Everyman in Vietnam
J O S E P H  G I L C H ,  J R

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A Soldier’s Journey through the Quagmire

An honors thesis submitted to the
History Department of Rutgers University

Written under the supervision of Professor Michael P. Adas

Rutgers University
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For my Mother,

who gave her wings –

and my Father,

who pushed the rock.
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The issues that are presented within this study began to coalesce years ago when as a fifth grade student I discovered my uncle Jimmy had served in the US Army during the Vietnam War. As I matured, his mother Catherine revealed that she had saved every letter that Jimmy had written home, and to my good fortune she handed over the collection to me. If not for her keen foresight this study would never have happened. Still growing I began to read more and more books on military history, and I became particularly interested in the American Revolution, The American Civil War, and the Vietnam War. As a young grammar school student at Glen Landing, I met a teacher, Thomas “Tracy” Fallon, whose considerable historical insight pushed me to further pursue my new love for history. I continued to have great luck in being taught by wonderful teachers like Jennifer Garrison and Mary Jane Chambers, whose appreciation for the past allowed me to see the general and comparative aspects of history. Though I am appreciative of the luck I had in being taught by great educators, I owe the most gratitude to one of the great military and technology scholars of our time, Michael Adas. His teachings, assessments, and scrupulous edits enabled me to perfect many aspects of this study. His guidance helped me effectively research, cite sources, and understand history in a global context that reaches down to the everyday level of the men who fight America’s wars. I have benefited gratefully from our
ongoing interactions and I hope our opportunities for working together as I study to become an educator will continue.

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Joseph Gilch, Jr

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I have never been to battle, and I hope I am never confronted with a situation that asks of me what America asked of its youth during the Vietnam War. My study takes place in the midst of that conflict. It follows James X. Gilch during his tour of duty with the 5th Mechanized Infantry, deployed in Cu Chi, South Vietnam. But unlike many war narratives, combat serves in large part to frame Jimmy’s coming of age and the ways in which that journey exemplified the experience of so many soldiers drawn into the quagmire that was Vietnam. Like most of his fellow combatants, who enlisted or were drafted, Jimmy came from a family that bridged the working and middle class divide. He was drafted in August of 1965, and in the following month reported for basic training at Fort Dix, New Jersey. Soon thereafter, he was deployed to South Vietnam with many others at his social and educational level to fight what proved to be an unwinnable war. Much of the information presented in this study is drawn from the seventy-two letters Jimmy wrote to his parents, and others addressed to his best friend Gerry Shields. It is imperative for readers to understand that the narrative is based primarily on Jimmy’s letters or interviews I conducted with family members, friends, and other combatants who knew Jimmy. Because it would be awkward and intrusive, I do not cite each letter when used in the narrative. But they are cited in the bibliography with inclusive dates. When I am quoting directly from the
letters, I use quotation marks, and portions of Jimmy’s letters quoted directly are in his language, however awkward at times in terms of grammar and syntax.

For issues and incidents where Jimmy does not address larger issues that are important to the narrative, or explain at length his feelings or actions on a particular subject, I have used other combatants’ letters that do deal with these issues in greater depth. To capture as accurately as possible the feelings, actions, and motives of many American GIs in Vietnam, I have used mainly letters written during the conflict rather than oral interviews and memoirs or fiction published in the years following the war. I have used oral interviews and published materials to describe certain settings, such as the American military camp in Cu Chi and specific character traits belonging to individuals in and out of combat. I have also used other primary source documents such as *After Action Reports* that specifically deal with Jimmy’s unit and help fill in the details of search and destroy operations that he was often reluctant to discuss in detail in his letters home.
Musée des Beaux-Arts

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters; how well, they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.
In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

- W. H. Auden
Da Nang, Vietnam, 1965. In a supply shack, the tragic and frustrating mission over, Crew Chief James Farley weeps. Photo by Larry Burrows, *LIFE*, © 1965
Figure 1
South Vietnam: The Ho Bo Woods, Bo Loi Woods & Iron Triangle with Fil Hol Rubber Plantation
Copyright Ray Smith, 1993
“You can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours, but even at those odds, you will lose and I will win.”

-Ho Chi Minh

“No one has ever demonstrated more ability to hide his installations than the Vietcong; they were human moles.”

-General William Westmoreland

On the morning of July 1, 1966, at approximately 0700 hours, Operation Coco Palms was terminated. The mission was a disaster. Communication was poor. Lives were wasted and resources were expended prodigiously. The actions undertaken by American troops against the Vietcong guerrillas, delivered only minor setbacks. Low American morale fed into confusion, and lives continued to become victims of search and destroy missions. War had become a numbers game in which the army that has the most kills is the winner. It had morphed into a war of attrition.¹

The 5th Mechanized Infantry left their base camp at Cu Chi with 634 American soldiers. Now, six were dead. Eighty-one were wounded, and 73 were labeled sick or diseased. Fourteen Armored Personal Carrier’s (APC’s) were damaged by mines, six of those were reported as “combat losses” and another seven experienced mechanical failures.

One of the many weaknesses of the APC track was its vulnerability to heavy weapons fire and anti-tank mines. One mine had the ability to destroy one or several carriers, which led to substantial causalities and the loss of thousands of pounds of war material. The APC was also unreliable as it was never intended for search and destroy missions, especially in the harsh terrain of Vietnam. It constantly experienced malfunctions, which added costly repairs to an already

expensive fuel bill. Operation Coco Palms was evidence of the major weaknesses of the APC’s to which the troops it carried were exposed. Not only were the mammoth machines costly in terms of upkeep, but broken down tracks had to be towed, stranding defenseless troops inside the Area of Operations (AO). And in Operation Coco Palms, the Light Recovery Vehicles (LRV’s) that were sent from the American base to recover the malfunctioned tracks had severe trouble in reaching and towing the lumbering machines. Part of the problem lay in the poor lines of communication. During the operation the extreme heat inside the APC’s reached a staggering 115 degrees Fahrenheit, shut down cooling fans, and rendered the radio transmitters inoperative. The overheated transmitters made radio communications difficult, meaning that the only opportune time to broadcast was at night when temperatures fell. But radio contact during night hours was dangerous because it gave the enemy the opportunity to intercept transmissions and ambush American troops.

Upon termination of the operation, the APC’s had exhausted a total of 8,837 gallons of diesel fuel, and American troops had expended a total of 83,174 ammunition rounds, 306 grenades, and 2,240 pounds of C4 and TNT block explosive. With such high expenditures, the American troops of the 5th Mechanized had to be resupplied 131 times by UH1D “Huey” helicopters. Helicopters were being lost at the rate of one a day, at a cost of about one million each. Supplies were dropped off, wounded men and dead bodies were loaded on. It was Henry Ford’s prized assembly line gone mad. Upon resupply, the mechanized unit acquired 44,500 pounds of food; 11,000 pounds of clothing materials, 38,000 pounds of oil-based petroleum products, and 24,000 pounds of ammunition to just continue the mission. Each division needed
$100 million worth of equipment to keep going, including 6,780 rifles at $122 each, eighteen light tanks, 362 jeeps, and four huge road graders.²

The Vietcong had far less money and their own military hardware was infinitely less sophisticated, so they took to capturing and reusing American supplies. During Operation CoCo Palms, the men of the 5th, who were well aware of the enemy’s cunning strategy, were not surprised when their unit found and re-captured equipment that was in fact their own. Upon discovery, GIs burned the captured American equipment and threw it into the flames along with Russian and Chinese weapons. Pound for pound, the material that was seized weighed nowhere near that used to resupply American troops. In the enemy’s position, US troops also found 27,000 pounds of booby-trapped rice, and destroyed 78 tunnels, 155 bunkers and 60 buildings. Many of the buildings were torched by one of the APC’s newer weapons, the flamethrower. But the pressurized tank connected to the nozzle of the weapon was malfunctioning, and for the remainder of the mission it was worthless.

Of the seventy-eight tunnels destroyed, most were well below six feet in depth. At the time of the operation, no technique had yet been found that could adequately destroy a complex tunnel system. A recently developed method that employed funneling flammable acetylene gas into the tunnels and then detonating it, proved ineffective, and heavy cratering charges would required the transport of too much large, expensive, and unsafe explosive material. In order to accomplish the mission “correctly,” the officers in charge asked for a time extension and more troops to completely destroy the larger tunnel complexes.

The 155 bunkers that were found were constructed in such a way that they could withstand a direct artillery hit. Some of them had trap doors that led to other areas, allowing each bunker to be mutually supporting. Many were concrete and reinforced by large rubber tree

² Ibid.
logs. Each had the capacity to house at least forty Vietcong soldiers. After Action Reports verified that as long as the Vietcong remained inside their bunkers, they were immune to artillery fire, incoming explosives, and bombings from B-52s. It was also noted that a lack of accuracy and timing on part of the United States Air Force, not only delayed operations - in one for case fifty-five minutes as troops waited for a B-52 air attack that never came - but that inaccurate bombing routes led to the destruction of areas around the targeted points. Soldiers of the 5th did the best they could to destroy the bunkers, but regardless of Air Force accuracy, it seemed that their destruction was useless because it was evident from past incursions into the area that the Vietcong would just rebuild and refortify.

Clouds gathered over the Cu Chi base camp on the night of June 21st as men of the 1st Battalion (Mechanized), 5th Infantry were preparing for Operation Coco Palms. One man, James X. Gilch, from B Company, 2nd Platoon, 2nd squad was in the orderly room answering phones and writing home to the sound of heavy rain. During June all of Southeast Asia was inundated by the southwestern monsoon. The weather usually followed a daily pattern, highlighted by thunderstorms in the afternoon and early evening, with sporadic, heavy showers, lasting no more than forty-five minutes throughout the day. The maximum temperature reached highs of ninety-two in the morning and afternoon and fell into the low seventies at night. The relative humidity for the whole month was steady at ninety percent, making it seem much hotter.

Hanging up the phone and reaching for a pen and paper, James dated his letter (never losing count of the days) and addressed it in the usual way, “Dear Mom and Dad”. Mom always came first; in times of stress, Jimmy would write to Mommy and Daddy. Still comma crazy, but now rarely misspelling words - he was getting used to writing letters. He asked how his five
sisters and two brothers were and told them that in a month he would make Private First Class. His excitement level was directed towards the pay raise not the uniform stripe that would come with promotion. He continued on about his girlfriend, Louise, at home and how the many letters he had received made him smile. Before signing off with “Jimmy” and a hand drawn picture of a tow truck, he broke the news about the upcoming field operation. He reassured his family that he would be fine, and promised he would write as much as possible before moving into the bush and after he returned.

