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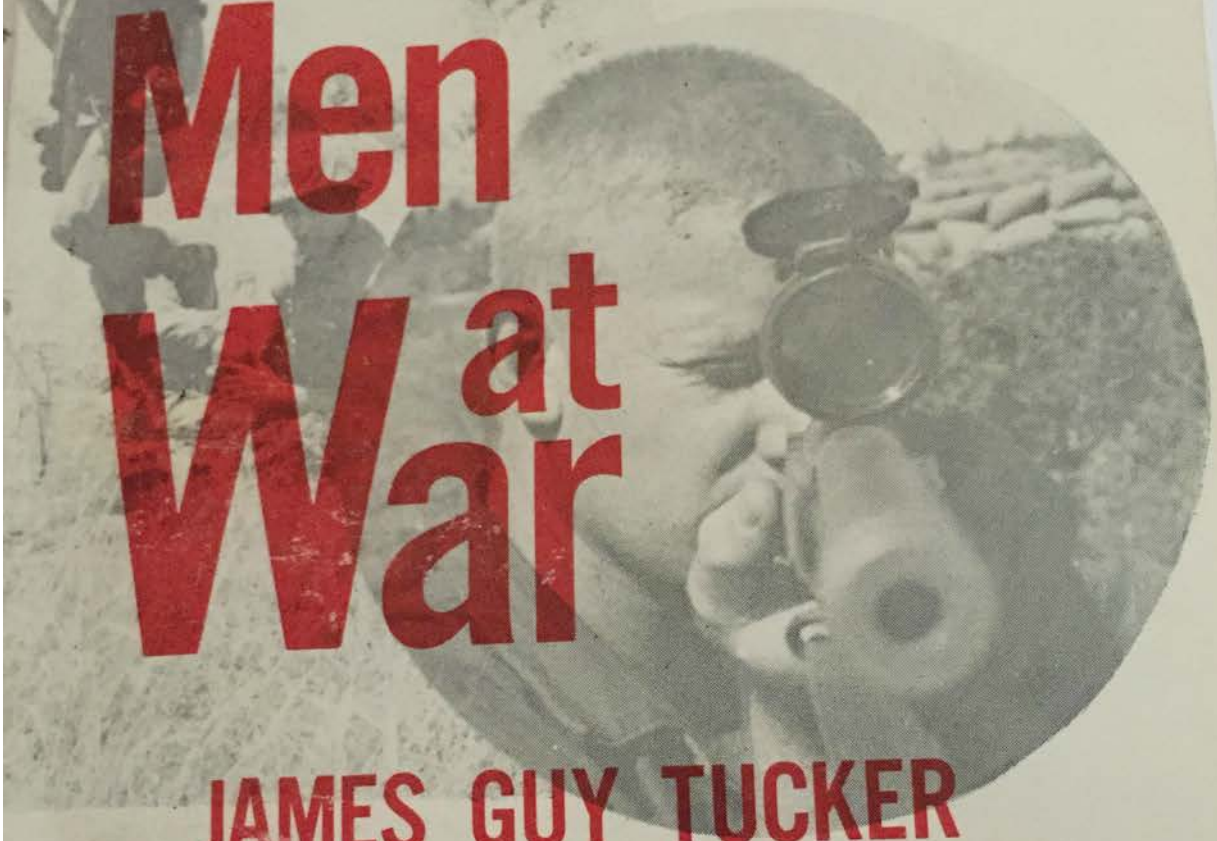
Arkansas Men at War



JAMES GUY TUCKER

TNAM--VIETNAM

With Introduction By

J. William Fulbright

1965

July 14, 1965

Looking at the truckloads full of United States soldiers arriving at the Bien Hoa airbase yesterday afternoon, Lt. Col. Lloyd "Scooter" Burke of Stuttgart, winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor in Korea, said, "We're here to kill VC, we are going to patrol, search them out, and when we find them, we're going to kill them."

Most of the soldiers in Burke's 2nd Battalion 16th Infantry have never seen combat. Forty to sixty percent of them are draftees. Their organization, though a part of the highly spirited, Big Red First Division, is not a volunteer outfit. The young men who are settling into their defensive positions at the Bien Hoa airbase are typical American "citizen soldiers." They have a two year tour of duty in the Army, and then return to their civilian status . . . the era when Vietnam was a professional soldier's war is now over. American casualties will shortly be announced not one or two at a time . . . but quite likely in the same numbers that Vietnamese casualties have been announced for so long.

The question arises as to the reaction of the American people when they suddenly do realize that Vietnam is a place where a great many Americans are likely to die. Lt. Col. Burke points out, quite correctly, that the men arriving here from the

states are fully aware that they are indeed soldiers, and that they may be killed here. But, what will happen as the American people watch the casualty figures among American troops start to build?

The American citizenry has not been prepared to accept reports of heavy American casualties. As a matter of fact, they are still tremendously upset when they hear of only four or five Americans being killed in a battle. Most Americans are presently blithely unaware of the fact that "those little brown men" way over in Vietnam can actually inflict any serious damage to the mighty American monolith. In short, most Americans just haven't realized there is a real war here.

America's dangerous ignorance of the true situation in Vietnam is due to several causes. First, the Americans don't like to think about war . . . they listen only lightly to the news from here, and forget quickly. Second, press reports have seldom emphasized the massive death toll suffered by the Vietnamese in this war, and as a result most Americans think the death toll here is pretty low. They fail to translate actual Vietnamese deaths to potential American deaths.

The American soldier is one of the world's best fighting men. But he is certainly not invulnerable. The newly arrived Americans will soon realize what this name "Vietcong" really means. He may have been told that the VC are tough, resourceful, ruthless fighters. But he has been told that he is better. There is no doubt in my mind that American soldiers can defeat the Vietcong. But the fact remains, that no matter how fierce the fighter, when an American heliborne battalion is dropped into a clearing surrounded by Vietcong machineguns and mortars, it will be slaughtered just as quickly as a Vietnamese battalion.

It is a chance that soldiers know they must take. I'm not sure the American citizenry knows, or wants to admit, that their boys are now taking that chance.

Shortly before the First Division started landing at Bien Hoa yesterday the VC mortared a village only 2,000 meters away from the landing zone. Small arms fire continued for fifteen minutes. Artillery was firing in the distance as the planes approached, but it was unfortunately quiet when the troops stepped off their plane.

Those young men were serious and professional as they made their camp last night . . . but it's a shame they missed the mortaring because they are going to learn very quickly the facts of this war . . . and someone needs to start reminding the American people, as much as they do hate to be reminded, what war is all about.

1967

The DMZ, July 4, 1967

This is the story of three Arkansas boys and how they passed the time on July 4, 1967, this third year of our war. They spent this Fourth of July hiding from sniper fire and waiting to move a hundred yards forward to recover the bodies of seventy Marine friends who had been killed two days before.

The DMZ dividing North and South Vietnam is a flat, barren area, filled only with scrub brush, hedgerows, shell craters, and bodies. On July 2, a company of the Third Battalion, Ninth Marines ran into, or were ambushed by, a strong North Vietnamese force that had crossed the Ben Hai River and was roaming south towards the Marine outpost of Con Thien. Before the battle was over, at least seventy Marines were dead and 170 wounded. The fighting continued sporadically for three days as the Marines pushed slowly forward to recover their dead.

James Larry Howard, 21, son of Mr. and Mrs. Homer Howard of Bright (Miller County), Floyd E. Bradley, 19, son of Mrs. Edith Bradley and the late Mr. Bradley of Shirley (Van Buren County), and Billy E. Davis, 18, son of Mr. and Mrs. Elmer C. Shepard of Pine Bluff, were at the forefront of this action. A walk to their position was an education in the desolation of war.

