

# UNDERSTANDING VETERANS OF THE VIETNAM WAR

*Portraits of Vietnam Veterans with  
writings by the individual veterans.*

by Tom Hussey



More years ago than I'd like to admit, during my childhood, a large group of Americans fought a war in Southeast Asia. During this time I was in a military family—and therefore, if only subconsciously, understood the war in Vietnam to be correct and justifiable. If our military was involved, then we must be the good guys and they must be the bad guys; whoever *they* were. My father was going to go to this war. So our involvement in Vietnam had to be good in my 1970, because my dad definitely was a good guy.

At that young age, the Vietnam War was sort of a game to me. The airplanes and “army-men” I saw each night on the television news interested me, however, they were just pictures without meaning. On March 21, 1970, my father’s best friend, Major Edward M. Hudgens, was shot down over Laos and listed as Missing in Action (MIA). I remember vividly the day we heard the news. Suddenly for me, the Vietnam War had a human element. I knew Major Hudgens. I played with his kids. He was real. Somehow for me, Vietnam was no longer a game with airplanes and army-men.

As I grew older, I looked for information on the Vietnam War in my school library. I found many books on all of America’s wars except Vietnam. I wondered why. There was no longer any mention of the war or its aftermath on the television news. The game was over and it seemed to me that just when I became interested nobody wanted to talk about it. It was now very bad to have been in the war. It was no longer cool that my father had been a fighter pilot, or had even served in the US Air Force. This I did not understand.

Roughly 3 million Americans served in Vietnam. These men and women are as diverse as any other linked group in this country. This statement does not necessarily agree with the media stereotype that portrayed Vietnam Vets as crazed and explosive. These people are your next-door neighbors, your teachers, police officers, firemen, and often—your boss. Their “Vietnam experience” is the only event that unifies them. Vietnam brought them together during the 1960’s and early 1970’s, and through organizations like the Vietnam Veterans of America, it is bringing them back together and into the open now many years later.

I worked to become actively involved with the Vietnam Veterans of America; Genesee Valley Chapter #20, in Rochester, New York. I became friends with the men and women who served our country during the Vietnam era, and have talked with them about their experiences and feelings concerning that service. I have seen the good that they do for the community.



Major Edward Monroe Hudgens, Southeast Asia, 1970  
Photograph Courtesy of the Hudgens Family

**When I began this project, I wanted to show these veterans as the cross section of the population they are. The more I got to know the individuals, the more I realized that each of them has something to share. I could never begin to tell their stories, but I am thankful that I have listened. Please take time to listen to them as I have. I truly this work leaves you with a different perspective on the Vietnam era and on the men and women who served our country during that turbulent time.**

**Tom Hussey**



. . . Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty. . .

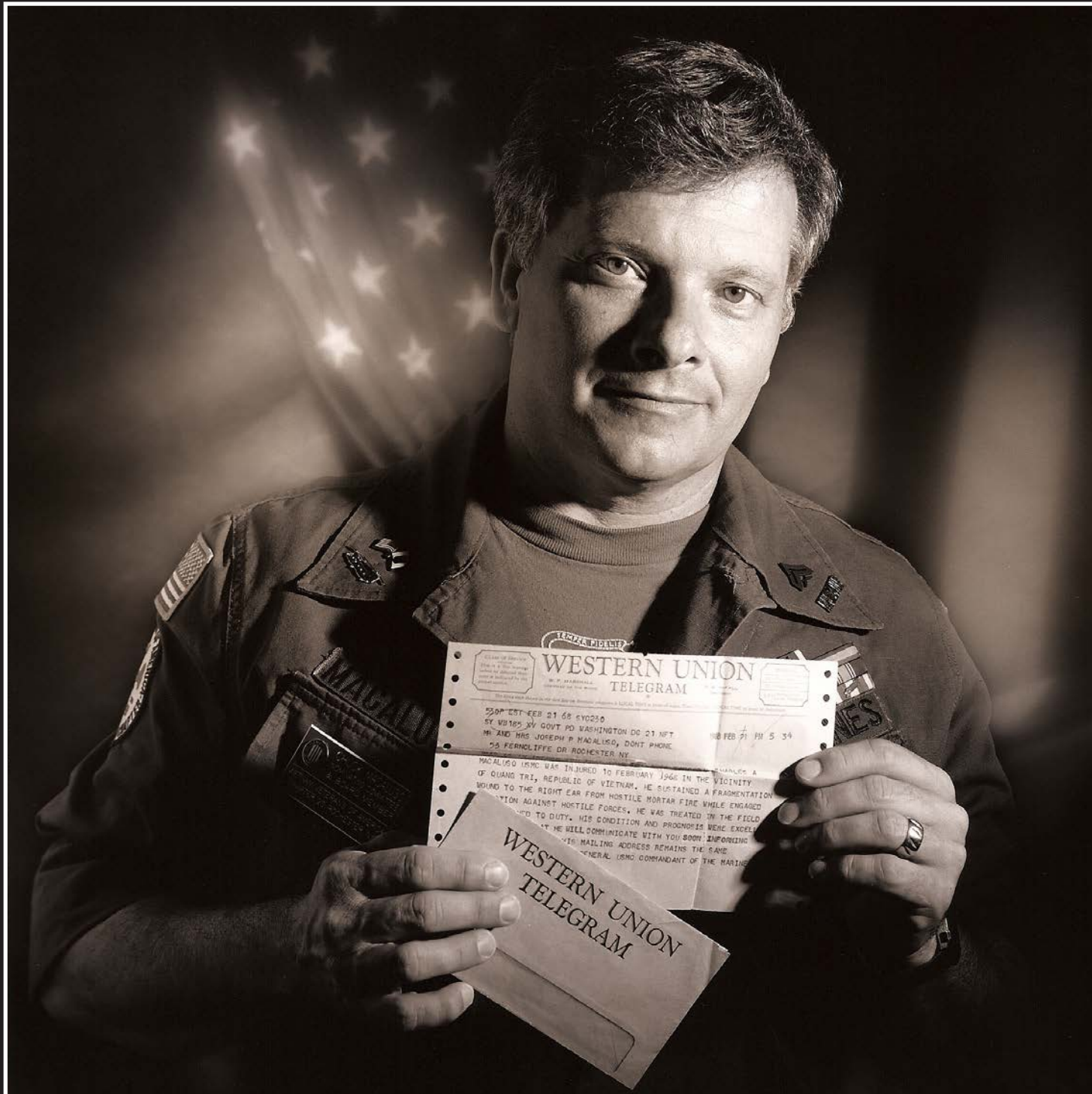
. . . To those peoples in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required—not because the Communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right. . .

. . . Now the trumpet summons us again—not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need—not as a call to battle, though embattled we are—but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle year in and year out. . . Will you join in that historic effort?

In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility—I welcome it. I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it—and the glow from that fire can truly light the world.

**And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country . . .**

**From John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address  
January 20, 1961**



## CHUCK MACALUSO

**U.S. MARINE CORPS 3rd Marine Division**

Phu Bai, Khe Sahn August 1966 - April 1969

I joined the Marines in 1966, and was one of the “lucky” ones who made a six month “Med” Cruise. About three weeks of each month was spent “playing” war with our NATO Allies across southern Europe. It was the same game you played with your buddies, only you were more organized. After arriving back in the States, the vacation was over, everyone who had not been to Nam got their orders to go. Game time was over, we were going to the real thing. In the weeks of preparation, training was taken more seriously but death was not an issue. I didn’t know anyone killed in Nam and we sure didn’t run across it in our training. The only Vietnam Vets we saw were all alive and well.