Operation Coco Palms was conducted in the Ho Bo and Boi Loi Woods areas, located in the Hau Nghia and Binh Duong Provinces, where the 5th Mechanized Infantry was to implement search and destroy operations to flush out the Vietcong. Intelligence reports stated that two enemy battalions of moderate strength had been spotted conducting operations in the area and were firing on Air Force resupply planes. Numerous caches, base camps, and documents had already established that the Bio Loi and Ho Bo Woods areas were major strongholds for the Vietcong. The 5th had previously fought there on four separate occasions.3

Coco Palms would make this the fifth time the 5th would be venturing into that heavily wooded terrain and many GIs, including James Gilch, complained openly to friends that they were going, yet again, back to “that same damn area”. This sort of talk reflected a common disposition towards operations in the Ho Bo Woods, and by June 21st many soldiers Jimmy had begun to question the importance of taking the objectives of the war more generally. Others in Jimmy’s unit wondered why the battalion had not yet set up a base in the area and stayed on, rather than of going in, “kicking ass,” leaving and returning to get their “ass kicked.” This line of questioning persisted as the orders for the mission made it clear that once again they would leave after the mission, letting Charlie rebuild his defenses and booby trap for the next invasion.

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3 See Figure 1 on page 5.
Jimmy wrote home twice more before “saddling up” and manning his point position atop the APC at 0630 hours on June 25th, 1966. The first of the two letters had arrived home on the afternoon of June 23rd, expressing future plans and a last minute visit he had paid to his friends at headquarters that involved a few good laughs and a beer before moving out. The second told his parents not to worry, because as he jokingly remarked, he was a hero, and parents of heroes never needed to worry. What he did not tell them was that their son, “the hero,” took the point position on top the APC, the most dangerous place to be in all of Vietnam because it made him an easy target for Vietcong waiting in ambush.¹

The main target of the operation was the Ho Bo Woods. In an effort to open up that area to assault, the whole battalion crossed along the southern edge of the nearby Boi Loi Woods, hoping to draw Vietcong reinforcements into that sector. Company B was designated the demolition team in charge of destroying tunnels, houses, and bunkers. The ruse failed. The slow movement of the American tracks alerted the Vietcong, giving them ample time to reinforce both positions. Dense forest and thick undergrowth restricted the movement of the tracks, making progress loud, slow and tedious. American B52 bomb craters worked against rapid movement, as tracks were unable to see the depth of each crater due to the heavy flooding, and many times got stuck in the mud. The rampant vegetation provided excellent concealment for the Vietcong and limited friendly observation, slowing the operation even more as the APCs had to realign their firing lanes. The sluggish, forced pace also made the American troops prone to ambush and mines. By June 26th, Company A of the 5th Infantry had already lost two APC’s to anti-tank mines, which killed one man and wounded thirteen others. Seven of those needed immediate air medical support, or as GIs called it, a Dust-Off. Several hours later Company C encountered a

large command bunker and came under heavy fire. Two men were killed and another six were wounded. Vietcong losses were estimated at or near five dead for the day. As for Jimmy Gilch and Company B, they received light resistance and had destroyed twelve bunkers and 5,000 pounds of the total 27,000 pounds of the rice captured on the mission.

On the morning of June, 28th, Company B uncoiled an APC defensive perimeter that appeared similar to the circled wagon trains of the American West and remounted their tracks. They traded C-rations or Meal Combat Individuals (MCI), mixing and matching between one another. The MCI was designed to be a modest improvement over the earlier, more famous, canned C-ration. An MCI had additional menu items to reduce the monotony of the C-ration and insure adequate nutrition. It was a rectangular cardboard carton that contained several cans, which varied in size and weight. The whole package weighed roughly three pounds. It consisted of a meat-based entree, bread that came with a spread, typically peanut butter, whipped chocolate, cheese, or jam and dessert. The package came in 12 basic varieties grouped in 3 menus of 4 different entrees, and could only be opened with a P-38 can opener. Many GIs attached it around their neck with their dog tags. These rations had superstitions attached to them by those in Vietnam. The "Ham & Lima Beans" entree, a non-favorite since World War II, was detested by U.S. soldiers, who considered pronouncing the correct name might bring bad luck, and was therefore dubbed, "Ham and Motherfuckers". Many GIs also regarded eating halved apricots in the field to be unlucky.5

On this particular morning a “beans with Frankfurter chunks in tomato sauce” had been chosen for breakfast and was dipped with canned white bread and topped with hot sauce to hide

the taste. It was eaten cold because the fuel tablet took too long to heat up and though a piece of C-4 explosive could be used to speed up the heating process, it might be needed in the combat to come. Combat engineer Michael Butash comments on his experience using C-4 as a heating element for food. “We used a lot of C-4 plastic explosive. It made great cooking fuel for C rations. Cut off a little piece and light it, it would heat anything you wanted.” Infantryman Thomas Giltner also remarks, “C-4 is the greatest stuff I’ve ever seen…It [would] heat your coffee, [and] put a blasting cap on it, and it will blow your house right off its foundation.” A sip of coffee was likely, but heating liquids meant fires and that put the men at risk. Night patrols gave way to heavy eyes, but the men of B Company trudged on, it was their “job” after all.6

At around Ten a.m., Jimmy and B Company encountered an extensive Vietcong tunnel complex that was heavily booby trapped. As they were the demolition team, they had to destroy it. “Tunnel rat,” eighteen year old Gerald Rolf, was ordered to search the tunnel for weapons, documents, and propaganda. His build, (short and skinny) was perfect for navigating the underground complex. But unlike the rodent he was dubbed, his vision, like that of all humans, was poor in the dark. And everything he had learned about fighting seemed to have no relevance to what he was now ordered to do. In fact nothing ever worked to the GIs’ advantage in the tunnels. They only encountered claustrophobia, fear, and physical fatigue. Their only advantage, if one could call it that, was sometimes in the heat of the day the tunnels were still cool and dank. The complex underground network contained storage areas, living quarters, ordinance factories, hospitals, headquarters, and almost every other facility that was necessary to the pursuit of war. They were originally dug by Viet Minh guerrillas to fight the French in a war

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for Vietnamese independence, and by 1966 the tunnels stretched from the gates of Saigon to the border of Cambodia – leaving, now, the US Army with no choice but to destroy them.⁷

Rolf took off his fatigue jacket and helmet - learning from experience that they only got in the way. He stashed wire in his pockets, checked his flashlight, and took from their holsters a .45 pistol and a bayonet. This was not his first crawl and it probably would not be his last. He walked over to the hole and went in feet first. During the short descent, followed by a friend and fellow squad member, he pretended to now be the hunter. But in truth, he was still the hunted, and for Jimmy and the men above, the earth had swallowed them whole.

Slowly crawling forward, the two men sucked in the horrific smell of death and soured adrenaline that was associated with the underground shelter. A rat never knew what he was going to encounter down below. Some found bats that got tangled in their hair, others snakes (said to be over six feet long), and there was one rumor that a guy found three dead rats on leashes with a needle next to them – they tested positive for the bubonic plague. Edging up to a ninety degree right turn, Rolf twisted in with his searchlight. He froze, but it was too late. He was seen and could only now wait for what was about to happen. The man following him, unaware of what lay ahead, continued to creep along, only pausing when he heard Rolf whisper, “Oh No.” Shots were fired. Hearing the gunshots, members of the squad still above ground sent a small recovery team in to save the wounded eighteen year old from Cincinnati, Ohio. The reinforcements reached the two men and began dragging Rolf out, but they too became the target of multiple small arms fire. Left with no other choice and desperate to save themselves, they used Gerald Rolf’s body as a human shield.

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Several days later Operation Coco Palms was terminated. B Company, 2nd platoon left the Ho Bo Woods and headed back to the Cu Chi base camp. They were down one man. The Company as a whole suffered two causalities and eighteen wounded. James Gilch didn’t write home that night, or for the next couple nights. Rolf was his friend and his sense of loss had become oppressive. Jimmy finally wrote home on July 3rd. He told his parents that he had attended church again and couldn’t wait until he was granted leave. He stressed that he was next in line for R&R. His letter was cut short because other GIs wanted to borrow his pen. On July 13th, 1966, the United States Army officially pronounced Operation Coco Palms a success. In all, twenty-five Vietcong troops were killed and nine were captured. The overall objective was met - locate and destroy Vietcong units and emplacements. A total of six GIs were dead, and of the eighty-one Americans who were wounded, fifty-four would eventually return to active duty. But bandages could not solve the frustration, tension and wounds from yet another indecisive “search and destroy” operation.
From Right to Left: James Gilch, Richard Gill, and Gerald Rolf
Cu Chi, South Vietnam
Millions of 105 and 155mm howitzer shells wait in Qui Nhon, Vietnam to be shipped back to the US in hopes that VC guerrillas would be unable to recycle them.
He found it difficult to sleep. The outgoing artillery certainly didn’t help, but he was use to that by now. Then again, it was something hard to ignore. He rubbed his eyelids and the ink from his fingers mixed with the sweat from his forehead and stung his eyes. He tried to focus his attention on something more mundane, something other than war. He wanted something that could put him to sleep. Guard duty was scheduled for later tonight and that beat answering the phones in the orderly room. Instead, he lay awake like most nights, in his foxhole, waiting for the sun, something he thought would never come when in the bush. But when it did, it was then he wondered, had he even fallen asleep. He listened to the Sergeant next to him in the foxhole brag about his skills as a lover, rehearsing in unwelcome detail all the necessary steps required to achieve a full, sexual, climatic experience. I’m better, Jimmy thought to himself, but decided to keep that between him and Louise – and the many others at home. He had more respect for women. It started to rain again. That was one of his escapes, so he turned over, listening to it fall and began to drift away.

He saw his dad, a giant of man who was well over six feet tall with a stern grin, a large belly, and a balding head. Then his mother, a shorter woman, with a warm smile, pulling his ear. He then saw his sisters, all six. Then he saw George or Georgie, his older brother and then Little Joe, the youngest. The one he was going to each everything he knew. As he fell asleep, he tried
to imagine what was going on at home, and, as so often happened, that place suffused his dreams.

World War Two was over, and America had exited the only true victor. Returning GIs cashed in on government aid, allowing many to finally return to school, offering a chance at better jobs. Others went right to work, marrying their “sweethearts” and starting families, and in 1945, 1.212 million babies were born. On May 6th of that year, a nervous George Gilch Sr. started the blue Cadillac, where his pregnant wife Catherine waited nervously in the passenger seat, and the two drove to Cooper Hospital in Camden, New Jersey. Catherine was used to the pain of labor, already haven given birth to two children, Kathleen and George Jr. The new baby boy would be no different; except for the fact he had blue eyes like his father. Ten minutes short of midnight, weighing seven and half pounds, James Gilch was born.8

George owned a business. It was nothing extravagant, but for a family of nine to be it was a livelihood that paid well. The work was hard, but he had to do it. That attitude was common for a man who came of age in midst of the Great Depression, and one he would pass on to his children. On May 7th, his wife having given birth to a second son, George proudly drove north on the Black Horse Pike in Runnemede, New Jersey, passing Eighth Avenue on the right and turning left into the yard of Gilch’s Towing Service. He got out, lit his pipe, looked at the station and saw a good future for his family. There was no way it would go under. His trucks were in good shape, and the gas station up front was doing well servicing America’s surging passion for automobiles. He and his family were secure, and so was America.