In the helicopter landing zone, half-naked Marine stretcher bearers moved like wraiths through a dreamlike haze of choking

red dust. Nerves straining almost as visibly as their tendons, they lifted their torn comrades onto the rescue ships, then stumbled dizzily back to the wounded waiting on chairs of splintered logs and crushed metal. Also waiting, dust covered and still, were the remains of what had once been friends, husbands, brothers—living boys a few hours before. One dead Marine had been placed under a poncho to keep the flies away and to keep his staring eyes from the sight of his former companions who still lived. He was quite young and his wounds hardly visible. His trousers fluttered in the occasional breeze that blows along that barren stretch . . . next to him lay the possessions he carried with him on his last day. Most were tools of war; a torn helmet, flak jacket; broken rifle. Also there was a photo and a letter, the address blurred by his sweat.

Further forward, Marines with haunted eyes admonished, "Don't. Don't go up there. Snipers!" The trail narrows and empties. A gutted tank, shell casings, a torn shirt, empty boxes and C ration cans—part of the litter of war—lay scattered along the trail. Stumbling to the rear came the walking wounded, some with heads, legs, hands bandaged and lips compressed with pain. Others had no visible wounds. These were concussion victims, gasping, or shaking their heads to clear some invisible fog, they dragged themselves through the dust absolutely silent, oblivious to any sniper fire. No one else was seen except the silent sentries, the friendly dead, stretched by the side of the path.

Across some torn strands of barbed wire, in a twenty foot deep bomb crater stood Larry Howard. Another Marine was standing there with ten canteens full of water he had just brought back from the five gallon water cans on the tanks further up. Larry had come to the 'line' at dawn this morning carrying his usual load of 3.5 millimeter rockets. Each round weighs nine pounds . . . Larry carried three, plus his pack, his rifle, three canteens, a 12 pound flak jacket, steel helmet—a total of nearly 75 pounds. Shell craters were large and small, some filled yet with the black strench of gunpowder, or the ugly grey of shrapnel, others clean and smooth, their rawness somewhat disguised by the dust sliding and blowing into the wounded earth.

Larry used to help make the things that had made those holes when he worked on the assembly line at the Red River Army Depot. Now he knows how much a man should fear them. "The artillery and mortars are the most frightening," he says. "You can hear them coming but you never know whether it will hit you or not.

You do know it will hurt if it does," he says softly. "The

thought of it is the worst." For Larry, it's hard to think of death having anything but the deep bass roar of an exploding mortar shell.

His helmet has his wife's name, Brenda, printed in indelible ink across the camouflage covering. His wife is the former Brenda Dishaw daughter of Mr. and Mrs. C. W. Griffin of Texarkana, Ark., and Atlanta, Tex.

"When I get home I just want to find some place quiet and peaceful. I've seen more in the last month than in my whole life. Some of these guys here really don't mind dying for their country. They do things I never believed anyone could do."

Larry looked over the edge of his hole to where the planes were bombing. "Oh yeah, say 'hi' to Clive Griffin, for me. He's a good buddy." He pointed forward to a line of six tanks. "Bradley is up there."

Before Floyd Bradley moved to Van Buren County, and before he came to Vietnam, he used to live in Little Rock. He went to school at Fuller and likes to fish. "If I was back home today I'd be eating watermelon and fishing on the White River. A river! Boy one of those would look good right now. I'm so thirsty! We can't get enough water up here!"

Floyd's helmet is also decorated. Across the front is emblazoned the word 'Hillbilly'. On the right side is written, "The South Shall Rise Again."

He kept ducking his head as the jets screamed down and then upward overhead, spitting out their seedlike bombs that blossomed into any one of a half dozen "deadly flowers," spreading their petals of fiery savage death.

Death came in six colors three hundreds yards out where the bombs were landing. The napalm has a black lace mantle with deep orange center; as it struck the ground it sent a long white pistel soaring upward before its blossom opened. The five-hundred pounders raised a cloud of red brown; the thousand pounders mushroomed in a graceful, spreading web of black speckled with darker fragments of earth and shrapnel.

"We came out to pick up the bodies," said Bradley. "So far we've only been able to get three. But when the wind is right you can tell there's a lot more out there."

"Hey, there's another guy from Arkansas in Kilo Company right up there by the bombs, Davis is his name; he's from Pine Bluff, I think.

Billy E. Davis, ("Bill is what they call me") graduated from Sheridan High School in 1966. As he came dodging toward his foxhole it was apparent that he considered the explosions only a few hundred yards away, much, much too close. "Boy, those bodies we brought out last night were in pretty

bad condition," he said. "By the time those planes get through with that area they're really going to be torn up. Bill is an eighteen-year-old Marine Lance Corporal and machine gunner. He's not as scared now as he was before, he says. "You get used to it, I guess."

"I was really jumpy the first night I was on the line. My buddy was asleep in his poncho on some sandbags next to our foxhole. About two in the morning, when it was real dark, he rolled over in his sleep and fell on me. Gee! I thought it was the Vietcong that had jumped on me and I started hitting him and yelling. It was funny," he said with a nervous chuckle.

A jet seemed to brush the trees as it pulled out of its dive; shrapnel pelted down around Bill. His company commander threw out a green smoke grenade to mark his men's position for the pilots.

Across from Bill lay a stack of folded blue green 'body bags'. One rubber container lay sprawled, its zippered mouth open waiting for its cargo, waiting for the Friendly Dead.

Cu Chi, June 18, 1967

Pfc. Birnes Penix of Wilmot wiped the sweat from his dark face. He chambered a round in his AR 15 rifle and shook his head to clear the roar of the helicopters from his ears. He then jumped from the chopper into the swirl of the dust and bullets that was supposed to be Charlie Company's landing zone. But it wasn't.

Face down in a rice paddy and with eyes straining to penetrate the jungle ahead, Penix experienced the confusion of battle. He recognized none of the people around him. He didn't know where he was, where his company was or what he should do. He did know there were snipers hiding in the trees ahead. He had been trained to react to that stimulus.

Penix was found five hours after the landing. His chopper had dropped him in the right place, but all the other helicopters in the assault from his company had dropped their troops in the wrong place, three miles away. Three miles is a long, long way in enemy territory, so Penix spent the rest of the day with Bravo Company.

Of course, Penix doesn't like any of it, but he says that it's the night patrolling that really bugs him. "Boy," he says, "I hate those things."

On Penix's second day in Vietnam he was sent out on a night ambush patrol. While changing positions in the blackness, his patrol crossed the lines of a group of South Vietnamese soldiers. Immediately the South Vietnamese sent up a flare, thinking the Vietcong were attacking.

"The flare went up right over my head," said Penix. "I was stretched out in the middle of the road—a perfect target—and right in front of me, maybe twenty feet away was a South

Vietnamese sighting a .50 calibre machine gun at me. That was a bad day."

Penix seems adjusted, reconciled, or whatever one calls the acceptance of the fact that he is in Vietnam to spend twelve months risking his life.

"When I first heard I was coming over, I really didn't want to come; but then I talked it over with my wife and my mother. Mother said, 'God is over there just like he is here in the United States, son; and he'll take care of you there just as he does here.'

"I don't blame the fellows at home for not wanting to come over; but our fathers fought just as we are fighting, and we owe it to them and to our children to be here. I think people over here deserve something better; they need something better. Mud houses, straw roofs, sleeping on dirt floors, drinking foul water—that's no way to live. People shouldn't live this."