I arrived in Nam and was assigned to Echo Co. 2/26 at Phu Bai. The next two months included working ambushes at night and being “chopped” to downed helicopter sites, setting up security during the day. On New Year’s Eve (‘67) we were told the battalion was moving farther north to some small base called Khe Sanh, the rest is history.

In the picture I am holding one of the three telegrams my parents received notifying them of my injuries. Today as a parent with my son in the Marines, it is hard for me to comprehend the flood of emotions my parents felt when opening the door and being handed a telegram, knowing full well it would be bad news. It is a reminder that as servicemen we experienced all the stresses and emotions that came with combat, but our loved ones at home also had stresses. The stress of knowing some day the man from Western Union may knock on their door.

Chuck Macaluso





## LINDA LANGLEY-BARRETT

U.S. ARMY US Garrison Medical Corps

Saigon June 1972 - May 1975

Jerome Treeter was full of life and humor. While in Vietnam Jerome stepped on a land mine. The lower half of his body was blown off. While working first shift one summer day at Fort Stewart Medical Army Hospital, a new group of casualties came in from Vietnam via Germany. Jerome was one of those guys. His first words to me were “I know you are gonna be my Army Nurse because there is no way I’ll let you get away.” He had a smile that would light up an entire room. I smiled and welcomed him home.

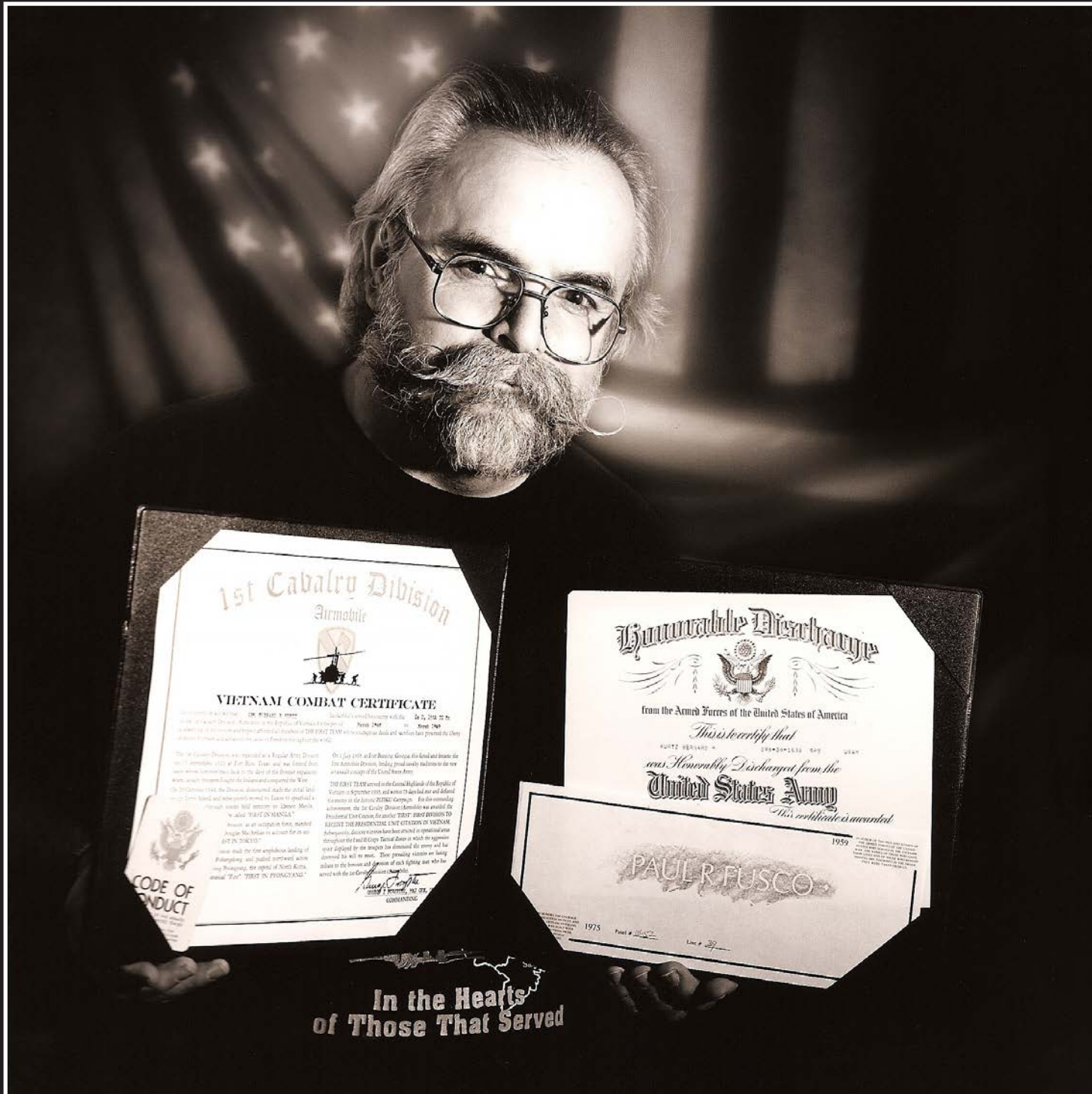
Months passed and Jerome and I became the best of friends. We got into lots of mischief together. I always managed to get him as a patient regardless of the shift I was working—of course that was planned.

He was amazingly humorous and full of life. He would say things like, “My legs are stiff today”—although he had no legs. “Linda, let’s go for a walk, I need to get out of this bed today” and “the last one to reach the door is a rotten egg.” The funniest thing he would tell me was that when he got home he was gonna go dancing with every woman he knew. I would have a strange look that would get him laughing until he couldn’t laugh anymore.

Jerome was a great checker player and he loved to play with me because I really hated the game and didn’t know it very well. He knew I hated checkers so he tried to make it interesting. We played for the dumbest things such as socks, boots and other articles that we could someday remember each other by. The last time I saw Jerome alive he let me win his cap in a game of checkers. I was on duty second shift that night and after the game we talked and he fell asleep. My shift ended around 11:00pm. Around 3:00am I received a call from a co-worker to tell me that Jerome had committed suicide. Of course I was in shock and really didn’t believe it, but it was true. Why someone so full of life would leave like that is beyond me.

Jerome was a friend; a friend I will never forget. Thank you Jerome for your spirit.

Linda Langley-Barrett



## RUSTY KURTZ

**U.S. ARMY 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile)**

Camp Evans, Phu Loi July 1966 - March 1969

Vietnam

A place of beauty!  
A place of death!  
A place I didn't want to go to!  
A place hard to leave!

War makes abnormal things normal!

Have you ever gone to dinner wishing you'd get shot at?

We did!!

At Camp Evans, we got rocketed everyday—seven rockets at dinner time. The week before Ho Chi Minh's birthday the rockets stopped. By the third day we were all jumpy saying, "We want our seven rockets and we want them now!" On Ho's birthday, they gave them to us, the whole week's worth. They managed to hit our ammo and fuel dumps, boy what a scary night!!

I think back and say, "We must have been nuts!"

Maybe we were!