In the post-war decade, there was no material thing the average American male wanted more than a new car. By 1945, there were 24 million passenger cars in the United States, and it was estimated that 15 million new buyers were in the market, 10 million looking for new cars and 5 million for used. Factories in Detroit managed to turn out 2.149 million new autos in 1946, but that was millions short of consumer demand. By 1950, the need was finally met and as the new decade passed, cars became the quintessential symbol of American power and material wealth - and the ultimate consumer item. George witnessed the boom and he himself was in the market for a fine automobile because the shop was doing so well. When cars broke down, he towed them. And when they needed fuel, he fed them. It was the perfect business for an affluent time, and he was now able to take home more in a week then he ever had before. He was not alone. With the major increase in auto sales, factory workers on the assembly line saw a 15 percent wage increase. As the early fifties came to an end, buyers jokingly remembered how they would once take anything they could get in an automobile, but now they had become far more choosy.  

Henry Ford nearly wrecked his company by insisting that what the public needed was basic transportation and the color black was all a car required. In 1954, Chrysler Corporation executives, following this same Ford principle, allowed engineers to talk them into producing a short, sturdy, sensible, cost-effective car. They watched sales drop by half. Chrysler went back to the designing board, and writer John Keats points out, “That next year it [the Chrysler Corporation] entered the market with an automobile three inches lower, sixteen inches longer, and in three colors.”  

It was said to have tailfins higher than one side of a B-29 bomber. Sales rocketed and change came incrementally. A majority of the time it was adding chrome to the

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9 Ibid.  
doors and inside paneling. By the end of the 1950’s truly extravagant effects had been reached. As Henry Ford turned in his grave, Jimmy unrolled car posters for the walls of this room. He could not wait to drive. The automobile had become the American dream and his dream too. So, he began to save his money, an obsession that would stay with him in the armed services.

By 1955 motor vehicles registered in America tripled and auto mileage went up 1,000 percent as Americans began to travel out of the cities into the suburbs. But travel was dangerous, and William O’Neill found that “up to 40,000 related traffic deaths accrued a year as drivers ventured on roads that lacked traffic signs and painted lines.” As the government created programs, such as the National System of Interstates and the Defense Highways system, more and more Americans got behind the wheel. Roads were designed, paved, widened, and re-widened to accommodate the increase in traffic and improve driving conditions. Regardless of safety, the automotive industry continued to grow, and by 1955 sales of new cars just fell short of 8 million. This production miracle was matched by that in housing.\(^\text{11}\)

The only possession a married couple wanted more than their own means of transportation was a house. By the middle of the 1950’s, Americans were traveling out of the cities in increasing numbers to take advantage of cheap housing in suburban areas. Their exodus created a mass real estate market and prices went down as houses went up. In 1940 Runnemede, New Jersey had a population of 2,835; by 1950 it nearly doubled at 4,217.\(^\text{12}\) A decade later, the two square mile town was called home by 8,396 people. In addition to running a tow trucking company, George Gilch Sr. owned five acres that was cultivated and above all provided space for his future greenhouses. Twelve year old Jimmy Gilch saw his father plant pine trees along the fences and driveways to hide the suburban sprawl that soon surrounded his patch of property.

Holding to his conservative values, George Sr. wanted to shield his land and livestock from the public eye. He was not particularly happy with the new look of America. He was conservative who believed in the empowerment of an individual to solve problems. He was especially frustrated with the Civil Rights Movement and the increasing assertiveness of African Americans. He did not believe blacks held his equal, but Jimmy grew to think differently.

Television was a perfect medium to bring Americans together, and during the 50’s an entire industry built from scratch took hold of the nation. Television was yet another great technological accomplishment of the era. The first telecasts offered little beyond simple news broadcasts and “Howdy Doody”, but by the mid-1950’s the broadcast industry was booming, just like the automotive. With a growing family of now eight children, George, like all middle class American fathers saw a television set as another essential possession. He bought a Zenith. Framed in wood, it featured a small oval screen. He placed it in the den near the radio and record player. Watching the TV became a family affair in the evening. Shows that starred Jackie Gleason became so popular that his salary at CBS rose from $8,000 to 11 million within a couple years and his show budget averaged $120,000 per program. Other networks boasted rising stars, such as Lucille Ball, Desi Arnaz and Edward R. Murrow. Television, as David Marc commented, was another American “technical acumen aimed” at condensing entertainment and news into one source for adults, while feeding a new cultural craze that the coming of age post-war generation bought into. 13 14

Jimmy was still interested in tacking up car posters, but now he had another hobby, television. Coming home after school or work, he sat on the red carpet in the den, looking at animated cartoons and shows like Tom Terrific and Spin & Marty. His favorite would become

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*Tennessee Tuxedo.* Within a ten year-span from 1949 to 1959, the number of household television sets went from 940,000 to 44,000,000 and though many shows were censored, they could not suppress sexual innuendo. Soon Jimmy tore down his car posters and put up one of Marilyn Monroe. He saw the Civil Rights movements explode on TV, and Rock & Roll take off. In 1956 he watched Elvis Presley, who was to become the ultimate celebrity for him as for so many Americans, appear live on the Ed Sullivan show. That program captured 82.6 percent of the viewing audience, a proportion so large it was scarcely believable. This gave rise to a new music and a new culture for white teens. Pop music replaced the Big Band craze of the WWII generation, and gave a critical push for the emergence of rock and roll. In 1956 he also saw, *The Searchers,* in Technicolor and became an ardent fan of John Wayne, whom many Americans came to regard as the ultimate hero. Then, he saw broadcasts covering the success launching of the Russian *Sputnik* Satellite, and watched the sweat roll from his father’s brow, as he muttered, “Damn Commies – what’s wrong with Washington? As his father shook his head, his mother, being the lady she was, frowned and noted how important now religion was going to be for Americans.\(^{15}\)

After World War II, there was an unexpected rise in church membership. In 1940, 64.5 million Americans regularly attended church. By the late 1950’s, their numbers nearly doubled, as 114.5 million Americans found a place for religious worship. A large number of families who joined a certain religious congregation were influenced by President Eisenhower’s call to the American public to seek out a religious group. At the 1954 Republican National Convention Eisenhower was named “not only the political leader, but the spiritual leader of our times” for his

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\(^{15}\) Michael T. Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis* (Champlain-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000) This is a key book in debunking the notion that Elvis was racist and exploited black artists -- in fact (and this may have had an impact on Jimmy) Bertrand argues that Elvis cut through the racial divide and made it possible for blacks to become music figureheads.
statement, “Our government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith.” Of the President, Writer Will Herberg wrote, “[Religion] is something that reassures [Eisenhower] about the essential rightness of everything American, his nation, his culture, and himself.” Many families answered the call, including George and Catherine who raised their children as Roman Catholics and attended mass regularly at St. Teresa’s, two miles down the road from Gilch’s Towing. But the boom in religious attendance did not bring sinners to the altar asking for absolution from sin. Many new churchgoers were post-war parents who took their children to mass in the belief that the Church was a perfect environment for teaching the moral values that communism lacked. These attitudes alarmed the more religiously committed members. They saw the Church being tainted by the post-war generation, which misled their children by becoming more attached to American’s growing materialism, than on faith in God.\footnote{Will Herberg, \textit{Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An essay in American Religious Sociology} (Garden City, NY: University of Chicago Press), 285.}

Jimmy was raised to take his religious responsibilities seriously. He took Holy Communion regularly and chose Saint Francis Xavier as his patron saint for confirmation. He added “Xavier” as his middle name, which proved intriguing, as it was far from the norm. He felt a strong moral obligation to help the underprivileged. But, like many of his generation, he eventually was forced to question the moral contract he made at confirmation. Increasingly, his focus became enjoying his youth.

Attending school at Saint Teresa’s, he found himself rebelling against the tedium of Sunday mass and the rote recitation of daily prayers. He became a leader whose push backs against middle class conformity had far larger implications then he could imagine. On one occasion, the nuns who tried to prove that scrubbing the classroom floor was a privilege, ordered Jimmy to do it. He refused, saying, “My Dad says that’s what the janitor is for.” In the seventh
grade he went to the barbershop after school and got the letters “DA” cut into the hair behind his head. His Catholic teachers would not stand for such a tauntingly obscene haircut, especially when Jimmy admitted it stood for “Duck’s Ass”. He was sent home on suspension until it grew out. But to the surprise of St. Teresa’s administrators and teachers, the students rebelled, refused their lessons, and hung up make shift banners about the injustice Jimmy and his haircut had received. He returned to school the next day with his haircut intact, and finding himself a town hero.

As his mother and father held fast to hard work and church, Jimmy was moving on to something new. It was fresh and different – Rock and Roll. At the time Jimmy saw Elvis perform on TV, the singer was already a national icon. Men wanted to be him and women wanted him. Jimmy admired the new music and found himself connected to a culture that journalists deemed too sexual and priests condemned as immoral. By 1960, Jimmy, a fifteen-year old freshman at Triton High School, had a disposable income. He, more sparingly then most, and his friends spent a good portion of their money feeding the rising music industry. It in turn gave rise to a corporate business, promoting music for a youth culture that was distrusted by parents and often suspected of encouraging subversive, corrupting values. But the new youth culture marked a beginning time of relative affluence. As the post-war generation came of age, full employment, combined with shortages of consumer goods led to plenty of money, but little to spend it on. Music and movies filled that expenditure gap, and the emergence of the new prosperity merged the working class into the middle. From colleges to high schools, young people across America broke away from the mainstream, getting caught up in fads and in some cases youthful rebellion. Rock and roll was the starting point. It was sexy, audacious, defiant,
and unfettered. But, popular music was not the only creation of the cultural movement teenagers followed and supported.  

Western and action films – often promoting rebellious themes – led to a proliferation of drive-in theaters across the country. Characters were shown breaking laws, while standing up to authority. As fifties fashions promoted conformity, the youth movement in the sixties came to value clothes as a way of expressing individuality and difference. The young public bought into the movement and schools helped it gain popularity. Television, schools, drive-ins and the mobility produced by automobiles all facilitated the disseminator of news and gossip, and proved venues where sex could be talked about openly, and often even acted upon.

Walking down the halls of a newly built high school, Jimmy found himself in the company of his generation, particularly his best friend Gerry Shields who shared the same beliefs and the same taste in music, movies – and women. By the beginning of his sophomore year, he had lost interest in subjects, such as math and science, and sought to escape from what many young teenagers come to regard as their “prison.” Fights were generally the easiest way out, but he was not a bully, let alone a fighter. So, cutting class with Gerry proved to be the most effective, and his favored method. His escapist skills left the principle with no other option than to punish him with detentions and threatened suspensions. Jimmy was impervious to those threats as well as his mother’s chastisements. To avoid family arguments, his father took him to work, and many times on hunting trips. When he did go to school, he found shop class exciting. His ability to work with tools, and creativity in design, gave evidence of mechanical ingenuity. He also knew how many quarts of oil trucks at the station needed, how many feet were in a mile,

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and how to read a map. As he worked more at the station, he began learning more practical skills and making more money than most of his friends, and school became a mere interruption, and increasingly an impediment to his new trade. While his brother George was college bound, Jimmy stayed fixed on home, friends and work.