Penix feels that he should live like that, for his year of duty anyway. "I felt bad, leaving my wife pregnant, but I felt like it was my duty. Now that I'm here I feel better about it."

Sitting in the sun on a rice paddy dike, with his grenades weighing down his sweat-soaked shirt and a can opener glistening under the band on his camouflaged helmet, Penix recalled the last time he had been summoned to the Company command post.

"The last time I was called in from the field was back in Fort Polk, on a day just as hot as this. That was real bad news. I was hoping this wasn't the same sort of thing."

On that day, Penix had been in his last hours of training in hand to hand combat. He was called to the company commander's office. His two-month-old son had died. "That was hard, real hard."

"But the Red Cross was effective. They deserve a compliment. Twelve hours after I got the news I was home, and they took care of the money for the burial."

Now Penix waits for the end of his tour of duty and thinks of his wife, Rosetta, and their six-month-old daughter, Vivian. "I miss them, and I miss all my old buddies from high school." Penix graduated from Slackle Grand High School in Wilmot in 1966.

"It seems like I've always been with the wolves", says Penix. "Our high school team was called the 'Wolves' and now I'm with the Wolfhounds." The Wolfhounds are a highly respected group of fighters, feared by the Vietcong.

"When I first got with the unit they kidded me a lot," says Penix, "I told them they would have to shape up. Back

in Arkansas, I said, we don't believe in being anything but Number One, so if you people can't be Number One then I just won't stay."

The Wolfhounds are definitely Number One around Cu Chi, and Penix likes his job and his companions, but says he will be glad to leave them both.

Before he joined the Army, Penix worked for Georgia Pacific in Crossett making plywood. He wants to go back there to work, wants to stay in Arkansas, but he says he is flirting with the idea of going out to California. "I have to take care of my family, and the pay is higher there." Then he adds again, "But I sure do like Arkansas."

Penix's nickname is "Rabbit", so named in highschool "because I was jumping all the time." He wants to thank his Boy Scout leaders fo rthe things they taught him, and his high school coach, Willie Parker, for the good physical conditioning he, Penix, received. And, finally, the Rabbit says "hi" to his good buddy, Will Clark, Jr.

June 20, 1967 (delayed)

Bob Higgins sat on the edge of his bunker south of the Bo Loi woods and looked over the barbed wire towards the fertile rice land of the Saigon River delta.

"I'm just looking forward to getting back to Atkins and working on the farm again. Pfc. Higgins' parents, Mr. and Mrs. R. H. Higgins of Atkins, have some good soybean land in the Atkins bottoms. The Vietnamese are mostly farmers, too, but watching them wade in their fields behind their wooden-yoked water buffaloes makes Bob say simply, "I'm not used to that kind of farming."

Higgins graduated from Atkins High School in 1963. He played right guard on the Red Devil's football team, and was president of the Beta Club and of his senior class. After farming with his dad for awhile he was called to the Army.

Bob took his basic training at Fort Polk, La., deep in the southern swamp land. "I'll say one thing for Fort Polk," grins Bob, "it's a great place to train before coming over here. It's sort of a little Vietnam."

Higgins has been on the line since he arrived in Vietnam in April. That means a twenty-four hour a day routine of patrols, ambushes, and filling sandbags to build bunkers. His company, Alpha Company of the 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry, 25th Division, has spent most of its time searching for the Vietcong in the Bo Loi woods thirty-five miles northwest of Saigon.

Not only must Higgins fight the VC in the woods, but

South of the Bo Loi Woods, June 20, 1967

On television they do it once a week, blasting across the desert sands, harassing the Germans . . . that's the "Rat Patrol". Here in Vietnam, just south of the infamous Bo Loi woods, Sgt. Clarence James Gray of Little Rock, leads six men and two gun Jeeps into this daily exercise in organized insanity.

Sgt. Gray, with the Fourth Battalion, Ninth Infantry, has been blasting along the jungle trails of Vietnam at 70 miles an hour for most of his eleven months here. His life depends on how well he keeps his men, their jeeps, and their two M-60 machine guns operating.

Perhaps more so than any other unit in Vietnam Sgt. Gray's team is completely, totally interdependent. The jeep must not stall; the gun must not jam; the gunner must return fire directly at the enemy; the driver must not falter. And Sgt. Gray must be able to give the right orders, and at the right time under heavy fire.

Outwardly, Gray's jeep is a standard, dust-covered, militarily drab, unexciting hulk. The only distinguishing feature on the vehicle is the long, sleek snout of Gray's "Baby", "Best Friend", Mother", "Father", "Lover" and "Protector": the M-60 machine gun.

The gun sits godlike on its dust-covered altar, and seems to glow under the admiring smile and caresses of "its people." Under the hood of the "altar" sits an engine as clean and well-tuned as any that ever took the track at Indianapolis. The driver of this deformed racer is racing for his life when he gets behind the wheel.

The "Recondo" teams, as they are often called, seek out the enemy, they precede and follow all convoys to prevent sneak attacks. They continually patrol roads that are dangerous even

for tanks and heavily armored vehicles to travel. They look for Vietcong tax collectors, road blocks, snipers and mines, and they usually find them—the hard way.

The floor of the jeeps are covered with sandbags to absorb some of the blast if they do hit a mine. But as Gray says, "The best thing we can do is just try and drive so fast that the mine will explode behind us."

Mines have exploded in front of Gray, and behind him; snipers have fired all around him, but so far he has been untouched. The hardest part of his existence at this point is trying to make these last thirty days disappear. They compose his final month in Vietnam.

"When I first arrived I was scared, real scared," says Gray; "but I got over that in a couple of weeks. I was just so busy that I didn't have time to worry."

With only thirty days left now, Gray is officially a "short timer". "Once you start getting kind of short, you start getting kind of scared . . . all over again." And time drags. "The first six months went real fast; but then, man, they don't move at all."

Vietnam isn't all bad in Sgt. Gray's opinion—just mostly bad. "Actually, Vietnam might be a nice place to live if there weren't a war. Some of the people are real nice and friendly.

"There's a papasan down in Trang Bang who gives us a big bowl of noodle soup and a big glass of rum with a little tiny bit of coke in it every time we come to town. He won't let us pay him for it either, no matter how many of us come, or how often we come. He even gets mad if we try and pay him. He just stands there and smiles and brings another bowl of soup.

"They seem amazed that we are so big," says the six-foot Negro. "Most of the Vietnamese get a kick out of my skin too. They think the color will rub off. The kids come over and rub at it and pinch it, then laugh like crazy."

But as much as Gray likes the people, the rest of the country leaves him cold, hot, sweaty, chilled, and scared. It is standard operating procedure here to shake your boots each morning before putting them on. Most anything may fall out. Black scorpions as large as a good iron frying pan cruise through the grass looking for whatever it is they eat.

"And don't leave out the red ants," says Gray. "Those red ants are something else." Gray and all the men here sound somewhat awed when they speak of the ants. "You get all swelled up from them. There's just no comparison, not at all. Except, maybe, well maybe, yeah! Like a rattlesnake bite, that's pretty close.!"

All of his buddies have pretty good morale, Gray feels. But

he gets angry when he speaks of the guys who never get any mail from home. "This is the time you need to hear from someone," says Gray. "All you can do when you get over here is count the days until you can go home, and you've got to feel that someone back home cares about you. The married guys have it real tough. One guy in my squad hasn't had a letter from his wife in over a month. He's sending her all that dough home; the very least she could do is mail him a letter once a week.

"Of course some guys come over and think they are real rugged, and don't give a damn, don't care. But they get over that pretty quick. A guy here just has to have someone who cares for him and he needs to care for someone."