Rusty Kurtz





## **LEE CLAXTON**

**U.S. ARMY 5th Special Forces Group, MACV, 1st Cavalry,  
1st Field Force USARV**

From Cam Rahn Bay north to the DMZ, west to Laos and Cambodia  
April 1964 - June 1971

I grew up believing that if our country asked you to serve in the military, in peace or in war, it was what we owed this country for our way of life here. Serving in the military was not what everyone wanted to do as a profession, but it was certainly not a dishonorable profession. The Army was going to be my career and I had looked forward to it and been preparing myself for it since I was about 10 years old.

I volunteered to go to Vietnam the first time and kept volunteering to stay "in country" for a total of five years and 10 months. At first I thought the war was really all about trying to stop the spread of Communism and helping the people of South Vietnam live in a Democratic society. As time went on and I, like most others, saw that it was not a war being fought in such a way as to end in victory by defeating the enemy, but rather by attrition. I saw my duty change to one of doing what I could to help others less experienced than myself get through and go home when their tour was completed.

It has been hard for me to deal with the anger, when I think of all the wasted lives, but it has become easier due to finally being able to talk about Vietnam; being allowed to show my pride in having served my country to the best of my ability. I have come to realize that it is not wrong for me to take some personal pride in the fact that my service may have saved at least one other young man from having to go to Vietnam and maybe having to die there.

I am proud to have served my country and can only hope that my country will be proud of not only the Vietnam veterans but all those since and into the future as it has been of those in the past. We were sent to do a dirty job whose outcome we had no control over and then expected to come home and blend back in with society as if we never went or were ashamed of having served. We are your mailman, police officer, fireman, doctor, lawyer, teacher, mechanic and many other professionals. I'd say we have done well as a whole and it is time you allowed us to stand up and be counted as patriots.

Lee Claxton



## GARY BEIKIRCH

**U.S. ARMY Det. A-245, 5th Special Forces Group**

Kontum, Dak Seang

August 1967 - August 1971

These thoughts come from a motto in a Special Forces team house in Vietnam:

To really live you must almost die...To those who fight for it, life has a meaning the protected will never know.

“TO REALLY LIVE YOU MUST ALMOST DIE...”

How sad that so much of life is spent not living, but dying...  
Day by day, fear by fear, hate by hate. Vietnam almost killed me.

“TO THOSE WHO FIGHT FOR IT:”

Rather than die I have fought.  
I have found a war  
I have fought the “enemy”  
I have fought “friends”  
I have fought myself  
I have fought to live...and I have learned about life.

For years I knew that I had been changed, but didn’t know why.  
For years I blamed Vietnam.  
But I have learned it’s not Vietnam...it’s life.

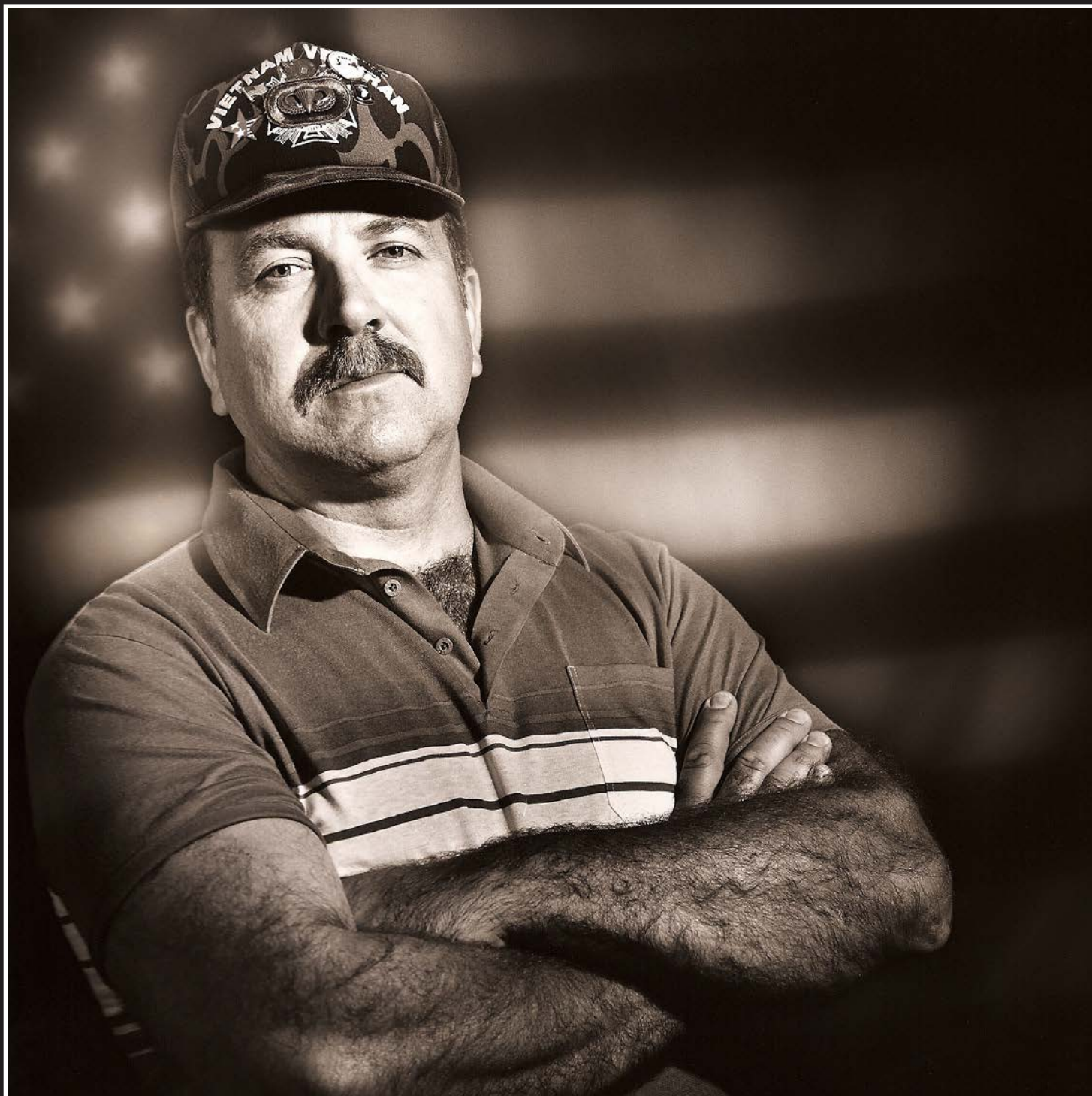
“LIFE HAS A MEANING THE PROTECTED WILL NEVER KNOW.”

Life brings pain, it brings terror.  
It hurts sometimes, and sometimes you cry.  
It can fill you with fear, hate, and guilt.  
Life had hurt me, and in pain, I shut down.  
In anger, I closed myself off from others  
In guilt, I closed myself off from life.  
No more pain...but...no more life.  
Life had lost its meaning.

ITS TAKEN YEARS, BUT I HAVE LEARNED THAT:  
HIS LOVE CONQUERS THE HATE  
HIS TOUCH HEALS THE PAIN  
HIS PEACE CALMS THE ANGER  
HIS FORGIVENESS CLEANSSES THE GUILT.  
GOD HAS PUT MEANING BACK INTO MY LIFE.  
WITHOUT HIM, LIFE HAS NO MEANING.

