for me to go back. And there wasn't a hell of a lot they could do about it."

They found the body of the man who replaced him in Vietnam seven months later.

After being discharged, the first thing he did was grow out his hair, grow a beard, and do "everything unmilitary" thing he could think of. He entered the electrical engineering field and helped develop the heat shield that protects U.S. astronauts as they re-enter the atmosphere. Then, as technology outpaced him in the early '80s, he switched to small business management.

Despite his ability to adapt and learn new skills, Jerry found the transition to civilian life to be challenging.

"Let's remember," he told himself sardonically, "you're not on missions anymore. There are people here. You're not allowed to kill them." He got in the habit of warning people he worked with. "I would tell people, 'Don't ever sneak up on me, because I can't guarantee your safety.'"

Jerry met his wife at work in 1984 and they married in 1986. The union brought along a 12-year-old stepdaughter, whom Jerry loved as his own.

In the mid-80s, 10 years after it ended, the Vietnam War became a hot topic in popular culture. Bruce Springsteen wrote a song about a veteran lamenting his patriotism that, ironically, became a patriotic anthem for the decade. Books and movies about the conflict popped up all over. This was a time for healing. An opportunity to recognize veterans and give them the respect they had been denied.

Jerry didn't want anything to do with it.

"When I got out of the military, I



U.S. Army Soldier patrols the jungle during the Vietnam War in 1965. (U.S. Army photo)



U.S. Army Soldiers with the 4th Battalion, 503rd Infantry, 173rd Airborne Brigade wait for the evacuation of a fallen comrade in the Long Khanh Province, Vietnam, on Aug. 14, 1966. (Photo courtesy of the the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration)

was done with the military. Period,” he said. “I still don’t even belong to a VFW or any of that stuff. I just see no reason to do that.”

He admits that, for many veterans, being part of a group and reflecting on their experiences is therapeutic. But it wasn’t for him. He takes full responsibility for what he did. He wasn’t drafted. He wasn’t sent somewhere against his will.

“I did those things on my own,” he said. I couldn’t tell if he said it out of pride or guilt.

I asked Jerry if he feels he ever suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. He mulled over the question for a bit.

“I don’t know if you’d call it that,” he said with some reluctance. “I didn’t go to a psychiatrist or psychologist or anything like that, because they weren’t there. They didn’t experience it. But I had to work on it. It was my issue. I had dreams on occasion. Every once-in-awhile, one would sneak up on me. But that hasn’t happened of late,” he said with a smile, “So that’s a good thing.”

Jerry has had a heart attack and three bouts with cancer over the years, beginning in the early 90s. His most recent was a rare form of aggressive prostate cancer, which had him concerned, but after radiation and chemotherapy, the tumor shrank to miniscule proportions. Jerry was ecstatic. He still isn’t ready to die. Not just yet. ■

Travis Maruska is an associate professor of writing and media studies at the Anna Maria College in Paxton, Massachusetts. He was born at Fork Polk, Louisiana, where his father served in the U.S. Army in 1975, but was raised in North Dakota. He has a master’s degree in screenwriting and recently finished his first novel.

NCO JOURNAL

<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>

<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>

<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