Clarence's mother, Mrs. Louise Gray of Little Rock, has three sons in the service right now. One of Clarence's brothers, Lawrence, was stationed in Da Nang for a year and Clarence went up to visit with him a few months ago.

Another brother, Richmond, is in the Air Force. But Clarence is especially proud of his youngest brother, Willie, a student at J. C. Cook Junior High School.

Gray speaks of Willie with obvious affection: "He's real smart. He works hard an dhe wants to be a doctor. He's going to do fine in life. He's real smart."

As soon as he gets home, Gray wants two things which are the eternal dreams of any soldier at war: "A good home-cooked meal and a good, hot bath in a bath tub." And, Mrs. Gray, Clarence says he wants that meal to include "collard greens, ham hock, butter milk, black-eyed peas, and corn bread."

The nineteen-year-old Gray graduated from Biscoe High School in 1963, where he played on the basketball team. He worked part time at the University of Arkansas Medical Center in Little Rock and at the John R. Jernigan Deep Rock Service Station while he was in school. After he leaves the service Clarence hopes to attend college on the GI bill and get a degree in Business Administration. Then he would like to stay in Arkansas if he can find a good job there.

Da Nang, South Vietnam, June 2

In March 1965, the United States Marines landed on the sandy wastes at Danang, Vietnam. In May, 1965, Tommy C. Thompson, son of Mr. and Mrs. E. C. Thompson of Little Rock, graduated from Hall High School. Not long after that, Tommy married his high school sweetheart, Barbara Hanns. On January, 1967, Barbara gave birth to their daughter, Donna. Day before yesterday Tommy received his second purple heart in Vietnam.

Since he gets shot at almost every day, Tommy might receive his third purple heart, and an automatic free ticket home, at any time. "And I'd like to have it," he says, "but only if it's just a little scratch that gives it to me . . . not like the first time; I don't want that to happen again."

The first time was in Operation Union last April. Dropping through the clouds and swinging across a rice paddy on a mission to evacuate a wounded Marine, Tommy's helicopter was the target for every enemy machine gun surviving the furious poundings of jet fighters that had supposedly "softened up the area" before Calvin's chopper went in.

Many enemy guns had survived. One of those sent a .30-calibre bullet slashing through the side of the helicopter; the amorphous mass tore through Tommy's fibreglass flak jacket down low on this side, carved a ragged path up his rib cage, and lodged itself under his arm. He was on the hospital ship "Sanctuary" for three weeks with that wound.

On June 29, he was lifting a group of Marines out of a 'hot' landing zone when the second wound came. The air was thick with bullets; one Marine was hit in the leg as he crawled into the chopper. Tom got it in the neck. As he returned fire, a bullet slashed at the back of his neck, splattering him with shrapnel. He spent two hours at the infirmary with that wound. Neck covered with iodine, he was back at his job the same day.

Tommy's work day runs from twelve to fifteen hours. His work week is all week. His office is at the window of a UH 34 D Marine Helicopter. His tools consist of a 7.6 calibre machine gun and a set of iron-hard nerves. Sometimes he is able to relax. "At night we just circle around mostly and all I have to do is watch for mortar flashes below." But during the day: "I'm always watching for someone who's trying to 'ding' me."

The UD 34 helicopter is about fifteen paces long with a great bulbous nose and floppy dragonfly like wings. The green machine does indeed resemble a dragonfly or a grasshopper. It's skin is patched here and there: small and large, usually square, the patches are a litle more yellow than the rest of the aircraft; but there are so many patches in Helicopter Number 20 that it will soon be hard to tell which color was the original.

Inside, two thick masses of wire wrapped in white, oil-smudged plastic slip snake-like out of the tail over the heads of the two gunners, through the stomach of the machine and into its cockpit. From the stomach, only the legs of the pilots are visible in the cockpit. Two pairs of legs with boots dangle, disembodied, as would the legs of a man on the gallows. They jerk irregularly, manuvering the foot controls.

Tommy sits on what is, essentially, a kitchen chair. Bolted to the floor, the chair is draped with flak jackets. Two over the back to ward off bullets from that direction; one under the chair and one Tom sits on for protection from fire entering the sofe underbelly of the machine. Two jackets are wadded, crammed and wrapped, stuffed into a small crevice by his left arm.

Facing the pilot, Tom sits on the left side of Number 20 and must protect against all attacks from that direction. He carries a wooden handled thirty-eight revolver on his hip. His flight uniform is all zippers, pockets, and dirt.

Tommy's grey-back plastic flight helmet has his initials emblazoned in yellow on the visor protector. In rain or dust, or when looking into the sun he pulls the green-tinted visor down out of the helmet. So positioned, only the base of his chin, and his mouth are visible. The rest of his face is green, opaque plastic. On his hands he wears soft leather kid gloves. They fit tightly, absorbing some of the vibration of the machine gun and preventing his sweat-soaked hands from slipping as he reloads.

On the afternoon of June 30, Tommy made four trips in his chopper. They were run of the mill, except for the fact they weren't fired on that day. On the first two trips Number 20 carried a load of food and supplies for Marines in the field.

Tommy and his co-gunner loaded the boxes on board: case after case of 'c' rations stored in cardboard brown boxes and stenciled in military fashion "Meal—Combat—Individual."

There were oranges from the Florida citrus growers association, Washington State apples packed in a white box with a red-faced "Mr. Apple" wearing a mortar board smiling from its side. There was grape juice from Pennsylvania, grapefruit juice from California, pineapple juice from Hawaii, and grey bags filled with thousands of small plastic, saccharine-type bottles of mosquito repellant.

The grasshopper bounced into the air with its cargo, went up to twenty-five hundred feet and then dropped rock-like through the air, careening from cloud to cloud to avoid bullets from below.

The moment it touched down, Tom unstrapped his safety belt (a loose belt whose purpose is not to hold the gunner in his seat, but to keep him from being sucked out the open door of the chopper). Panic seemed to hold sway as he and his co-gunner hurled the cargo out the door. Too long on the ground in a forward area invites destruction for the helicopter and its crew.

Green visors flashing in the sun, heads bent, bodies swaying under the load, the blond-haired Little Rock boy turned into a sort of man-ant-parasite flushing the stomach of his grasshopper home.

As the last box hit the ground, Number 20 began clawing at the air with its floppy rotor blades and dodging into the clouds. Having regained altitude, Tommy looked at the crushed orange on the floor of the chopper; its juice had splashed across his boots, and now was gathering a little colored pool on the floor and rippling from the vibrations of the flight. Perhaps it reminded young Tommy of the blood of the young Marine he had hauled out of a rice paddy last week. Both his legs had been blown off, "one below the knee and one above the knee" by a booby trap. Or perhaps it reminded him simply of the early mornings before school, or in early marriage, when the orange juice came ice-cold and comforting to his lips, and why it could not be like that now. Perhaps it passed by him completely unnoticed, as many small, reflective things in the most lethal, lashing moments of maneuvering in a forward area.

As Number 20 was reloaded for another trip, Tommy sat and chewed one of the apples, oblivious to the dust that had settled on it; unconscious of the sweat that beaded on his sunburned nose and across his upper lip that needs only an occasional shaving.

Outside a Marine lay asleep under a water carrier. Tommy threw the apple core out the door as a man would dash an empty champagne glass into the fireplace. He sat, letting the sounds of his helicopter wash over him. Far too much noise to talk, he listened to the roar of the engine, the whine of the

rotor blades slashing at the dust-laden air, the wind seeking to find a way under his heavy flak jacket to cool him, the nervous crackle of his headset: these are the "sounds of silence" in a helicopter.