His dislike of school led him to eventually drop out. By December 1961, now sixteen and thinking he knew everything he needed to know, he decided to quit school after he was provoked into a fight. In the school office, waiting for his mother to take him home, all he did was smile. He thought, at least I won’t be missing hunting season. His mother arrived shortly with a look of disappointment upon her face, and the two rode in silence home in the new car. He spent the rest of the day staring at Ms Monroe, his wood carvings from shop class, and his last remaining car poster of a 57’ Chevy. It was something he wanted to own, and at seventeen he had fixed up his own Chevy (not a 57’), but in his drive alone, he came home with a scratch that ran deep along the whole side panel. He tried to convince his father that someone hit him – he father believed none of it. But the accident did not stop Jimmy from getting behind the wheel, especially of a tow truck and for now that seemed to be enough – just like his portion of the bedroom he shared with George.

The house was not big enough for all nine kids to have their own room, so they shared. Jimmy and George’s room was in the back of the house, but the brothers, as siblings many times did not saw eye to eye. Jimmy was protective and stern in his ways, if he did not like the way his sister was dressed to go out, he refused to take her. It was that simple. And when the girls found themselves without a ride, their brother George started the car. But Jimmy lived by a double standard. Before he met his steady girlfriend Louise, he was often found at drive-ins (never in town) with his friend Gerry Shields, where they often switched dates midway through the movie.
Afterward he ventured back to the station and made use of the towed cars. There he hoped that the alone time would allow him more to get to know his date more intimately. His double standard even stretched to school. If one of his girlfriends talked to one of his sisters about him, or what they did, he broke off the relationship.

Jimmy excelled socially, but George was more introverted. And when George found a girlfriend – he married her. College bound with a career to think about, George, unlike Jimmy, rather rigidly observed rules and laws. George had what amounted to a young Ronald Reagan personality, a young democrat who favored traditional straight-edge, academic values. But Jimmy understood rules as things to question and test. He preferred tee-shirts and rolled up jeans and admired James Dean’s *Rebel Without a Cause*. He found working at the station rewarding, and his practical skills and outgoing personality led him to see his future within his hometown. He was found likeable by older members of the town. Gerry’s grandmother, a Scottish born, “prim and proper” lady, who rarely cracked a smile, found Jimmy to be witty and polite. His frequent visits to see her often led to conversation about baseball, and once Jimmy, unsettling the woman, asked, “Do you think sex will ever replace baseball?” Though she found the query inappropriate, Jimmy still held a firm place in her heart. Gerry’s mother and sisters found him to be goodhearted, courteous, and comical. But, he also had a serious side that allowed him to learn from mistakes and accept the consequences.  

He woke up to the Sergeant tapping him on the cheek, and whispering, “Hey…”

Sometimes he wondered if the guy even knew his name. Nothing had changed. As he gathered his composure, he could feel he was still wet. He also knew he stank, but he could not smell it anymore. With most things, he knew all too well the smells of Vietnam. He noticed the artillery

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had stopped. But he knew, just like the rain, it would come back, pouring down like always. He guessed it was around four a.m. and his eyes hung heavy as he re-tied his boots. Wincing hard several times, trying to clear the blurriness, he had trouble locating the lace. It was his turn for guard duty and the two and a half hours of sleep he got (never more at one time) seemed like a second. Wrapping the bootlace around his leg twice, he used the remaining slack to tie a double knot. They were not coming off. He was used to being tired, but nothing like this. He felt sick with exhaustion. It was almost the same way he felt when serving several consecutive nights of guard duty back in boot camp at Fort Dix. Sitting up, looking out into the black, he was reminded of what the chaplain at basic had said about courage in a foxhole. The guy was right.
Left to Right: Catherine Gilch, James Gilch, and George Gilch
“Grow in your new courage, child; o son of gods
and ancestor of gods, this is the way
to scale the stars. All fated, future wars
shall end in peace...”

- Virgil, The Aeneid

Down the close, darkening lanes they sang their way to the siding-shed,
And lined the train with faces grimly gay.

-Wilfred Owen, The Send-Off

George Jr. was nervous, but college protected him. Billy Pollard, the kid down the street, already got his. Jimmy was next and he knew it was coming. George Sr. knew it was coming. Catherine knew it was coming. Hell, anyone watching the news knew it was coming. But it was not war they foresaw. No, that was obvious. It was the letter coming that worried the family.

August of 1965 was pleasant in Runnemede, but not beautiful. Summer was in its last days and light breezes at the end of the month spread rumors about the coming of Fall. Jimmy was working at Morton’s Hosiery Factory down the street from home during the day. At night he waited for the phone to ring, which signaled that the station needed help. He came home one evening, gave a box of defective hosiery to his mom and turned on Tennessee Tuxedo. It was then that his dad pulled him aside: “Jim, listen to me.” He pointed to the TV, “Turn that stuff off. The National Guard, I know guys. I can, I – I’m going to get you in, Gerry too.” Jimmy looked at the ceiling, making sure not to look his father in the eye, smiled, and shook his head back and forth and breathed in deeply. Assuming Jimmy’s smile meant yes, his dad began turning away, but twisted back when Jimmy, exhaling, said, “No.” It was a confident, defiant, “No”. Hearing the response, George was not as mad as he was uneasy. “Jim, you know what this means – you don’t have to go. Guys from the guard stay home.” For someone from the working, middle class, George had several connections others families lacked. His towing service made it possible for him to make “friends” in high places, especially state police officers
and locally elected officials. It could also give Jimmy a way out. “Yes, I know what it means and, if I get picked, I’ll go. Billy Pollard’s already gone, and you know that kid. If he did it, I know I can do it, and better. I’m not running away from this. It’s my duty. Besides, not everyone goes.”

“Your duty is here!”

His father walked out, calm, but disappointed in Jimmy’s decision. What worried him the most were the “unknown” factors. Neither he nor anyone else in the family understood exactly what Vietnam meant or even what it was. Stopping communism and spreading democracy made sense. The communists were seemingly trying to take over the world. That was clear from the TV news.

Jimmy was hardheaded. Whatever he put his mind to; he made sure he finished it. The time he and Gerry painted Mrs. Shields house battleship grey and ran out of supplies midway through, leaving a white line in the center of the house, didn’t count. He was older and wiser now. That was when he was nineteen. Now was twenty. He was a working man with a steady girlfriend, named Louise, whom he met on the boardwalk earlier in the summer at Sea Isle City. No, he was not going to let something like Vietnam beat him. If he was drafted, he was going, and anyone who knew him understood he was the type of kid who was going to come home with lots of stories. He was a leader, and that meant he had to go. Deep inside he knew that others counted on him – people like Gerry, and his other friends. And his dad, who Jimmy felt expected big things of him. Most important, Jimmy thought he needed to be an example to his sisters. Backing down would only reveal his anxieties about war, which he was convinced, were cowardly. This was his chance to demonstrate his worth.
He knew that he had made mistakes, but the draft could make up for them. No one had ever pulled him aside, to push him to use the potential he had. Even in the class in which he had excelled – woodshop – the teacher just glanced uncaringly at his work and remarked it was worth a good grade. Many times he was misunderstood, as friends viewed him as funny and failed to see his serious side. And judging his worth on the basis of his actions, his teachers allowed him to settle for less than what he felt he could achieve. He was not going to let his father do the same by tempting him with an opportunity that offered a way out of a chance to prove his worth. Tired of standing still, and realizing that the rebel image neighborhood kids associated with him was not going to last forever, he wanted to be drafted. It was an opportunity to grow, and the possibility of going to war was a price he needed to pay for the lost chances of his past. And he felt that paying that cost offered the possibility of a better future. But, that price frightened him. He felt stuck, but convinced himself that since John Wayne never backed down, he could not either. What he wanted was what all Western heroes had, an everyday world that gave them a chance to live fearlessly. But because Jimmy knew nothing but security, comfort, and peace, he hungered for the danger and challenges of war. If the draft card came, he was going to fulfill that obligation he owed as an American. The communists needed to be stopped, and James Gilch was going to help the people of South Vietnam do just that.

The letter eventually came. “Greetings from Lyndon Johnson” led to feelings of anticipation for his father, and frustration and possibly guilt. It was the last week of August, 1965, when Jimmy was ordered to report to the lobby of the local US Post Office at 6:30 a.m. for transportation to Fort Dix Military Training Center, in Burlington County, New Jersey. Failure
to report could result in imprisonment, and a package provided to local law enforcement agencies with lists of drafted men made escape almost impossible.

“Ah, six-thirty, that ain’t bad,” Jimmy said, looking closer at the letter. “Well, look at this, it says, ‘You may be found not qualified. Keep this in mind in arranging your affairs, to prevent any undue hardship if not inducted.’ Hope I pass the test; could possibly be the first one, huh?” He looked at his dad who was sitting at the table, shaking his head in displeasure. Just days before he had set up an appointment for Jimmy to get into the guard, but, having stayed out late the previous night with Louise, Jimmy decided to sleep through the scheduled meeting. It was no accident. “Hardships! Hell, who would be upset with not going,” his father glared over at Jimmy. “Oh, dad – look right here, it says, ‘If employed, to protect your right to return to your job, inform your employer of the possibility of non-induction.’ Guess I better hurry over to the station.” “You think everything is a god damn joke, Jim.” “George!” His mother looked disapprovingly over at her husband. She was angry that her husband used the Lord’s name in vein. George mumbled under his breath and walked away.

Jimmy had a week to report, and decided as he headed upstairs that he was going to start packing his belongings. The draft notice included detailed instructions. He needed to bring three pairs of clean clothes, and enough money to last a week for personal purchases (whatever that meant, since he assumed that the army was suppose to supply everything he needed). It also instructed him to bring a record of his life insurance, which he did not have, and his social security card. After he squeezed everything into a paper bag, he made sure to inform everyone that he was about to become a soldier. Many already knew.

In the first week of September, Jimmy waited at the post office for the 6:30 bus to pick him up. Sitting with his family, he saw familiar faces of boys from around the area, as many also
sat with their families, fidgeting their feet. Some kids came alone – one even had his father drop him off. The buses arrived promptly, and after the men were loaded on, they were driven down the New Jersey Turnpike to Fort Dix. The fort was originally established as Camp Dix on July 16, 1917. During World War I, it developed into one of the largest training centers in the nation. After the 1918 Armistice its garrison was reduced and it was used to train Reserve forces. In the 1930’s, it was renamed Fort Dix and became a permanent base for several units. In 1940, a reception center was built to process those inducted under the Selective Service Act, informally known as the draft. During World War II ten infantry divisions were trained and sent overseas from Fort Dix. Post-war, the base helped over a million soldiers move back into civilian life. By 1965, a mock Vietnamese village was being built to acclimate drafted soldiers, like Jimmy, to conditions in Vietnam.\(^{19}\) The barracks sat on eleven square miles of bleak, acidic, nutrient-poor, pine barren soil that allowed for virtually no undergrowth, besides thorn bushes. It was isolated from civilian life, and contained large areas of open woods for training. The camp was a perfect training area for preparing forces for battle on the plains of Europe. The New Jersey weather also gave trainees opportunities to adapt to seasonal changes, but monsoons, tropical heat and humidity were not in the forecast.