Gary Beikirch





## **RAY CAMPBELL**

**U.S. ARMY 101st Airborne Division**

Phan Rang, Duc Pho 1966 - 1972

I arrived in Nam at the height of the war with that American blend of motherhood, apple pie, Ford, loving my country, patriotism; and the blood and guts, gung-ho, kill the bad guy mentality of John Wayne. I'd spent the last few months in Airborne Training, double-timing through the woods of Kentucky screaming, "KILL V.C.! KILL V.C.! KILL V.C.! I WANT TO BE AN AIRBORNE RANGER! I WANT TO LIVE A LIFE OF DANGER!"

I landed with boyish fantasies of winning the war single handed and wasting as many "gooks" as possible. Chants of "Kill V.C.! Kill V.C.! Kill V.C.! I want to live a life of danger!" were still reverberating in the back of my mind when our C-130 touched down in Nam. Over the next few months, foolish dreams of "a life of danger" would take on a grim reality which would profoundly affect the boy-soldier forever.

For me, the Vietnam War is not over. It won't end until we bring home all those men who were left behind in 1973. Those men and the names of the men on the wall are the real heroes.

Ray Campbell





## PETER GALLE

**U.S. ARMY 560th Military Police, MACV**

Can Tho December 1964 - December 1967

As I deplaned in Saigon a soldier coming on board to return home told me to remember a saying he learned in Vietnam... "The incompetent leading the unwilling to do the unnecessary." I trusted him, he was leaving, he must have been right.

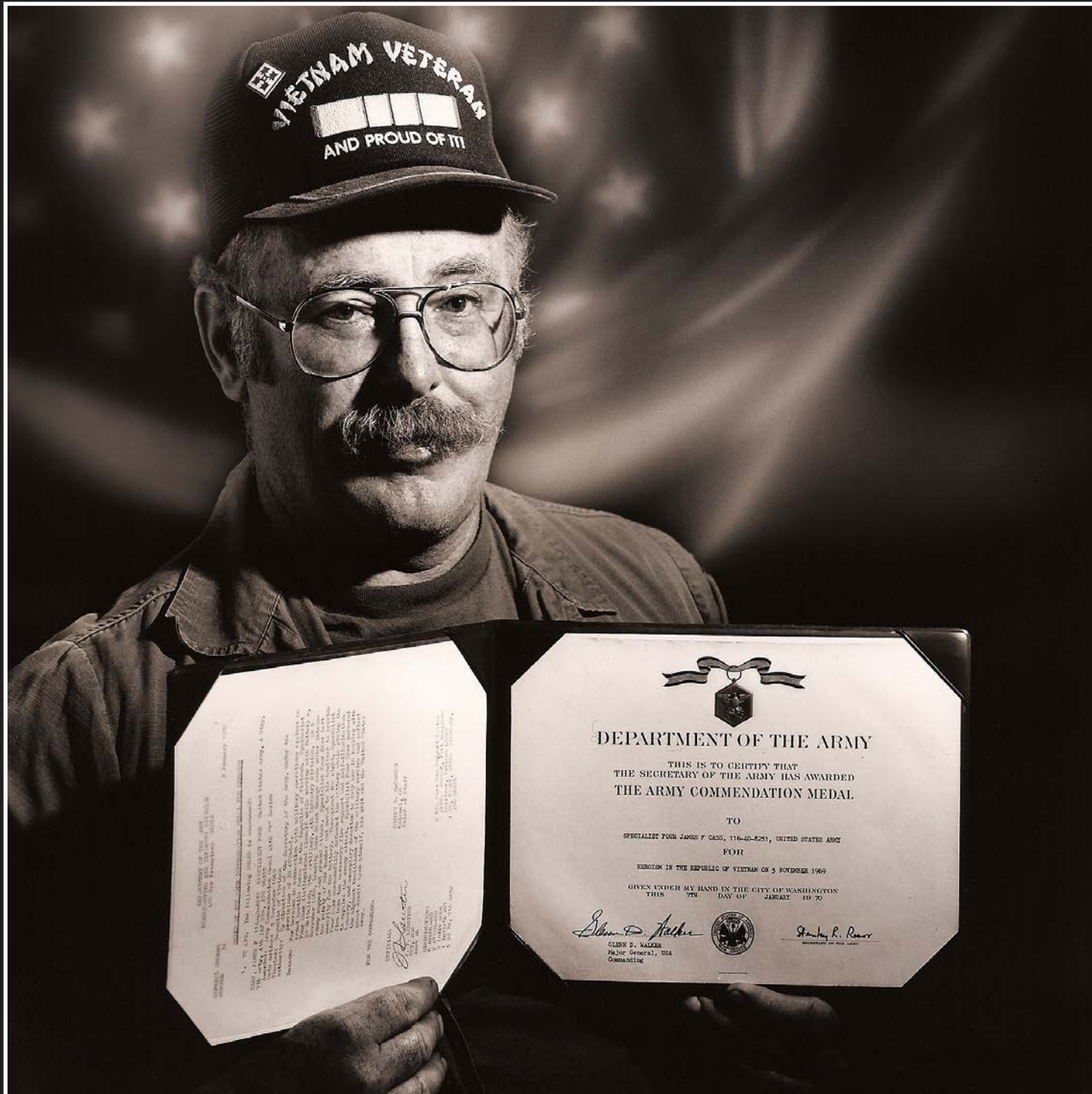
As they mortared the air base for the first time, nobody could make a decision to give the order to lock and load. In practice it would take only five minutes. While waiting we watched helicopters alternating, one up, one down, each movement unleashing streams of bullets, some green, some red. "Puff the Magic Dragon" flying in circles. The mortaring continued—a "Niagara Falls" of arcing shells and explosions went from one side of the airstrip to the other then rapidly disappeared leaving smoke and flames.

It was over in a matter of minutes. A strange silence fell over our compound. The order came, five hours later, lock and load and get inside the bunker where we waited until the sun came up. No bodies were found, no Viet Cong, no Americans—damage was done.

Boxes marked, "blood saturated fatigues," silver coffins on forklift trucks being loaded on the Starlifter behind me and the attaché on the airfield a few days later was my greeting to my tour of Viet Nam. I was told that I would be returned to the United States exactly one year later. I was.

Peter Galle





## JIM CASS

### U.S. ARMY 4th Infantry Division

Pleiku, Base Camp Enari, LZ Bunker Hill, LZ St. George

February 1968 - November 1969

If you go home today with any lingering thoughts of this display, don't try to remember me, remember the officers and men of "A" Battery 2/9 Artillery. The experiences I shared with these 70-some men make up my most vivid memories. In eight months' time in the field with the firing battery, it seemed like I had learned everybody's girlfriend's, brother's, sister's and parents' names. I also learned about where your grandparents had immigrated from, who your best pal in high school was, and the wildest prank that resulted in your being expelled.