Another trip out; this time the chopper settled in an open rice paddy while a patrol of Marines kept their rifles pointed at the surrounding fields. Three blindfolded Vietnamese were led to the helicopter. Tommy pulled them inside and then fell back to his seat as the chopper lifted off.

The three men were naked but for white pajama bottoms tied with string. Their blindfolds had once been their shirts. Their feet were mud-caked and calloused.

One man freed his hands. Tommy jumped on him; then another passenger helped. The prisoner trembled violently, unable to see, only able to feel the wind rushing past him and recall the stories he had heard of prisoners being thrown from such helicopters.

The prisoners sat very still on that battered, screw-studded, paint peeling, aluminum helicopter floor. Each man was tagged as would be a package in parcel post. The tags had each man's name, age, and circumstances of capture. One was thirty-five years of age. He had been found hiding in a hedge row and had tried to run away from the Marines that caught him. Another was twenty-seven; he and the third, who was thirty-five, were reported by a Vietnamese civilian to have been "carrying a pack".

A hard rain forced Number 20 back to base for an hour, and Tommy had a cold soft drink at "Snoopy's Hangout", the squadron snackbar. He lit a cigarette with an engraved lighter picturing Snoopy, scarf blowing in the breeze, mounted on his bullet-riddled "sopwith camel." The squadron mascot, "Snoopy", who looks as much like the cartoon character as any dog in the world possibly could, walked from handpat to handpat, to ear scratching.

Having been asked what kind of dog he was, Tommy replied, "I don't know. Vietnamese is all I could say. He rides a lot of the choppers; he'll sleep right through a fire fight out there."

Ask Tommy what he misses the most other than his wife and family and he'll say immediately, "Clean sheets . . . or, for that matter, sheets period." He watches television for relaxation.

Tommy loves flying, even with the danger he faces in Vietnam. "The Medevacs are the best part of the job," he says. "When we can go bring out someone that's been hit, then I feel like I've accomplished something, helped someone."

The rain stopped and Tommy went out for his last trip of the day: lifting a Vietnamese soldier with a leg wound out of a battle and into a hospital and temporary safety. "It feels so good to be able to help a buddy."

The nineteen-year-old Calvin has a brother, Johnny, 20, who is in the Air Force and stationed in Texarkana. His married sister, Florine Barnett lives in St. Louis. His wife is the daughter of Mrs. W. D. Hanns and the late Mr. Hanns. Tommy is the son of Mr. and Mrs. E. C. Calvin, Little Rock. Tommy and his wife have a daughter, Donna, born this past January.

Da Nang, June

Phu Bai, Vietnam, July 5, 1967

For the hundreds of combat Marines who stop over at the Phu Bai airport, the first thing they see when they step outside for a breath of air is a large Arkansas state flag flying over the 'home' of Lance Corporal David McLaughlin of Ft. Smith. Now flying at the end of a long stick of bamboo stuck through the roof of his sandbagged mortar shelter, the big red flag came to David within ten days after he wrote Governor Rockefeller that he would like to have one.

McLaughlin, 19, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Dale V. McLaughlin, Fort Smith, is one of the thousands of "support" troops that back up the "line" companies and help them do their jobs. David does his part by feeding the doctors and corpsmen who care for the wounded. "I'm happy I've been lucky enough to be stationed in 'the rear' ", says David.

In Vietnam, of course, there is no real "rear". Everyone in the country is threatened with the danger of attack at any time. David's area was mortared on the 28th of April. "But none of them came close", he says. How far away is "not close"? "Oh, way over on the airfield," says David. "Way over on the airfield," is all of fifty yards from his bunk. For the last week, while bitter fighting raged twenty miles north of his position, David has been under orders to carry his combat gear with him every place he goes. "Even to the movies and the bathroom!"

David left Subiaco Academy in 1965 to join the Marines; they promptly sent him off to Baking School. And today, David can make and cook "sweet" doughs, "sour" doughs, and "in between" doughs. "We learned to operate about forty different kinds of ovens for use in the field and at base. They even taught a course in 'basic cake decorations' ", laughs McLaughlin.

On his time off, David goes with the "Medical Civic Action

Pacification" teams (MEDCAPs). He's been able to get into many of the small villages and towns in the area as a result and is slowly picking up some of the Vietnamese language. As for the people: "I like them. They're not bad people at all. I'm even starting to eat some of their food."

The food he cooks is received in the standard time approved military fashion: "With a lot of grumbling". But the little complaints don't bother him. "As long as we get the usual kidding about the food we feel fine. We'd be worried only if everyone clammed up all of a sudden. Then we would know something was wrong for sure."

Despite the quick return of the flag he asked for, David says the mail service has been "all screwed up lately." "That's all the guys have to look forward to; and so when it gets fouled up they get all depressed."

In addition to the letters David receives from home, his family sends him the **Southwest American** and **Ft. Smith Times Record.** "It's great to be able to keep up with what's happening in the state," he says. David plans to stay in Arkansas and looks forward to getting out of the service in February of '69 so he can start college at the University of Arkansas and work on his degree in education. "Then I'd like to come back to Ft. Smith and teach."

Living in a wooden hut with a corrugated tin roof, David has boxed off his bed with old ammo crates . . . sort of his "office". On the shelf over his bed is a long line of books. Outside is a sea of two-inch-deep dust that is blown through his hut constantly by the rotors of the aircraft across the way. A huge power generator almost drowns out all attempts to listen to the radio or even talk. "I miss the comforts of home", he admits. Most of all he misses his folks and his sister, Yvonne and also his girl, Shirley Smith of Russellville.

"Yeah," says the nineteen-year-old Marine, "I really miss Shirley".

Phu Bai, Vietnam, July 6, 1967

Lance Corporal Lloyd E. Parker, Jr., 19, of Melbourne has been in Vietnam for seven months. He feels like he has personally walked across every inch of land between Da Nang and the Demilitarized Zone; and he spends about eight hours a night now walking back and forth over a three square mile area outside Phu Bai, where his job is radioman with the Third Marine Division.

Parker's platoon is presently providing security for the Phu Bai area, accomplished by constant night patrols and ambushes.

On July 3, "Junior", as he is called, was on a patrol that ambushed fifteen Vietcong. "They left four bodies behind," said Parker, "but it happened so fast I didn't really see it. Most of us were asleep actually, when one of our men saw them coming. He opened fire with his .45 pistol; then we woke up and used our rifles. I guess we must have confused them a little, starting out with the .45 that way."

Parker's worst experience came on Operation Hickory on May 25 at Hill 117 along the DMZ. "We were set up on top of the hill, all dug in, when we started receiving mortar fire at about four in the morning. I was asleep outside my hole when I first heard "the tubes". Way off in the distance I could hear them firing; but I was bushed and really didn't want to move. Then a buddy reached out and pulled me into the hole with him just as the shells started landing."

It is an age-old story of war: in the late, lonely night, with muscles tired and aching, mind weary from war and waiting, the exhaustion leaves the soldier sometimes indifferent. The danger seems a far-away fantasy; the body does not want to move, the mind cannot force it to. The conscious instinct of self-survival is pushed away by a semi-conscious, somniac stupor, and perhaps, in such submissive moments, a self-pitying subconscious dream that perhaps unheard, unfelt explosion will end it all: the dragging, deadly days, the long, lonely, lethal nights.

Parker was lucky; a buddy was there to save him. Some, many, are not so lucky.

"It was dark and we couldn't see a thing except the flashes when the shells hit," said Parker. "There were about thirty rounds fired at us. Things quieted down for about an hour; then Charlie ambushed our ambush patrol as it was returning to the camp area. The commander sent down the third platoon to relieve them; but they got hit too. So, finally, it was our turn.