As buses pulled up to the reception station, a short, stocky sergeant greeted them with his customary – “Get the Fuck off this thing, you worthless animals!” One minute, they were human beings, now they were little more than meat. The sergeant, who came on the bus screaming, had calmed down as he led the men to the check-in station. As they filed off one by one, tensions lessened a bit while they were being processed and signing paper work. Each man was assigned to one of three drill units within the training brigade: The Proud Rifles, which was the 2\(^{nd}\)

\(^{19}\) Major General Charles E. Beauchamp. *The United States Army Basic Training, Yearbook of The United States Army Training Center: Infantry, Fort Dix, New Jersey, (Topeka, Kansas: Jostens Military Publications), 5.*
training regiment; The Pioneers, the 3rd; and The Nonpareils, the 4th. Jimmy was ordered to the 3rd Pioneers, Company S: Their motto, “We Will.” Then, each unit was led into a lecture hall for orientation, which generally was handled by privates or corporals, and after which each inductee took an aptitude test. The scores didn’t matter much unless one was a compulsive achiever. But, for draftees college was not on their personal agenda. 20

In the following days recruits were all given the same haircut, short and to the skin, and were issued their equipment – white underwear and green fatigues. A white stripe over their right breast shirt pocket identified who they were, but the label over their heart showed who they really belonged to, the US Army. Now called recruits, they were led to be medically processed, an assembly line procedure in which they “weighed you, measured you, looked at flat feet, squeezed your penis to see if you had the clap, looked up your anus to see if you had piles, counted your teeth, made you cough, listened to your heart and lungs, made you read the letters on the card, charted your urine and your intelligence, gave you a service record for a future and an identification tag stamped with your serial number to hang around your neck, issued OD regulation equipment, a condiment can and a copy of the articles of war.” 21 During the medical inspection, many men claimed to have unique health problems that they hoped offered a way out of the army, but almost all who were inspected were approved with a “guaranteed fresh” sticker on their green bodies. Being modest, Jimmy felt a deep sense of humiliation while standing naked in line while being probed for physical shortcomings. He suddenly felt lost. Mortified by a situation he chose for himself. Nothing could be less satisfying than to find that the choice he

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20 Yearbook of The United States Army, 16.
made might disgrace him. He kept his head straight, and was careful not to look down the line. He swallowed hard, sweating from bodily crevices he never knew could perspire.  

When the examination was complete, the inductees were placed in formation and given their ID tags. The sergeant shouted, “Attach’ SHUN, For-War-D’ MARCH”, and like cattle they were finally herded into their assigned barracks. The thick smells of floor polish and gun grease filled the dry air, and black stenciled “NO SMOKING” signs marked the walls. The barracks would be their home for the next eight weeks, a place where each inductee, in accordance with army standards, was pushed down and built up. Each trainee was assigned to a bunk with a foot locker and next to it a wall locker. Within the olive green footlocker, general army rules detailed the placement of their effects. Toothpaste or tooth powder had to be positioned in the left rear of the footlocker. It must not be dirty or dusty, and it must be bottom backwards. It also had to appear upside-down when the locker was opened. A trainee’s shaving cream must be placed in the right corner, while his razor had to be facing down on a white towel that lay in the middle. The razor blade had to lie horizontally upon the towel, so, when one opened the locker, the cutting edge was to the right. Each soldier’s knife had to be moving in the opposite horizontal direction of the razor, with its blade facing out. The toothbrush must be pointing in the same direction as the razor, with the bristles on the right side, also facing outward. A recruit’s comb, along with his soap dish and shoe polish, were required to be neatly positioned on the same white towel. Each item had to be dry and dust free. If a man used cologne, the same directions applied to it as for the toothpaste. The wording on the label needed to be facing backwards. The locker itself had to be locked at all times (to save men a few precious seconds in the morning, many dialed in the combination at night, so all they had to do was pull the lock open) and placed exactly in the center of the end rails of the bed – not a centimeter off to either side. An

22 Ibid.
inductee’s shoes must face toe out and be placed directly in the middle of the area covered by the bed. Bunk sheets had to be washed brilliant white and placed on the mattress so tight that, if a small object was tossed on the bed, it would bounce off without the sheets ever being ruffled. If a soldier was caught not meeting those requirements, he would be gigged, which meant he would not be going home on Saturday night.23

The Pre-Cycle Week was over, and adjustment to military life began in the first official week of basic training. Trainees were first faced with mental and physical challenges devised by instructors who taught the basic techniques of combat. It did not take long for Jimmy and the rest of Company S, with its showy, young black commander, Captain Arthur McAllway, Jr., to fully be inducted into the hellish environment of basic training. Company drill sergeants, like James Cumberland, walked around hard of hearing and a sizable chip on their shoulders. It seemed they hated their job, and because they did, each recruit was going to suffer. They had been given the unenviable task of training the worthless, unintelligent men in Company S to be effective soldiers. Misbehavior brought the command, “drop and give me twenty.” Often it didn’t matter what the offense was. Sometimes Cumberland didn’t like the way you looked on a particular morning; other times, since he was hard of hearing, if a man didn’t yell back loud enough, he had to “drop and give twenty.” Sometimes a single trainee had to drop; at others it was a pair, and every so often it was the whole platoon. And no matter how fast one ran, how far one threw a grenade, or how high one could jump, Sgt. Cumberland’s grandmother seemed to be capable of doing it better.

It was in these first weeks of boot camp when inspections became daily routines and training in general military subjects rapidly increased. It also was a time that allowed for no

23The general process of induction into army life that frames my discussion on Jimmy’s experience in basic training is ably discussed in John Sack’s detailed account of boot camp at Fort Dix in M (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 1967), 4-10.
individual thought. If a trainee thought he had found a better solution to a problem, and it was
not done by “the book,” the consequences were far harsher than push-ups. Drill sergeants
became thought police, and were often fiercely hated by their troops during these early weeks.
Demonstrating one’s preference, or worst talking back, led to the accused having to run several
miles alone with full pack. Sometimes the offender would lose his precious weekend pass. Drill
sergeants knew what a recruit ate, where he slept, and who liked or hated him, and they used all
the information they could compile to make the soldier in-the-making’s life miserable. If one
man hated another – Cumberland placed them in the same drill squad and watched them argue as
he made one a higher rank than the other.

Privacy was nonexistent – the bathroom was an open area where men showered, shaved
and shit. Every morning started at 0430 hours (4:30 a.m.) with lights out at 2100 (9:00 p.m.). At
night Fire Guards were chosen for two hour shifts of walking around the barracks, keeping
watch. Sometimes they caught men stealing food, running to escape, or worse, trying to set fire
to the camp. Punishments for such offenses ranged from extra hours of watch and kitchen patrol
(KP) to court marshal.

The third and fourth weeks of boot camp gave trainees an introduction to their rifle –
ever was it called a gun. In these weeks, the Army’s M-14 rifle, soon to be replaced by the
M16A1 (M-16) was supposed to be understood inside and out. Marksmanship training was
followed by intensified, vigorous instruction on how to live in the field. By week five each
trainee was tested for his accuracy and rate of fire on the range. If he demonstrated high
proficiency in “zapping” targets; he could be awarded a marksmanship ribbon. During this
phase recruits also learned how to set up and fire claymore mines.
At the end of week five basic training shifted to another level. Men were beginning to get used to the punishment of daily physical exertion. But there were those who still could not adjust to US Army training methods, and they concluded that military life was not for them. They gathered in groups and began to voice their opinions quietly about leaving – heading north to Canada. There was even a rumor in one platoon that a guy paid three others to break his jaw. He was hoping that he would get deferred, possibly, even go home for good. Some thought about having an “accident” on the range. It took guts to pull the trigger on oneself, and self-inflicted wounds were a major offence in the army. Like Jimmy, most trainees just took the pain. He had welcomed the draft, and there was no way for him to back out. He was stuck. Basic was getting harder, and his nerves were wearing thin. By week six, on a Saturday afternoon, Jimmy was visited by his family. He was increasingly concerned about where his life was headed. He had recently placed a request to be a colonel’s aid, but was notified that all the open positions were filled. He had a feeling he was going to Vietnam.

As basic was winding down, Uncle Sam was busy in Washington on that same Saturday feeding stiff IBM cards into machines. There were two separate card decks; one white, and one green. The white deck identified locations where the army had an opening for a rifleman. The green deck listed the names of each rifleman in the army at that current moment. When fed into the machine, each card exited, paired with one of the opposite color. That was the main way the army decided where draftees went. Those who did not want to take a chance with the system left, and after that weekend leave several men failed to report back to Fort Dix.

During week six the air got cold, but training was still physically and emotionally rigorous. Squads learned the importance of camouflage and that when “their sorry asses were sent to Nam, they wouldn’t come back in a black bag,” if they stayed low, and operated under
the principle of concealment. Recruits were also trained in basic hand-to-hand combat. So Jimmy learned ten to twelve different ways to “finish” a Vietcong guerrilla. He told his parents: “The first move that Sergeant Cumberland demonstrated was throwing a VC down and smashing his head seven or eight inches into the ground with the stock of the rifle.” Other killing techniques included digging at eyes and kneeing men between the legs. Hand-to-hand combat instruction was followed by grenade throwing and night firing exercises. Week six also included basic individual tactical training (ITT). 

During the same week trainees learned about chemical, biological, and radiological weapons and mastered the training procedures intended to enable them to survive such an attack. After detailed instruction, each recruit waited nervously to experience the gas chamber for himself. When the men were ordered out of the classroom unto the field, they would be exposed to chlorobenzylidene malonitrile, or CS Gas. CS is a non-lethal substance that is used in all branches of the military and police departments as a riot control agent. The squad marched into the chamber with their gas masks on, but once the doors were shut and sealed, they were ordered to remove them. Each recruit had to spend approximately three to five minutes in the chamber without his mask. It could be the longest three to five minutes of his life – depending on how well each squad member cooperated. The group was not allowed to leave the chamber until each man had successfully removed this mask and felt the effects of the gas. Seeing many throwing up and gagging almost immediately upon contact with the gas, Jimmy thought twice about taking off the mask. When he did, he immediately started coughing; trying to get the gas out of his

24 For photographs and more descriptions on ITT see: Yearbook of The United States Army Training Center: Infantry, 59 - 64.
lungs, but that made it worse. His eyes started to water. When his skin began to burn, all he
could think about was the time he forgot his suntan lotion at the beach.

When the squad was back in the barracks at night, Jimmy was out on guard duty. Tired,
bored, and alone, he found a pen and some paper and began another letter. He wrote that he
could not wait to go home that weekend. He was still feeling the effects of not getting the
colonel’s aid position. He admitted to being uneasy about the situation in which he found
himself. If boot camp was teaching him anything, it was the importance of education. He
realized that when he was growing up, he was not fooling anyone. “In fact,” he admitted, “If
only I knew then, what I knew now.” As the men from S Company came to know each other,
they realized that most of the soldiers who were going to fight and die in the war were from the
working class. Jimmy made a promise to himself that when this was over, after he finished
school, he was going to someday run his father’s gas station. He wanted to make the family
proud of him, for a lowly army private was not what George Sr. had in mind as a career for his
son. Jimmy began to understand all of this when he was once caught sleeping during class.
Cumberland and the other sergeants were not at all amused by a lapse that the rest of the trainees
deemed hilarious. While they laughed, Jimmy realized they weren’t laughing with him, they
were laughing at him. He came to see that he had to change, if he was going to come back alive
and go on to school. He needed to pay attention.