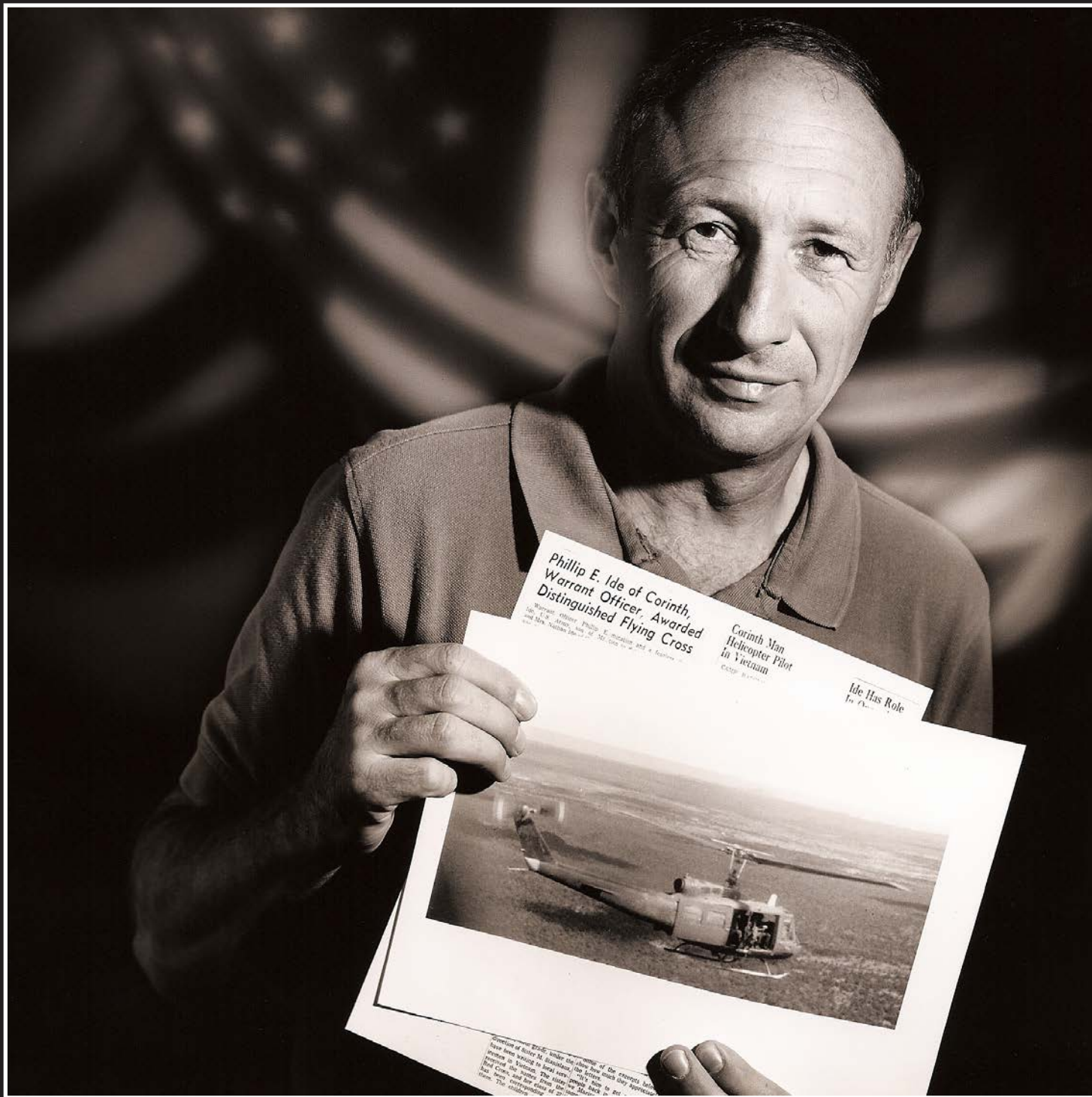
There was sharing cigarettes, sharing problems, sometimes arguing and even fist fighting over otherwise 'unsettleable' issues. Get it? We were a big family of sorts. Not quite equal to the family at home, but tighter than anything before or since.

I knew the saddest moment of my tour would be leaving home (for Nam) and the happiest moment would be leaving Vietnam to come home, but it wasn't quite that way. Yes, I was down when I left for Vietnam. But saying good-bye to that bunch of people was the most difficult moment for me; getting on that deuce and a half to return to base camp, and then to the world, knowing I would never see that big family as one again—ever.

Think of the officers and men of the "Mighty Ninth."

Jim Cass





## PHILLIP IDE

**U.S. ARMY 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile)  
Company C, 227th Assault Helicopter Battalion**

An Khe, Chu Lai, Dak Tho (I & II Corps)

1966 - 1996

I want my family, and friends and you to know that I am PROUD to be a Vietnam Veteran. I had the honor of serving with some of America's finest during a very bitter period in America history. I did my best, despite being caught in the middle of the frenzy of those changing times, daily facing exhilaration and horror at the same time. On many missions I became convinced there was no way to survive 12 months of this stuff-but one survived minute by minute.

I'm holding a picture of the "HUEY" Helicopter, along with a newspaper article, describing personal heroics. These pictures are my visual reminders of the horrors and the exhilaration of war. The "Huey" is the symbol of the Vietnam War.

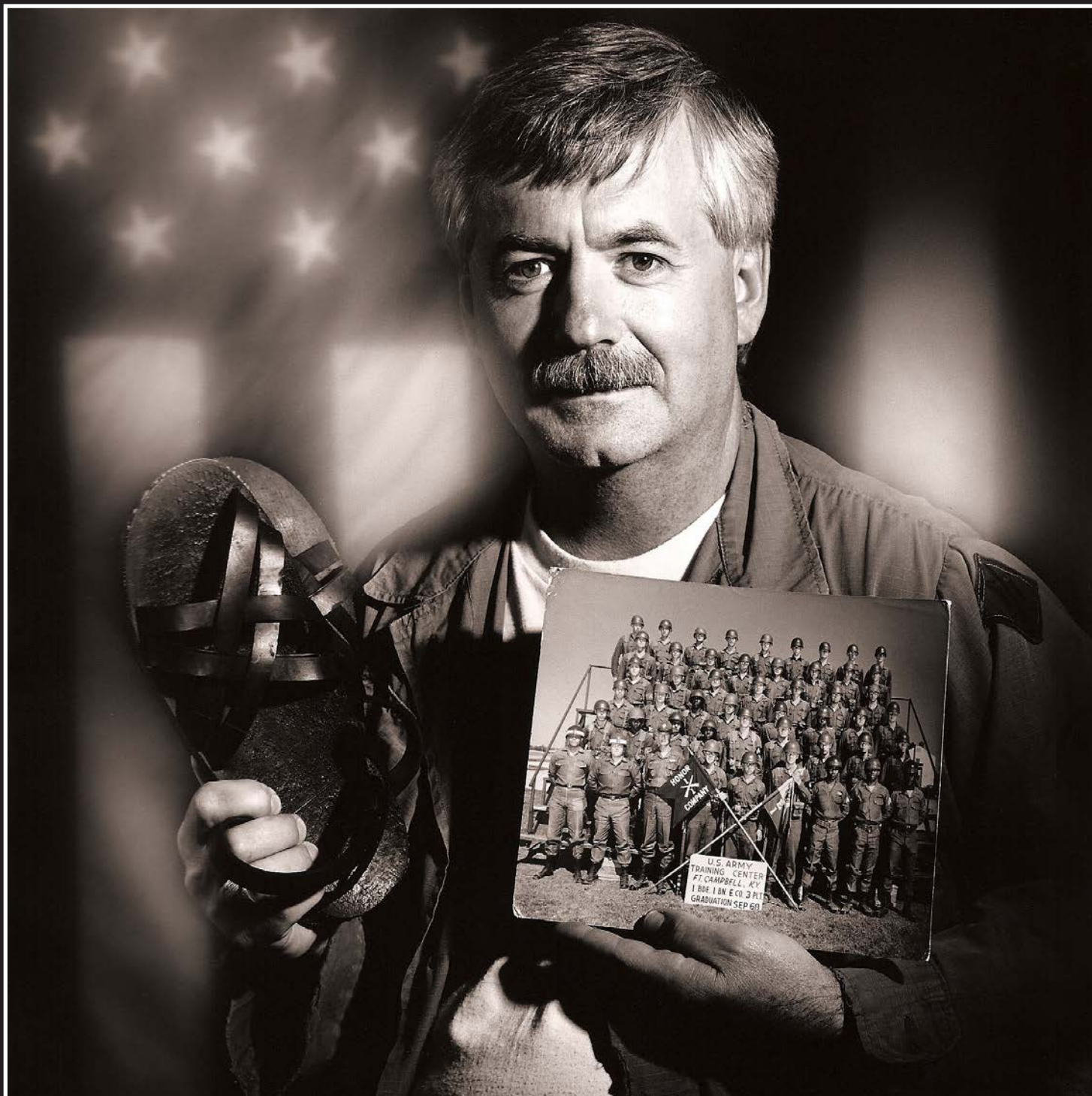
I salute the brotherhood of past and present pilots. They flew combat in un-armored helicopters and listened to the rattle of gunfire and felt the impact of round after round as soldiers loaded their wounded, themselves, their fallen comrades and equipment into our helicopters and were rewarded when these sturdy old war-horses, once again, rose from the earth and safely flew out of harms way. This is what Vietnam was all about to me. Flying in conditions and circumstances that were ABOVE AND BEYOND THE CALL OF DUTY.