"We started out just as the sun was coming up. We were moving down a pretty steep hill and skirting an overgrown rice paddy. Just as we reached the tree line they opened up on us with automatic weapons fire — thirty calibre stuff. The lieutenant got it right away. He took about eight rounds of machinegun fire right across his chest. Then the sergeant took over and pulled us a little ways back up the hill. Our platoon alone had taken three dead and four wounded."

The sergeant held us on the hill for awhile so we could be resupplied with ammunition and food. The artillery blasted away at Charlie while we were resting.

"About two in the afternoon we decided to try again. We

hit them, but the artillery fire hadn't been able to dent the bunkers they were in. They had three 30 calibres that I saw."

"Who was killed on that time down?" Junior called across the bunks to one of his buddies.

"Well," said the other, "there was McCombs and Jeeter."

"Didn't Parker get it too?" asked a third.

"Yeah, and so did Wilson; no, that was later."

"Anyway," continued Junior, "I was assigned to an m-79 grenade launcher then. I tried to use it but the brush was so thick that the grenades exploded before they could really get close to the target. So, back up that hill we went again."

"The next morning the c/o gave us orders to try one more time. The captain and a lot of brass went out to fly over the area in their chopper to see what the situation was. The minute they got close the chopper was shot down. The Captain was killed. The Colonel got a fifty calibre round in his leg and shoulder. The Major and the pilot got hurt too. So after that, they just gave us orders to get the heck out of there. And we were glad to go."

Parker told his story without emotion. After seven months of such operations, he's used to them. He would destroy himself if he let himself waste emotions on every incident he has been through.

He does get upset about the draft card burners at home. "If anyone has to come over, everyone should have to. I guess the war is good for the Vietnamese who favor Saigon. I'm not really sure it's good for the United States. But I'm here and I don't like the idea of these demonstrators who feel like they can get out of doing what I'm having to do."

Junior tapped some ashes off his cigarette into the top of a Pabst beer can that had the top peeled back. He looked at the mess gear and rifles hanging from the ceiling of his "hootch" and at his friends, sleeping, cleaning their weapons, writing letters.

"I just want to get home where it's peaceful and do some fishing up at Lake Norfolk," said Junior. "That's all I want to do."

Parker is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Lloyd Parker, Sr. of Melbourne. He is a 1965 graduate of Melbourne High School.

Bong Son, July 14

PFC Charles J. Grano tilted back his head to drain the last few drops of warm water from his green rubber canteen. He tried to ignore the rivulets of sweat making furrows in the thick dust on his face and arms. "It was a beautiful introduction to this place," he says sourly. "Someone told me that we would only average about one fire fight every six months—we had three during my first fourteen days with this company. That gave me a whole new perspective on just about everything, especially on home and education." He looked around him with absolute disgust, "Well, at least we can rest awhile here, now. We need it."

The men in Bravo company, 2 bn 5th Inf 1st Air Cav like Charles Grano. They call him 'Arkie' after his home state and he enjoys the nickname. Arkie's tour of duty in Vietnam began "after I got too smart for everybody." A 1959 graduate of Crossett High School, Grano was in the National Honor Society, and played a clarinet in the band before he went to the University of Arkansas to study business and marketing. He left the University in 1962, the first time he got "too smart", went home to Crossett and worked for a year at Homer Pierce ESSO. The next year he went back to college, this time at Arkansas A and M. Two years there, and he did it again. "I got too smart for everybody one more time . . . and that time I got drafted." He went from Ft. Polk to Ft. Rucker, to Ft. Benning, and then in February of this year his unit was alerted for duty in Vietnam.

He joined Bravo company on June 15th. "We'd been camped up on a mountain when word came in that another company had been pinned down by heavy sniper fire. We jumped on our choppers and they dropped us into the fight. It was funny in a way. I didn't have any thoughts in particular as I jumped off the chopper. The LZ was 'hot', with most of the fire coming from some dirt bunkers built near three hootches on the other side of a rice paddy. Three of us went up to check one of the bunkers after the tanks had hit them pretty good. I was scared to death walking up to it; and I don't mind admit-

ting it. Ivey, a good buddy of mine, walked around in front of it to fire inside. He got hit in the thigh the moment he got close. I tried to fire and my gun jammed so I hit the dirt. After that we just tossed some grenades in and that was that.

"As we started walking away, a VC jumped up out of another hole just about twenty yards away and opened up on us again. He didn't hit anyone and our fire pushed him back into a hedgerow. We used grenades, and machine guns and the tanks. I guess we finally got him. But they're tough. Those people don't come out of their bushes and holes until you carry them out!"

A few days later there was another rice paddy and more sniper bullets. "We hit the dirt the instant they started firing," says Arkie. "But both me and another guy had picked the wrong side of the dike. We were in a real bind." With bullets smacking around him like mad hornets, Arkie tried to spot the enemy so he could return fire, but the bright sun hid their muzzle flashes. "I knew I had to move before they got the range on me. I could hear the rounds all around me and it was getting pretty nerve racking." Finally, knowing a further delay would mean death, Grano vaulted up and tried to get over the dike. "I felt a real hard slap down around my hip. It knocked me off balance, but I got over behind a tree." Not feeling any pain, Grano checked his body and finding no wound or blood replied to his anxious lieutenant that he was ok.

Grano laughed. "That night when I was eating chow I reached back to get a drink of water, my canteen had a big huge hole in it." His lieutenant took one look at it and said, "are you serious? Someone up there likes you pretty well!"

After those three fights, things quieted down a bit. "We spent a lot of time chasing Charlie but don't have much contact."

Currently Arkie's company is guarding a much used bridge across a river near the town of Bong Son. This assignment appears to be specially reserved for companies that have had a rough time and need a little rest before they get back into the thick of things. "It's good to get out of those hills and rice paddies" says Grano. "I spent so much time in those rice paddies and all that water I was beginning to think I was blood kin to a water buffalo."

Although food, and mail service is good, and medical aid is trustworthy ("our Medic is as capable as any doctor I've seen.") Charles feels the biggest morale booster is the fact that all the men know they have only twelve months to put in here. When a soldier leaves Vietnam, if he has less than three months of active duty left to go, the Army usually discharges

on arrival back in the states. "I understand it just takes about three or four hours once I get back to Oakland. I guess after we're through here we aren't much good to the army anymore."

"It's strange some of the things that happen here," says Grano. "One time a VIP from Washington came out. We had to cordon off a village and search it for him so he could see how we operate. It seems sort of funny to be putting on an exhibition in a war zone."

And there were other incidents. "In one village we were searching our whole battalion stopped for six hours when one of the medics found a real sick baby and tried to take care of it. He had to do a lot of arguing with the mamasan and papasan to get them all on a helicopter so the baby could be taken to a hospital. Finally he got them all out. But it seems ironic, and nice, that with our primary emphasis on killing people, we could stop a whole operation to fly out one sick baby."

Grano says he used to be more of a 'hawk' before he came to Vietnam. But now that he's seen the war, he thinks it's being fought just about the way it has to be fought. The big thing is teaching the people that we want to help them. The VC tell them that we will eat their babies. Really! I'm not kidding," he smiles, ironically.

"It's slow, tedious, nasty, brutish fighting it this way but its the only way. If we hit Hanoi harder, they can easily hit Saigon. And, like I say, we have to show we want to help. Scaring them won't do any good. Scared people don't make good allies. I guess the thing we have to remember most is that the Vietnamese people as a whole are between a rock and a hard place."