Like so many inductees, Jimmy missed his room at home and his friends from
Runnemede. Just a few nights earlier while he was sleeping, some men from his platoon flipped
over his mattress, and he hurt his leg as he fell from the top bunk. It was all in good fun, but it
meant that Jimmy had become the target of pranks. He was no longer the leader he used to be.
He felt isolated and uneasy, especially about being able to pass his final individual physical
training test in the next few days. As his remaining time on his night duty wound down, he mentioned that he wished his parents had been harder on him, but he hoped that “sometimes you can still learn when it’s too late.” Then he signed off with a remark that betrayed his ambivalent feelings about the coming test, writing, “…but, if Billy Pollard done it, I know anybody can do it (I hope).”

Company S rose at four o’clock the next morning and Cumberland handed over the day’s first class to the chaplain. It was now the priest’s job to keep the company from falling asleep after breakfast, which consisted of powdered eggs and an unknown meat product – perhaps pork roll. The subject of class was “Courage.” The Chaplin was a theology major and intended to say things like, “I suggest to you that it takes a man with courage of conviction to –” He paused, placed his hands on the side of the old wooden podium, which he called his pulpit, and continued. “- to put your foot down.” He continued, asking, “Do you know what takes courage in foxhole? It is this -” He paused again, saying nothing. For the men at that morning hour, it felt like “eons of empty time” went by as they sat with their eyes drooping, waiting for an answer. One man could be seen biting the skin between his thumb and index finger to stop himself from falling asleep. Finally, the chaplain broke the silence, observing that, “It isn’t the noises that get you, it’s the silence.”

At eight o’clock that same morning, Company S moved on to their concrete floored training classroom. A sergeant shouted, “Atten’SHUN! SEA’EATS!”, and as S sat down in unison on the cold metal chairs, they shouted back, “We Will!” The first time they were prompted to respond this way, Jimmy laughed, but soon he realized this was the motto of the company. Like all Companies, S did a lot of shouting. Its confident captain said group

responses built morale, Jimmy sensed it also kept men awake. Shouting was not just confined to the field and the classroom; it prevailed in the mess hall too. Before a man could get his “chow” he was ordered to left face and stand at attention. He then shouted to his sergeant that he was either drafted or had joined the army voluntarily. This was to done to ensure no one was missing from the camp. At the end of the month the sergeants totaled up the categories, and reported them to the mess sergeant, who wrote down the count and threw away the tally.

During the first class of week seven Jimmy and S Company were learning the basics of the bayonet assault, advanced first aid, and combat firing – experiencing the latter while crawling under barbed wire, and crouching in trenches as live rounds flew overhead. Beyond the classroom men put these skills to work. They charged –screaming – at truck tires with their bayonets fixed. They then wrapped medical gauze on plastic heads that didn’t bleed, and by the end of the week, they were ready for their final physical conditioning test, called “Pro Pack”. It was designed to test the skills of each man in the all the areas in which they had received instruction. Physically demanding and emotionally punishing, men of S Company came to endure training, and Jimmy, thinking many times he’d rather die, drew from within himself the stamina needed to finish.

That night after the final test, the barracks were loud with men singing along with the radio and dancing in the aisles. Jimmy sat atop his bunk, writing home, remarking on the party like atmosphere. But boot camp was not over, and that night, Cumberland barged in, with a higher ranking officer beside him, set to deal out one last mental assault before the men became soldiers. He was there for a random inspection; a routine the inductee’s knew all too well. Quickly jumping to the floor at attention, Jimmy positioned himself in front of this footlocker. Cumberland approached yelling in his face, and asked a question. Jimmy responded with a
smart-aleck answer that found him kissing the ground. Before moving over to the far window, Cumberland continued to torment the other men. He placed his finger under a thin piece of window molding, and proceeded to find dust. He sneered, “Looks to me like you fucking retards think this shit is over! It’s Not!” He then walked out with a grin on his face. Angered and upset about another round of petty abuse, Jimmy continued the letter, and jokingly exclaimed he might perform some “hand to hand” on the drill sergeant. He asked his mother to “write to our congress man because you know I always do what I am told.” When his mom received the letter, she read it and smiled, knowing that though her son was growing up, he hadn’t lost his sense of humor. But, perhaps she should have taken Jimmy’s advice, for the following morning in Washington, D.C. a white card with the location Vietnam exited the machine with an attached green card with the name James X. Gilch.

The men of S Company repacked their personal belongings and neatly placed their military uniforms in their issued duffle bags. They then undressed their bunks and rolled up the well worn mattresses. It was graduation day. The men who demonstrated high accuracy at the range, and those who mastered the Physical Training Test received trophies and handshakes from the leading noncommissioned officers (NCO’s). Standing at attention, they listened to their regimental commander, Colonel Robert H. Musser, give a few words of encouragement. Next, Major General Charles Bauchamp read his speech. In the unit’s year book he also wrote, “In this era of nuclear weapons, rockets, guided missiles and other modern tools of warfare, the most important element of National Defense remains the man who employs these tools. Man’s natural habitat is the earth, and in war he must eventually defeat his enemies by struggle on the ground. Hence the necessity for well-trained soldiers of the United States Army. [And by your training,
here at Fort Dix, we feel that in many ways you have developed a greater sense of responsibility, a greater awareness of the world around you, and have become a better citizen of this great country of ours.”

The ceremony concluded with a military parade to the tune *Colossus of the Colombia.* Aimed not only at pleasing the brass, the review also entertained the hundreds in the bleachers who watched with pride their soldier sons and brothers march by.

With little time to himself before he shipped out, Jimmy spent the remaining days at home saying his good-byes. The uniform gave him a sense of command and personal purpose, but it did not rid his new found feelings of contempt. Deploying everything he learned at boot camp, he conducted cleaning inspections in the living room. After his sisters had finished their chores, he began his search for dust, then gave his sisters another opportunity to banish it. His mother was pleased to find how meticulous he had become about his dress and the placement of his belongings. He no longer allowed his sisters to iron his dress fatigues – because they had to be pressed a certain way and only he knew how to place the pins on his uniform to be in accordance with army code.

The next morning, Jimmy went to visit Mrs. Shields up past Schubert Ave. He knocked on the door, and then greeted her with a smile and a hug. He shared stories about his army experience, and when he got up to leave, she broke down in tears. Jimmy offered his handkerchief. Walking with Jimmy to the door, she told him that she would see him when he came back. He paused for a second, then continued walking down the front steps. “I’m afraid, Mrs. Shields, when you see me again, I’ll be in a pine box.” And then he waved good-bye, leaving behind his tear stained handkerchief.

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26 Yearbook of The United States Army, 3.


28 Shields and Gilch interview.
A young Vietnamese girl presents a floral wreath to an American soldier arriving with the 25th Infantry Division on January 18, 1966 at Vung Tau, forty miles south of Saigon.

Image by © Bettmann/Corbis
Unit Positions and Locations at Cu Chi
Cu Chi Base Camp, Cu Chi, Vietnam.
As I ponder'd in silence,
Returning upon my poems, considering, lingering long,
A Phantom arose before me, with distrustful aspect,
Terrible in beauty, age, and power,
The genius of poets of old lands,
As to me directing like flame its eyes,
With finger pointing to many immortal songs,
And menacing voice, What singest thou? it said;
Know'st thou not, there is but one theme for ever-enduring bards?
And that is the theme of War, the fortune of battles,
The making of perfect soldiers?

-Walt Whitman

I think it better that in times like these
A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth
We have no gift to set a statesman right;
He has had enough of meddling who can please
A young girl in the indolence of her youth,
Or an old man upon a winter's night.

-W.B. Yeats

“Okayyy, ladies and gentlemen – this is your captain speaking. Our flying time to
Saigon will be approximately eighteen hours. Your attention is invited to the ‘NO SMOKING’
and ‘SEAT BELTS’ signs. Please comply when the signs are lighted to make our flight
destination a safe and memorable trip… (Click)” The pilot turned off the loud speaker and
directed the plane down the runway. The sea waved and Jimmy smiled back as he looked out the
little window, saying goodbye to San Francisco and the Go-Go clubs that took so much of his
money; and he didn’t even like them. The city was like a stockyard for soldiers heading to
Vietnam, and it was there GIs saw firsthand the rebellious youth culture, consisting mainly of
college students unaffected by the war. The draft’s upheaval led them to protest, but Jimmy was
well on his way to Vietnam – he was happy. Because it was the first time he flew, like a child,
he thought the window seat was precious. The first stop was Hawaii. After take-off he looked
out occasionally onto the dark sea and at some impossible hour of the morning the plane passed
over Tokyo. Then it came over Vietnam. Looking out the window, he saw no bombs exploding,
or tanks crawling down the streets, only a land of lucid green and brown rivers that were fed by mountains. It looked serene from the air. A blonde stewardess dressed in powdered blue picked up the microphone. “(click) Gentleman, we have arrived at our destination. The temperature on the ground is 91 degrees; the local time is seven-thirty a.m. Please remain seated…”

As Jimmy walked out of the air-conditioned plane onto the ramp, he felt the oppressive heat and heavy humidity surround him like a prisoner. It hit with such great force that his eyes grew heavy, and his hearing lacked clarity. It was as if the world was suddenly slowing down – giving him a chance to re-grasp reality. But his own anxieties blocked any awareness, and his sweat numbed his body. It was not a rolling, beaded sweat. It was a thick, muggy sweat that seemingly was pushing, all at once, from his insides out to his skin. He got hot so fast, and cooled so quickly, that chills caused his shoulders to twitch, and the sweat that formed at the back of his neck had now spread down his back and buttocks.

Just a several weeks earlier, Jimmy and other GIs back at Fort Dix could explain everything they knew about Vietnam in a maximum of two sentences. “It was near China. The communists were killing the poor locals and they ate rice.” His first impression was that it was hot, humid, and smelled. He was rounded up with the others and taken to a staging area – a makeshift, concrete building similar to the ones at Fort Dix. Inside, he filled out mimeographed forms, received a green steel helmet and was given a crash course on local geography. He was in what the army called “the pipeline,” a processing phase between training and combat. Thinking he was going to the 1st Calvary Division (airmobile) on entering the warzone, Jimmy found his orders had been changed. He was now assigned to the 25th Infantry Division, 5th Mechanized Infantry stationed at Cu Chi, in the Mekong Delta not far from Saigon.
The 5th Mechanized was an Armored Personal Carrier (APC) unit. The military deployed thousands of APCs to Vietnam. They were all based on the same M113 track, and looked similar to “a large metal box with Caterpillar tracks.” 

But no two were built exactly the same, compelling GIs to make their own modifications to increase protection, boost firepower, and add comfort. The APC was originally designed to safely bring troops to the frontlines of theoretical battles fought on the plains of Europe. The machines intentions can be compared to the landing crafts used in WWII to carry GIs “safely” across waterways where they then stormed enemy beach heads. Like the transport boat, the APC was not designed for inflicting heavy damage upon enemy forces, and with modern day nuclear weapons, and fighter planes the APC was small in the realms of firepower.