The camaraderie and desire to help one's buddies will forever burn in my mind and the minds of all Vietnam helicopter pilots. We are truly proud of what we accomplished. No war protest nor public opinion will ever change what we did.

It is a privilege, to be part of this group. As a Vietnam Veteran, I only ask for one thing. Please remember that we were America's sons and daughters that You sent to war. We completed our mission; the political policies were not ours. As a group we have continued to fly our helicopters in Iraq, Iran, Granada, Somalia, Panama, and now Haiti. We did our best, as we always do! Please, always remember and respect us for that!

Phillip Ide





## GARY RODAS

**U.S. ARMY 18th Engineer Brigade, 509th Engineer Co. PB**

Pleiku, Ban Me Thuot

July 1968 - July 1970

It seems difficult to comprehend, now after 24 years, 3 months and 13 days as a Vietnam Veteran, that I still do not really know why I was sent to Vietnam. Do you think my friends, some who died, that are in the picture I am holding knew? I have spent the last five years actively trying to find the answer, but all to no avail. For my return trip home I was issued a dress uniform with all the campaign and medal ribbons I was authorized. I was then sent on my way via Seattle Airport for my trip home. On that day, December 13th, 1969 at 17:30 hours, an individual out of a group spit at me as I was passing down the hall to my gate. Later that evening a person called out to me at O'Hare Airport and said "to bad you didn't die." Surely those two individuals must have known why I was sent to Vietnam. They both seemed to hate me for it. I must have done something wrong for the previous 365 days to justify such action. On December 14th, I walked into our family's house. It was my "Welcome Home" party. Within the hour a relative asked me how I could have been a part of such a wrongful action. People, what the hell are you all talking about? Welcome home.

Those previous 12 months became a secret. Nobody should know that I served in . . . you know where. God, what an awful way to treat a person who lived next to you, worked with you, who dated you and who had some of the best young adult times ever with you. After almost 25 years I can see guilt on your faces now that I can look at them. I can look at them because I know it wasn't anything I did. I'm not guilty of anything but being a patriotic American, loyal to my country, trusting your elected leaders. Remember, I was not old enough to vote. You sent me to Vietnam!

The Vietnam Veterans of America, Chapter #20 of Rochester is something to be proud of by all. My joining this group four years ago has returned my pride and let my secret out. And yes, took away the burden of a battle that I was losing. Family, friends, neighbors, lovers and strangers, you were wrong 25 years ago, you were wrong...You hurt us for something for which we were not responsible.

Gary Rodas





## **CLYDE SAXON**

**U.S. ARMY 1st Infantry Division**

Phu Loi July 1966 - February 1967

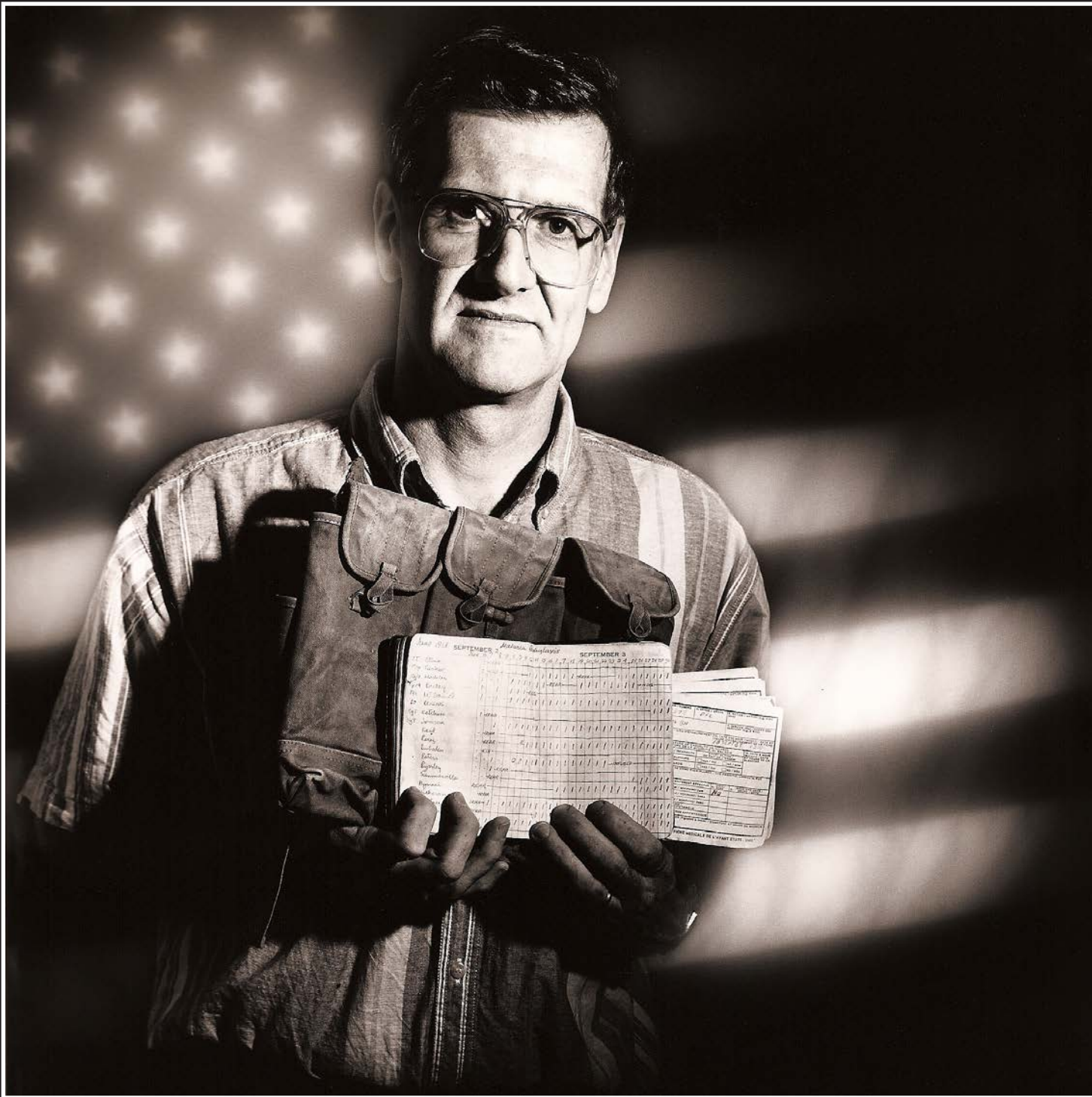
I was assigned to the First Infantry Division, 145th Aviation Battalion, 74th Reconnaissance Airplane Company at Phu Loi (4 miles north of Saigon) from July 1966 through February 1967. A few days after arriving in Vietnam, I was told the type of missions Fixed Wing Aviators were assigned. It was unbelievable to me that anyone in their right mind would put themselves in that much danger. A couple of days later, I was given an orientation flight as a Forward Air Controller (FAC). That flight was the most frightening experience of my entire life.