A Vietnamese boy, about ten years old, walked up and watched Charles talk. His red-checkered shirt was faded by the war sun, his trousers were torn, and his golden brown face carried a slight smile as he stood there. "I really like the kids," said Grano. "I've got a weakness for them—and it may get me shot before I leave here. For example, normally I spend very little money over here. I get to save a lot. But the other day when I was standing guard duty up on the bridge a bunch of kids gathered round. That's always the case. When these people see a GI out comes the cokes and beer. That day I had more cokes than I ever wanted to drink; I had my boots shined about six times; and I gave away all my cigarettes and candy.

"The kids like the c-rations too. Giving them a can of c-rations is like giving an American child an ice cream cone. But the only time I give out c's is when I have time to sit and open it for them and watch the kids eat it. Otherwise, babysan will take it home to mamasan who will pass it on to papasan—

who is most likely a Vietcong. Or else, they may just take it down and sell it on the black market."

Arkie's sergeant came by and told him to gather up his gear and fall in. Twenty minutes later standing in the dust and sun, with heat waves rising off the river, the Battalion commander pinned the Combat Infantryman's badge on Charles. The badge, showing two crossed flintlock rifles on a field of blue, is a proud symbol. It testifies that the man who wears it has taken his place in the roles of the long line of American men who have fought faithfully and valiantly in the service of their country. The badge knows no politics. It means only that its bearer has gone through the agony of performing a duty requested by his country and seen as proper by him. It is a brave badge.

Charles is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Charles X. Grano of Crossett. He has three sisters, Mrs. Stella Rous, Letitia, and Sylvia who is a senior at the University of Arkansas. Charles plans on finishing his BA after he leaves the service and then hopes to attend law school at the University in Fayetteville. He asks that a special hello be passed on to Pat and Helen and Sue at the Deluxe in Fayetteville.

Cu Chi August 6

1st Lt. Bill Wells of Harrison held his captured Vietcong weapons, an old French carbine and a nine millimeter Beretta pistol. Being in Vietnam has resulted in a re-evaluation of things for me," he said. "I guess I've adjusted my priorities. A lot of things that I used to think were essential seem almost meaningless now. It's the little things—going home to my wife in the evening, hot meals three times a day—the things I used to take for granted are now vitally important to me and I think it will mean a better life for me."

After six months in Vietnam, Bill, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Joe Wells formerly of Harrison, now living in Republic, Missouri, has just returned to Cu Chi, Vietnam from a five day vacation with his wife, Kay, in Honolulu. The worst thing about being here, says Bill, is "being away from my family. That trip to Hawaii to see Kay was one of the best things I've ever done." His wife will meet him again in January when Lt. Wells leaves Vietnam, and starts making plans to use his degree in accounting.

Bill presently is the supply officer for the 2nd Battalion, 27th Infantry, 25th Division, but his first four months in Vietnam were spent on the line as platoon leader for the 1st platoon of Charlie Company . . . part of the Wolfhounds. On May 16th Lt. Wells and his platoon went on a helicopter assault, called an Eagle flight, into the center of the 269th Vietcong Battalion. The landing zone for Bill's helicopters was "hot", (that is, under enemy fire) that afternoon and his men had to fight their way across a canal into a field, and then take cover from the intense fire coming from a hedgerow and bunker complex in front of them. Suddenly, a machine gun and BAR opened up on his men from the flank. Immediately Lt. Wells took eight men, braved the fire, and knocked out the weapons threatening his platoon.

His fast action won him a Silver Star and Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry.

Bill discounts the medals. He says, "It's easy for an officer to get a medal for something like that. Men are doing the same thing I did all across Vietnam every day, but most of them don't end up with a medal." Although Bill is no doubt proud of his medal, he doesn't dwell on it. Instead, the 1966 University of Arkansas graduate talks mostly of an officer's concern for the safety and welfare of his men. "I guess my greatest fear when I was on the line was getting someone killed because of a stupid mistake. And the worst thing for the men, is the continuous operations in all kinds of terrain—being wet and tired for a month or two at a time."

Yet, Lt. Wells says the morale of the men is excellent. "Watch the men heading out into the field . . . laughing, joking, carrying on, they have really high spirits. The men have the attitude that this war is just something that has to be done. You come and do your share and go home—someone else comes and does their share." The twenty-three year old Arkansan believes "success" is the greatest morale booster for the men here. "If we go for a long time with no contact then the morale gets low. But if we go out and kill a lot of VC, take only a few casualties ourselves, get some weapons, et cetera, then the morale goes up."

Do the anti-war demonstrations back home bother the men, or are the soldiers even very much aware of them? "The main thing the men are concerned with", says Wells, "is hot chow that night . . . immediate things. They're interested in what concerns them, not the world."

Bill does have his own feelings about the war protestors however, "I wish the people back home who think the war is wrong would realize there are people dying here so they can have the right to protest."

On the other hand, Lt. Wells thinks there is a misconception about the intensity of the war here. "Probably 80% of the men in Vietnam won't hear a shot fired in anger. Of course the war varies around the country. For example, we don't have as many casualties from small arms and mortars as we do from booby traps. But, the important point is, that a lot of families back home are needlessly worried just because their sons or husbands are over here. All the press reports is the violent aspects of the war, but in reality, the vast majority of the men here are pretty safe."

As for the Vietnamese, Bill, says the average man "doesn't seem to care much about what's going on around him."

"They are a fairly simple people," he says, "basically hon-

est. If the guy is not a VC he won't help you . . . but he won't hurt you either. He just wants to be let alone to farm his land."

Right now Bill's job leaves him a good bit of free time and a chance to rest a bit from his time on the line. As support platoon leader, his job is to find out where Intelligence wants the men to go, and what Operations wants them to do, and then provide the men with the trucks, mortar rounds, ammunition, food and endless other battle necessities that will enable the job to be done. The hardest part of his job is just trying to anticipate the needs. "Our tactical situation is very fluid, always changing, and it's a little hard to keep on top of it," he says.

Lt. Wells is a 1962 graduate of Harrison High School. While a high school student, he worked part time for Piggly Wiggly and Phillips Grocery. His wife, Kay, is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Glenn Davidson of Harrison.

Danang, The Hospital Ship, 'Repose' August 26

"It was an M-26 grenade that got us both," said the pale young Arkansas Marine from his hospital bed. "We were on a squad size patrol on Hill No. 270; the guy about twenty feet in front of me must have been the one who tripped it. Just all of a sudden there was this awful noise. It knocked me down. I was lying there . . . I never was unconscious . . . and I yelled for the corpsman right away. It's funny, I screamed for that corpsman immediately, maybe before I even hit the ground, but it seemed like I didn't yell for him until a long time later. I knew I was hit in the legs, but I could still move both my legs so I figured I was o.k. I didn't even know I was hit in the back until I got back to our base camp."

Lance Corporal Orus C. Pucket, Jr., 19, son of Mr. and Mrs. O. C. Puckett, Sr., of West Memphis, has been wounded four times in Vietnam. But, as is so often the case, most of the wounds were fairly small, so he wasn't evacuated, he received no purple hearts, and he was kept on duty. This time Orus got a purple heart.

One of the small consolations for Marines wounded in Vietnam, is the availability of the Hospital Ships, REPOSE and SANCTUARY. Both hospital ships, painted white with large red crosses on their sides and fully illuminated at all times, cruise the waters along the Vietnamese coast from the delta to the DMZ to care for the wounded. With a helicopter deck on its stern, the ship can receive wounded minutes after they have been hit. Once aboard, the wounded man has the benefit of a completely air-conditioned ship, with full medical staffs, and surgery facilities that provide everything from a frozen blood bank to an artificial heart machine. The REPOSE is listed as a non combatant ship according to the Geneva Conventions and is

completely unarmed—even in enemy waters. There might be some question in the minds of the North Vietnamese as to the ships non-combatant status, however, since the ships presence allows the wounded to return to battle so much more quickly.