At the start of the war, the tracks general purpose was to search out enemy positions, and any damage taken to the track would be absorbed by the machines aluminum armor. As the war proceeded, more APCs were becoming increasingly sought after, and the commander of Jimmy’s new division, Major General Frederick Weyand favored them over the M48 Patton medium tank. Weyand believed that the tracks were perfect weapons for surprising the enemy, and the tracks fast maneuverable abilities were crucial in winning the war against a disappearing enemy, one hamlet at a time.

But the armored vehicle, bound to roads and lightly wooded trials, made an enormous amount of noise, and was useless on night patrols. Though it had proved to be an effective weapon over Vietnam’s grassy fields, its

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29 Red Thunder, Tropic Lighting, 65.
30 Ibid, 66.
31 Jimmy’s new division was the 25th Infantry Division. Its commander was Major General Frederick Weyand, who later became a dissenter of Westmoreland’s search and destroy strategy. In 1967, Weyand, now a Lieutenant General, confessed in an interview that was leaked to the press that the war had developed into a stalemate. Also see, Red Thunder, Tropic Lighting, 64, 71.
12 ton metal body, and its 215 horsepower diesel engine often sank deep into the mud of flooded areas.  

Before being bused out he watched a movie in which the narrator observed that the Vietnamese live in an explosive situation where peace is nonexistent. After the reel finished, a lieutenant gave a slide show. His last picture showed an image of Vietnamese women clothed in silk dresses. It received some whistling from the seats. The lieutenant then proceeded to say that Saigon was not a VC city; it was a V.D. city full of dirty women. Next a captain from the medical corps, taking the microphone on the stage began telling the men about the numerous hazards and perils of Vietnam. He warned about cholera, dysentery, and how typhoid fever might occur whenever fecal matter was ingested. The men, who were not familiar with the word “fecal,” soon realized what it meant when a few laughs sweep the seats from those who understood and wondered why the fuck would someone eat shit. The captain went on trying to relay his information quickly as possible, for more troops were coming in. “Tuberculosis is particularly high among prostitutes,” he noted. Then continued to explain that clonorchiasis and paragonimiasis arise in the liver, and hepatitis, malaria, tapeworm, typhus, dengue and plaque are other maladies. He ended with one last piece of advice, “Don’t pet the dogs – rabies.” Hardly anyone understood most of what had just been conveyed. Jimmy was a grunt just like the rest of the troops, and when it came to medical terminology, they were the runts of the litter. He was there to fight a war for freedom, now he had to worry about the plague. It made no sense – so he laughed.

A sergeant then took the mic to address what he called a “vital matter” – how to stay alive. He began, “You can’t trust anyone! No one! Man, women – child! A cute little kid leans

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32 Many APCs still ran on gasoline early in the war, after a failed experiment on mixing both gasoline and diesel to obtain better fuel mirage, the US Army eventually designed APCs to solely run on diesel.
a bike next to a tree; you get the fuck away…it may blow up! When you see a woman carrying a box, you aim your gun. This place is hostile; you treat everything like it’s a hot LZ (Landing Zone). He then went to the slide projector. Click. See this. This is a punji pit. Each of those bamboo sticks will poke your dick right off. And that’s not the worst part – each one is covered in feces. What the sergeant was said seemed to make sense now, at least the connection between the feces and the disease. “You – Will – See them. They’re everywhere! My advice for your sorry asses is to stay away.” Jimmy wondered: how could I stay away if they were hidden everywhere? The sergeant then cautioned about insects, and especially snakes, which he advised, “If one bites you, just lay down because you’ll be dead soon.” He also briefly mentioned the tunnel network that lay under Cu Chi.

After orientation was over Jimmy struggled as he dragged his duffle bag to the buses headed for Cu Chi. He looked around at the other soldiers and saw that they too were soaked with sweat – like warm dew had formed over them. Once aboard the bus an officer handed him an M-14 rifle with no ammo, saying “if you see anything suspicious on the road; let me know!” Sitting down, he took notice of the barbed wire that covered the windows (to repel enemy grenades), and the “fresh” air that blew in from them was unforgettable. The smell, pervasive and unlike the heat that could be temporarily relieved by the rain, was omnipresent. Its foul odor even tainted his skin. It was a musty, old urine smell with a hint of death and human waste. The stink was sobering, but the countryside was amazing.

Riding down Highway One Jimmy saw ox carts and men on bicycles piled with enough boxes and food to press down the back bed shocks of a Chevy truck. He began to notice that the paradisiacal view from above was not at all like the reality below. Children with sticks ran naked in the streets, pointing them forward like swords and trying to keep up with the buses.

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33 M, 40-42.
Several people squatted along the road and peed, and others could be seen off in the distance laboring in the rice paddies. Most of the buildings were huts made from local bamboo and thatch harvested in the rainforest. The villagers wore black cotton pajama-like shirts and pants with wide conical hats, and some women blackened their front teeth, which Jimmy later learned they thought attractive. For Jimmy, Vietnam was a step back in time. He wrote home, “This country is so far behind us that in a few months we might go around the world and pass them again.” He bounced up and down as the bus hit rocks and potholes. He felt that the Vietnamese lived like pigs, and that they looked to US assistance to build a better future. He passed a construction site outside Cu Chi where Vietnamese workers were laying water pipes, and wrote to his parents “that since the US has arrived, they [the Vietnamese people] are living better off – they now have something to live for.” The impression gave him an immediate cause to fight for, especially for the children. Entering the camp, women and men could be seen selling anything and everything from silk shirts, to shoes, jackets and hats. It was a flea market for soldiers. Consumerism was becoming more and more pervasive in South Vietnamese culture, and the local villagers understood what sort of goods American GIs wanted. Black market shops were set up almost everywhere as the population turned away from farming. Younger kids walked the patrol roads selling cigarettes, and soda, and begging for candy. Jimmy noticed that “if you bought something from them or gave them sweets you were number one, the best [damn GI in Cu Chi], [but] if you didn’t give them anything you were number ten and they called you every name in the book.” Jimmy decided to strive “for number five.”

Jimmy stepped off the bus, setting off a mini explosion of red dust and a crater left behind that was a perfect imprint of his boot sole. The base camp area at Cu Chi was a flat, chemical wasteland, pitted with bomb craters. A red talcum dust swept through the air, and
treeless patches of ground had a top layer of soft soil that looked grayish brown. Cu Chi had once been a verdant region of intensive agriculture, which included rice paddies, orchards, nut trees, and rubber plantations. Villagers raised pigs, chickens, and water buffalo to drag plows or carry burdens between fields. But now the land as far as one could see was ruined. A map was posted on a board near the entrance on which surrounding areas had the words “destroyed” written in small black print. Behind the camp, parallel to the French built Highway One, ran the Vam Co Dong River. It fed a system of marshes and swamps that frequently flooded the camp, leaving soldiers to flounder in conditions that seemed like “an ocean of mud.” To the left of Cu Chi, a lone mountain stood in the distance. It was called by the local villagers, Nui Ba Den or in American translation, the Black Virgin Mountain. To the far right the Michelin Rubber Plantation could be seen. The more cynical GIs told the new arrivals that the real reason they were in Vietnam was to protect the interests of the larger rubber plantations. Closer
to Cu Chi’s front lay forested, enemy strongpoint areas the US Army dubbed the Ho Bo and Boi Lo Woods and to their right the Fil Hol rubber plantation. Located on the northeast corner of camp, American troops set up their own strong point to be used as a “last ditch” redoubt to repel enemy forces if the camp was overrun. It was later named the Ann Margret outpost in honor of the concert the temptress performer gave there and early on it was the scene of frequent fighting when soldiers were in the open digging and filling sandbags with mechanical dredgers and hand shovels. Beyond those areas the Saigon River flowed and acted as a dividing line between the 25th Infantry Division and the famous 1st Infantry Division, nicknamed “The Red One” because of its shoulder patch, the numeral 1 on red background.

It is unclear how much forethought went into the selection of Cu Chi as the 25th’s headquarters. According to Eric Bergerud, “During mid-1965, General William Westmorland was convinced that the war might be lost immediately and that US forces had be thrown into the beach wherever needed, regardless of detailed plans and preparations.” One of the breaches was clearly in the Cu Chi area, and the base grew up to close it. The location was chosen in December of 1965 by members of an advanced party, operating under Westmoreland’s directive. It was near a highway that could act as a major resupply line and communications route, and it was far enough away from any densely populated city – twenty miles from the suburbs of Saigon. When the camp location was being discussed, several officers in the South

34 See Cu Chih Base Camp Map on page 47.
35 See more information regarding the 1st Infantry Division in Vietnam in The Tunnels of Cu Chi, 29, 76, 102, 103, 127, 185. Also, the unit was referred to as “The Bloody Red One” as times because of it high causality rate in World War II from North Africa to Omaha Beach at D-Day. It suffered so many causalities it was resupplied with replacements at least three times its original strength of about 18,000 men.
Vietnamese Army (ARVN) cautioned against the use of Cu Chi. Whatever advantages Westmoreland may have seen, the Vietnamese officials warned that the US Army had chosen to position a major camp on the “doorstep of the most heavily fortified enemy stronghold in the Saigon area” – possibly all of South Vietnam. This was not a small matter, especially when the US military was to soon hire large numbers of the local population to build and maintain the camp.  

In the war of independence against the French, the area had been glorified in the accounts of communist leaders with titles for the area ranging from “Iron Land” to “Land of Fire”. In the post Geneva decades, the name Cu Chi took on a heroic resonance that was similar to Agincourt or the American Revolutionarily War battle on Breeds – or more famously Bunker-Hill. The Vietnamese had fought for thirty years in the forest of Cu Chi during their victorious struggle against French colonialism. During that struggle the Viet-Minh guerillas began building a large, complex tunnel system to defend the area, and they continued to use them during the war against the US.  

When Jimmy arrived at Cu Chi in the beginning of February 1966, the base camp was about a half of mile across. Each day it slowly expanded into the jungle where massive Rome Plows, plotting out new camp areas destroyed everything in their path and the decision to defoliate the area was defensive. Any raid, sapper attack, or frontal ground assault would have to come across several hundred yards of open ground, where opposing US forces waited in rather crude trenches. The enemy would then be exposed to mortar fire and air attacks. If they proved courageous enough to continue, claymore mines awaited them in front of barbed wire. Yet, the “no man’s land” surrounding the camp’s circular, barbed-wire perimeter actually favored the

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37 Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning, 28-29.  
38 Tunnels of Cu Chi, 17-18.
enemy in a number of ways. The open terrain proved ideal for enemy snipers, who pinpointed US positions, and coordinated mortar and rocket attacks from wooded areas slowed the camp’s growth. Local village workers, who worked in the camp, drew up maps for VC fighters who used the coordinates provided to dig further underground. Yet, despite lives lost and strong enemy efforts, within a two month period the base was one mile in diameter – and still growing. In that troublesome early phase there was little running water for baths, constant patrols that proved deadly for Americans, and primitive latrines that spread disease were the main source of the horrific smell. Time, expense, and monsoon rains made conditions near impossible for army engineers to build a proper sewage facility – burning the human waste seemed the only logical answer. The army engineer corps did design other projects thought to be less expensive, such as swimming pools, beer halls, movie theaters and schools. But, only in wartime would Cu Chi have been considered a military haven because in comparison to normal military settings, the camp was a crude place and efforts to stay clean were nothing short of futile. As Eric Bergerud observed, “The living conditions soldiers saw themselves in at Cu Chi would have been considered well below the poverty line in civilian life.” Many of the men drafted had already been toeing that line. The opening months for the 25th were comparable to WWI battles on the Western Front. Early on in the camps expansion period, Cu Chi was dubbed, “Hell’s Half Acre.”