My primary duties as a FAC were directing artillery fire and air strikes in support of First Infantry Division ground forces and flying patrols over shipping channels looking for enemy movement at night. During the night patrols, we flew blacked out—no lights on at all. Occasionally, we would turn our running lights on to let other aircraft in the area know our approximate location. Whenever we did this, the sky would light up with enemy fire. The shooting only lasted for a few seconds—alone in a little aluminum airplane it seemed like hours.

On several occasions I was requested to fly low enough to draw fire from the enemy and then mark their location with smoke grenades or provide location coordinates to the ground forces so they could seek out and destroy the VC or NVA units. In other words, we were acting as bait trying to get the enemy to shoot at us. Needless to say, each time I received a request of this nature, it felt no different than the very first one. Your heart starts pounding, hoping the firing would stop before you arrived over the targeted area. Sometimes, you would get your wish because the VC knew his chances of surviving the firepower we would direct were slim to none. The Air Force used white phosphorous, napalm and high explosives. Napalm and white phosphorous were very terrifying to the enemy. As time passed, it became unbelievably routine to get calls from ground forces requesting these low-level passes.

Clyde D. Saxon, Jr.





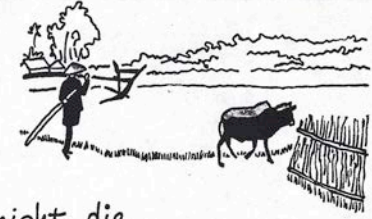
## BRUCE McDANIEL

U.S. ARMY 1st Bn, 52nd Infantry

198th Light Infantry Brigade, Americal Division

Chu Lai September 1967 - January 1971

KENT D JORDAN  
RODNEY A JAMES  
GEORGE D CURRY



*I might die*

ROGER L INBODEN  
PAUL D POTTER



*My buddies will keep me alive*

CLIFTON C THORN

*If I fail, my buddies will die*

JAMES V CAVANAUGH  
JACK P DELANGE



*If I dies it will be for no reason*

THOMAS R GREGSON

*I am alive because other people died*

ROBERT A GRUHN  
WILLIAM B CHRISTENSON  
RONALD M CREMER







## **VICTORIA GUNN**

### **U.S. NAVY WAVES**

US Naval Air Station, Jacksonville Florida

October 1968 - November 1971

In my later years of high school, I felt I was very patriotic.

Writing my feelings regarding this small but important event in my life still brings tears to my eyes.

A family friend who was only a few years older than myself was preparing to return to Vietnam for his second tour as a Corpsman.

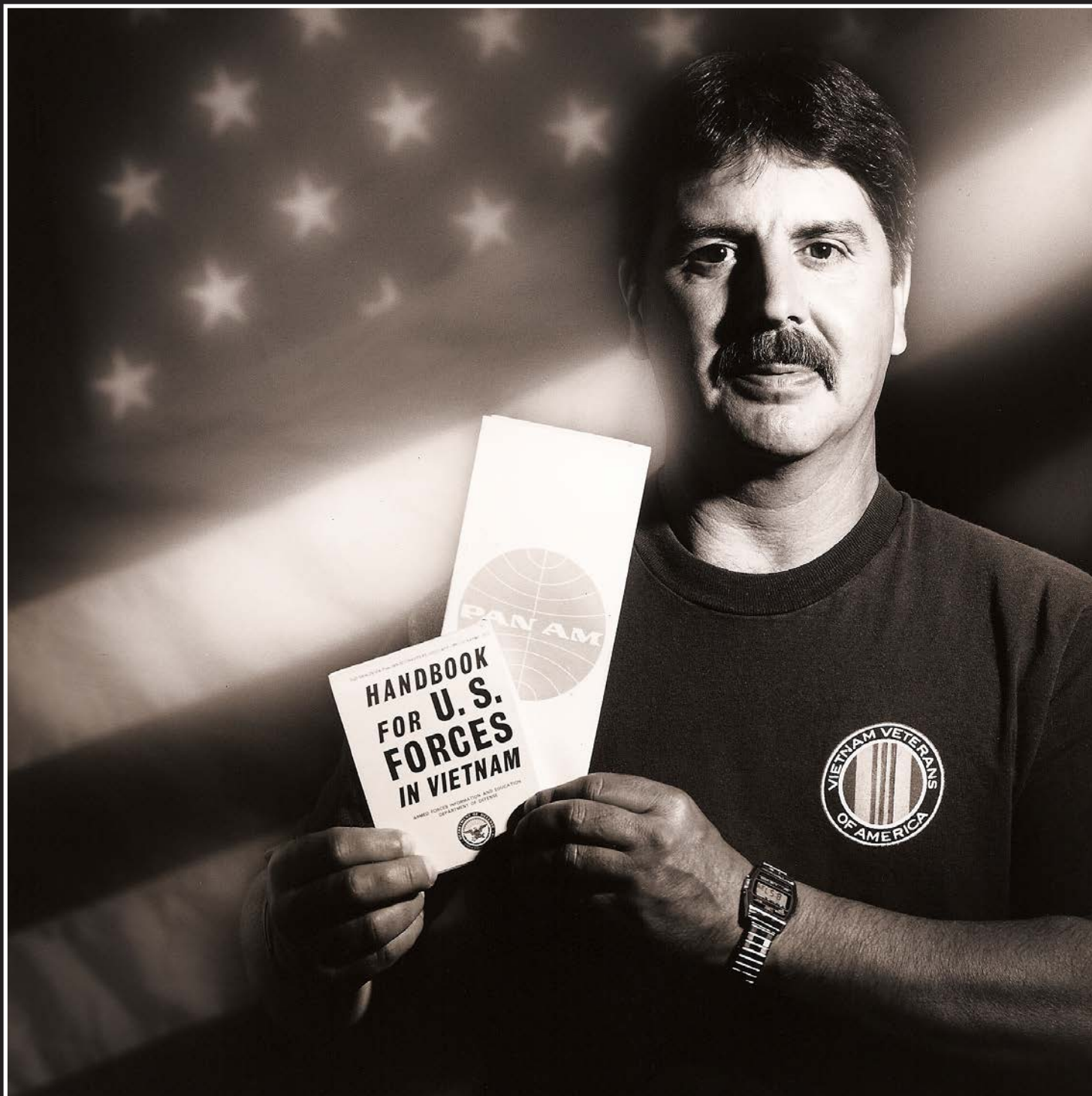
The year was 1968. His name was Michael Kauffman from Goshen, Indiana. He wanted to return to Vietnam, to be there for his brothers, when they called for Corpsmen.