When Puckett was on board the REPOSE he was assigned to a large room with beds for about sixty patients. The room was used primarily for less serious injuries. Puckett was lying on a bottom bunk; the man above him called over to the Doctor: "Hey, Doc! How about getting this window cleaned off, so I can see lovely Vietnam?" The boy leaned back on the cool sheets and gloated over being here in this air conditioned room instead of out there. All the patients were dressed in light blue hospital gowns. A tape recorder on one bed blasted out a taped radio show someone had mailed from the states. The radio show was complete with month old newscasts.

"O.K., Puckett," said two young navy corpsmen. "Off to x-ray for you." Puckett looked as though he were used to the routine and managed to get onto the movable table with a minimum of distress. His heavily bandaged legs were clumsy and he looked a bit like he was taking a walk out of a space capsule as he swung onto the table. "Be right back," he said matter of factly.

As he moved down the hall, a conversation began between two of the other patients. "Hey, I saw that little blonde Red Cross girl today," said a skinny private from Missouri who had been wounded by a mortar. "She's not half as pretty as everybody said she was." He was obviously disappointed.

"Yeh, but she's got round eyes," his buddy retorted coolly. "She's American."

Most of the patients in the room had been wounded by shrapnel. One man, who was part of the ship's crew, had a ruptured appendix. Two other Marines had burns. "The burn cases increase during the rainy season," a nurse explained. The men start trying to figure a way to keep warm and dry and they usually pick the wrong way."

The room was less than half full of patients, and the nurse explained that was due to the fact that all the casualties that had been on board from the fire aboard the aircraft carrier, had been sent on back to the States.

Orus returned fully X-rayed. "I guess they'll be finding little pieces of steel in me for a long time," he mused. He nodded over to a cheerful young man limping through the door. "That guy has seventeen holes in him from neck to toes from shrapnel. They have him making two laps a day around the ship now to get walking right again."

The 1966 graduate of West Memphis High School settled

back onto the sheets. "I went straight from the high school to here," he explained. "A couple of buddies, Robert Wayne Thompson, and Garry Neal, and I decided to join up. We got out of high school in June—and I was here on December 29th, and on my way out on patrol as a machine gun team leader."

"You never know what's going to happen out there," Puckett said softly. We get most of our casualties from booby traps, and snipers. Snipers shot two of the guys in my platoon through the head on one operation. But, then, on Operation Union Two, I had a mortar round land about five feet in front of me . . . it was a dud. So, that's how it goes. Being away from home, in a strange country, knowing you might be killed . . . you can't think about all that. I really don't have time to think about it; they've always got me doing something."

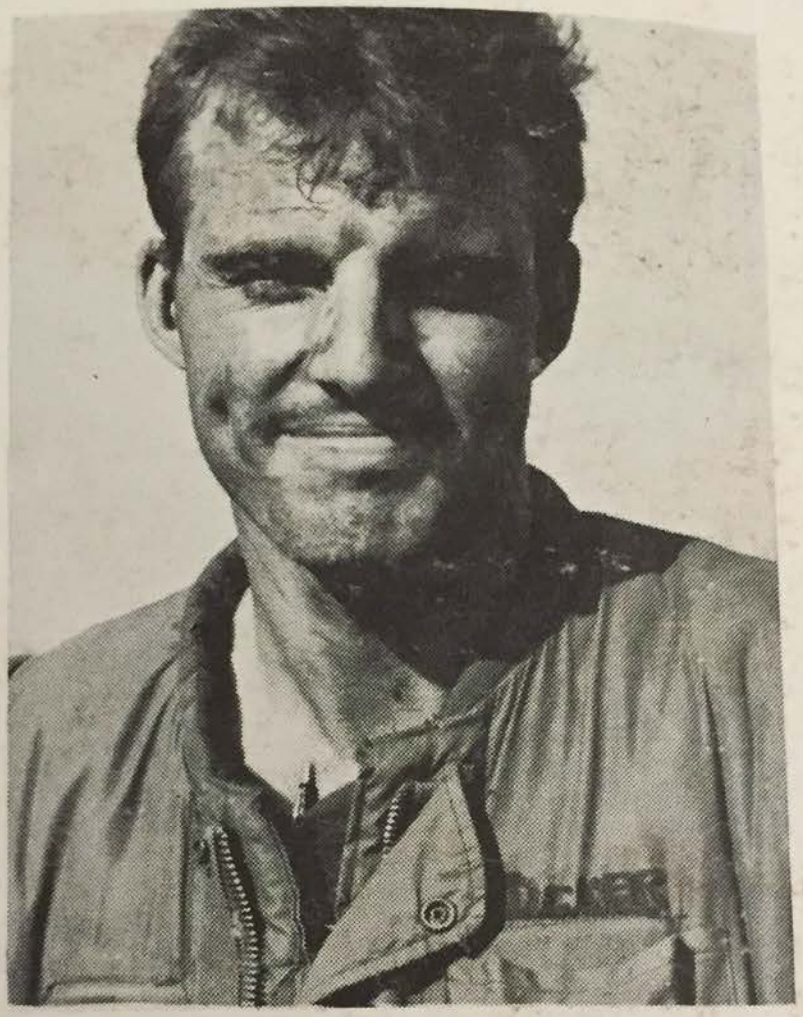
Puckett has seen two other Marines from Arkansas since he got here: Jim Fowler of Ft. Smith and Johnny McCoy Thomas of DeValls Bluff. "Thomas got his orders to go home," smiled Puckett. "He's a heck of a guy." Thinking of home, Orus says he really misses American women—"the ones over here look like hell," he laughs.

While he was on R & R in the Philippines, he called his parents back in West Memphis. "I called them about two o'clock in the morning to make sure they'd be home. I just wanted to hear their voices. That really made me feel good. That, and getting mail from home. Mail is the best morale booster for everybody. If you didn't get mail, you'd go crazy."

Puckett was glad to be in the hospital. The rains had begun to fall and it was nice to be in an air conditioned room, with clean sheets, regular meals, and a roof over his head to keep out the rain. "The heat and cold I can take," he says. "But not the rain. When the rain starts I really get depressed." He looked around him. "Nobody bitches about being out here on the REPOSE."

Orus, isn't sure what he will do when he gets out of the Corps. "Could be one of a million things." A nurse brought the noon meal into the room. Orus brightened. "Boy that food is great!" His tray was piled with a minute steak, corn, rice, bread and butter, and apple pie. "I weighed 200 pounds when I came over here, and now I'm down to 185." He dug into the food—then slowed. "S' funny. I'm always hungry, but I can't seem to eat when the chow gets here . . . , it's great chow, the best I've had since I got in this country. Guess I'm just not used to having so much good food."

"I hope I get to sail with the ship to the Philippines before I go back ashore to duty," Puckett said and turned to look out the window. "It's been quite an experience to be here. Why am I here? Well, I'm just here . . . mainly because I got orders."



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

After graduation from Harvard University and an Honorable Discharge from the United States Marine Corps, the author hitched and worked his way to Asia aboard freighters and Japanese and Chinese fishing boats.

On completion of ten months work as a free lance writer for TIME and UPI, staff writer for the SAIGON POST, and correspondent for the American Broadcasting Company, Mr. Tucker returned to Arkansas to complete his L.L.B. at the University of Arkansas.

VIETNAM