He was killed in action when his helicopter was shot down.

He felt it was vital to be there for the well being of his brothers and help in any way he could. He instilled in me a pride for our country and fellow man. And for that I will never forget him.

Victoria L. Gunn





## **JIM HUNT**

### **U.S. AIR FORCE 12TH SUPPLY SQUADRON**

Cam Rahn Bay Air Force Base

October 1966 - October 1970

The items I hold in my hands I thought represented the beginning and the end of my Vietnam Experience. That's what I thought twenty five years ago.

One item is a handbook for US forces in Vietnam issued upon arrival at Hamilton Air Force Base in San Francisco. The other, is my ticket for a commercial airline return flight to the Continental United States-my ticket back to "The World".

I also saved inoculation records, military orders, a Vietnamese handbook, some in-country pictures, currency and my camouflaged helmet cover. All were tucked away for twenty years along with most of my memories. What I didn't realize about those twelve months between my handbook and my airline ticket was how the experience would impact my life, my psyche and essentially affect my life forever.

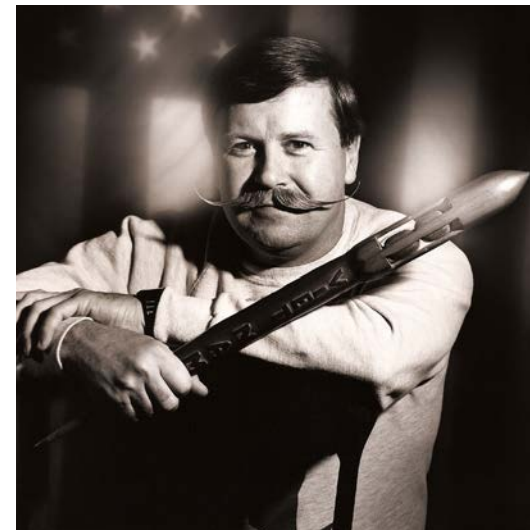
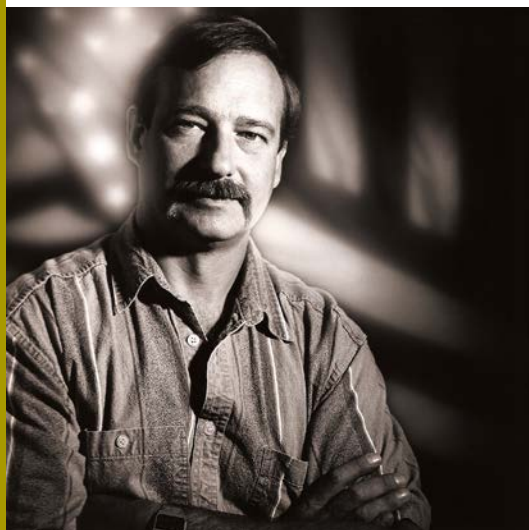
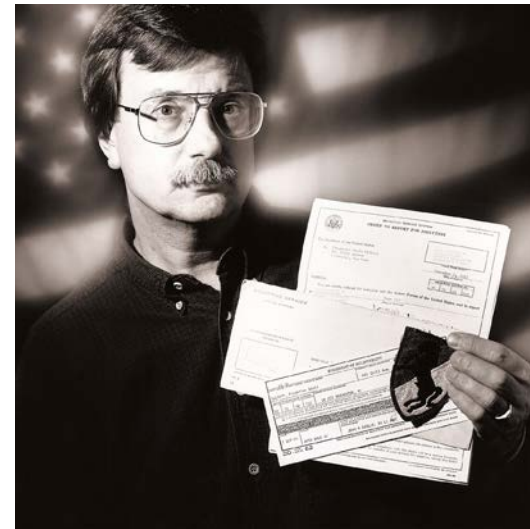
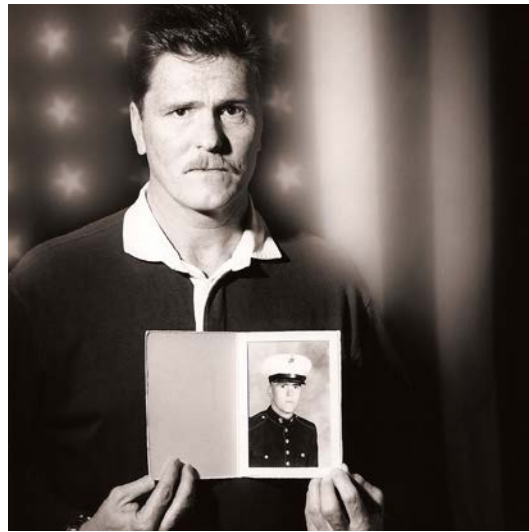
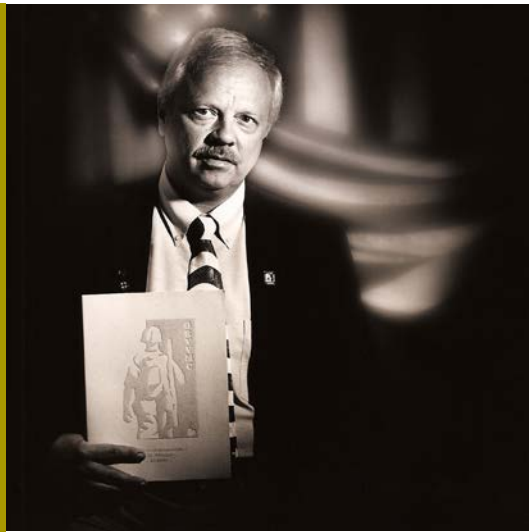
In 1990 I met some new friends, four Vietnam veterans affiliated with a congressionally chartered veterans organization named Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA). They invited me to join Chapter 20. I accepted. By 1992 I was a very involved member, experiencing the camaraderie, service to the community, and the bond that has helped both male and female Veterans begin to heal and better understand their Vietnam Experience.

The VVA Chapter 20 and Veterans Outreach Center share the facility we call "The House" on South Avenue. They are separate entities, but so close in their missions it only seems proper they share the same space. When I found out the VOC offers free counseling as well as veteran benefit and employment information to area veterans and their families; I became a client. This realm between chapter and center is where I was able to finally begin to comprehend the twelve month experience between my handbook and my airplane ticket and its effect on me and the years that followed.

Other veterans have come to realize that their experience has meaning, substance, and is still affecting their lives. I believe local Vietnam veterans share a bond of understanding and commitment that provides the energy to be of service to the community and each other.

Jim Hunt





What is shown in the previous pages is a small sampling of my larger project working with a group of Vietnam Veterans in the Rochester, New York area. It was an amazing experience getting to know these men and women, making photographs of them and encouraging them to share their feelings and stories.

It was humbling how open they were with me as I worked very diligently to learn more about them, helping me to understand my own experience with the Vietnam era.

**My work with the Vietnam Veterans of America, Chapter 20, Rochester, New York is dedicated to the memory of Major Edward Monroe Hudgens, USAF.**