39

On Monday, the fourteen of February, still using stationary from Fort Dix, Jimmy wrote home about conditions and daily life in camp. His spelling and grammar were terrible – in the two pages of the letter there was not one period. He wrote from his foxhole explaining how no fences surrounded the area and that “front lines” were a joke – the enemy constantly fired into

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39 Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning, 30.
the camp whenever they wanted. He admitted that “The VC were everywhere, from underground to spying in the camp dressed as civilians.” He spoke of guard duty, where at night he spent two hours on and two hours off until five am. He hated the anxiety of watch, and was dismayed by the fact that the sergeants who gave him orders “stayed up all night scared, and had no idea what was going on.” There seemed to be little purpose beyond the orders themselves.

Jimmy started every morning chipping in a dollar and collecting more from the members of his squad. Then he went off to buy a case of beer. Jimmy was the only “Yankee” in his ten man squad, as the others who were mostly black came from different parts of the rural South. For Jimmy the color barrier did not matter. In letters from these early weeks he commented on their slow draw and wrong interpretations regarding the Civil War. “You guys do know the North won,” he told them. While finishing his last beer, Jimmy threw down his hot helmet and put on the cowboy hat he bought it in Saigon. “That fight stills goin’ on though, Cowboy” another replied. Jimmy became cowboy. His hat and “I’m not taking any shit” attitude gave rise to his new nickname, and he thought he looked and certainly felt like John Wayne. In Vietnam birth names were not important – at least to grunts. To the brass and NCO’s, GIs were either boys or soldiers, but to the grunts, everything was more person specific. Cowboy’s old name “Jimmy” didn’t matter anymore – his past receded and his life now was “the Nam.” As for his future – like the other GIs, he began to plan to somehow insure he’d get out alive. But, outside of nicknames and fractured memories, Jimmy knew no one and no one knew him. The men he trained with at Fort Dix were deployed into different companies or units. He was alone, but that gave him time to think and make new friends and beer was a perfect bonding agent. It generated jokes and eased barriers. It also gave Jimmy and other newcomers a way to forget the heat,

however briefly. It became a major way to cope with the quagmire that was to become their world for at least the rest of 1966.

Jimmy grabbed ice from the truck, and sat with his squad hiding from details, picking up a tan even in the shade. On one Monday morning, he and some of the guys from his squad finished off a case of beer by mid-afternoon and waited by their APC in reserve. Company A was already out in the bush, and could be heard in the distance as their machine guns ripped through the silence of the jungle. They were clearing more land. The weather reminded him of the Jersey shore, and he often felt he was in a dream. In his letters he asked how school was going for the girls and if they had heard from Lou (Louise). He asked his parents to tell her that she didn’t have to worry because the consensus around base was that not a single woman had been spotted in two months. He ended the letter by commenting matter of factly that the next day his squad was heading three miles out into the jungle to burn a VC village and kill anyone who resisted. He promised to write as often and as much as he could, and concluded, “Forget about sending me sunglasses, just send me a spelling book. I want to get words right.”

What Jimmy failed to write was that the fourteenth of February had been a busy day for the medics and dust-off choppers. At 5:30 a.m., Company A set out from Cu Chi and moved across the Ben Muong stream, where they soon dismounted from their APCs in a reconnaissance patrol that led beyond the waterway. An element of Company B stayed at to secure the stream-crossing site. A platoon from Company C was positioned ahead of the Ben Muong, acting as a security force for Company A in case they needed to quickly withdraw from the area. At 7:30, Company C’s security platoon received several rounds of small arms fire, and by 9 a.m. they had requested an immediate dust-off transport. Four men were wounded – one hit in the head. In the meantime Company A was making slow progress on its mission to destroy houses, tunnels, and
food caches. By eleven o’clock, with ten men already wounded, two enemy mines were detonated wounding an additional three, and killing eight. Four of those killed were from Company A. Two were forward observers from Battery C, 1st Battalion 8th Artillery, and two were non-combatant photographers. Gripped by fear and succumbing to enemy fire, Company A began its retreat to Cu Chi, where Jimmy watched the battered Company return, and wondered what awaited him in the forest that stretched in all directions from the embattled encampment.
A driver tries to free a mud stricken APC from a heavily flooded area caused by the monsoons.
Cu Chi, Vietnam
Support troops from the US 25th Division take cover from the force of a US helicopter's rotor wash as it lands near Duc Co, Vietnam, 1965
Troops from the 5th Mechanized, Third Platoon, Fourth Squad, Cu Chi, Vietnam
“What passing bells for those who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the shuttering rifles’ rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells,
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs --”

-Wilfred Owen, *Anthem for Doomed Youth*

Soldiers are citizens of death's gray land,
Drawing no dividend from time's to-morrows.
In the great hour of destiny they stand,
Each with his feuds, and jealousies, and sorrows.
Soldiers are sworn to action; they must win
Some flaming, fatal climax with their lives.
Soldiers are dreamers; when the guns begin
They think of firelit homes, clean beds, and wives

-Siegfried Sassoon, *Dreamers*

It was a Wednesday, the sixteenth of February. Back from his first patrol, something that periodically would become a daily occurrence, Jimmy took out a pen from his fatigue jacket. He smoothed out a piece of stationary he’d kept from boot camp, crossed out the words Fort Dix, and wrote – “Viet Nam.” There was no doubt, his hand did not shake. Still, not having heard from his family since his arrival, he was unsure if the mail was getting home. Like many young soldiers, experiencing combat for the first time opened Jimmy’s eyes to the realities of death and chaos, and those revelations gave mail a new importance. Letters became lifelines linking troops to their families, helping keep many sane. Mail became their fallback in Vietnam. It was a reason to continue to bear the suffocating heat of the Southeast Asian sun. It also led many, including Jimmy, to start thinking and planning for a future beyond the war – the consensus being that if GIs thought about it enough, their plans would be realized. For the first time he wrote about combat:

“Wednesday, February 16, 1966. Dear Dad and Mom: How are you? Well it's about 7:30 in the morning here, the sun is just starting to come up, it feels like it is
really going to be a hot one today. Well yesterday I thought I would see J.C. for
sure, there were eleven of us in the APC, our mission was to burn up a small
town, on our way there we were being shot at, but that is the everyday thing here,
anyway, the APC hit a anti-tank mine [and] the VC were just ahead, we had to get
out and find cover, last night they were all around us again, but you see them. In
this part of Viet-Nam, the VC are the poor farmer’s who really does now how to
fight, [but] it is up North were all the heavy action is, anyway, the sergeants are
fighting with each other a lot and nobody seems to know what is going on, one
say’s one thing, another say’s something different – I’ll have to take charge.
During the day there is never anything to do, just stay in your bunker, and look
out for the VC. Most of the men getting hurt here, is done by their own man.
They keep telling us to be careful but how do you really do that, when you don’t
know what to be careful of, there is so much to watch for…”

Vietnam was one giant trap. Everywhere a soldier went, he risked life and limbs from
enemy fire, booby traps, and mines. As Cu Chi’s American military population rose, so did
unexpected deaths and injuries. Men were squashed by APC engines in the motor pool,
greenhorns mistakenly shot other GIs while on guard duty, and boredom seemed to become
death’s co-conspirator. Men accidentally shot themselves in foxholes, fell on barbed wire, set
claymores up backwards, and one man was shot on patrol when he turned on his flashlight to
find a suitable place to relieve himself – nobody used a flashlight again. 41 The young soldiers
lacked the particular kind of training needed to fight this kind of war. Then again, the average
age of American GIs in Vietnam was from nineteen to twenty-two, and of all the soldiers in-
country during 1966, more than half (62.5 percent) did not have schooling past the twelfth grade.
It was to be a thoroughly working class war. 42

As patrols led to more tension and worry, Jimmy made his father a proposition. “Let me
send the money [I make] home each month, use it as you see fit, I would like it to go toward the
station’s rent, when I come out it [the loan] should be down a lot and I can help pay it off, then
WE can cut it down the middle when we sell it, rent it, or [use it.] I have to start thinking of the

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41 Bobcats, The 1/5th (Mech) History in February, 1966, 2.
42 Christian G. Appy, Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam (Chapel Hill, NC: The
future, when I get as old as twenty-two I must think ahead.” Jimmy’s down time allowed him to reflect on planning for a different sort of future – one unlike the army, which he found did not offer the sort of career he thought it might. A job and a good education became something GIs in Vietnam realized they needed, and they discovered that it was very often the lack of that made for the free flight to the Mekong.

The next night, 3rd squad, (Jimmy’s) was ordered to head out into the bush again on another patrol. During the day patrols did not venture very far into the jungle; but at night many GIs traveled four to eight miles – “silently” – sometimes for extended periods that lasted on and off days. This patrol consisted of a squad sergeant, medic, forward observer, a machine gun crew, radio operator, and five grunts. The squad used a compass and a map to navigate, and usually a GI capable of keeping a good pace counted out the meters of the patrol, but because this particular unit patrol was a mechanized unit that was unnecessary. But it was crucial for the squad to have an accurate sense of their whereabouts because mortar teams had preplotted firing zones around the ambush site. Once the squad reached their objective, it broke into three groups of four men and planted claymores.  

Though nothing happened during the patrol, Jimmy wrote home, trying to capture the darkness in the rainforest. He commented on feelings of being watched, and the fact that the jungle seemed to talk. 44 On some nights, when he put his hand up to his face, he could not see it. He knew it was there, but just to make sure, he would give it a soundless shake. The darkness fed not only fear, but led to an impressive display of stars that matched even those he’d seen on the clearest, darkest nights in the Pine Barrens. The softest sounds made him jump, and he

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43 Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning, 107
44 Though it is classified as a work of fiction based on true events, Tim O’Brien comments about how the jungle seemed to “talk” and play music at night in his novel The Things They Carried (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), 73-77.
readied his finger, tightly against the trigger guard. To keep his mind off the eeriness, he
occupied himself with stray thoughts – something all GIs did. He thought about Louise and
home, the future planes he had for the station. They were what he increasingly counted to get
him out alive. This particular night the question that stumped him the most was if he sent
President Johnson a postcard, what would he write? “Wish you were here” he decided. It was
simple, sarcastic, and to the point. The next morning at first light, the patrol ventured back to
camp. But soon afterward, Jimmy was ordered back out into the bush on his first extended
search and destroy mission, “Clean Sweep” 45

Clean Sweep’s objectives were to search for enemy tunnels, villages, and camps. Once
found, they were to be destroyed along with everything inside. Tactics in Vietnam had very
different purpose than they had in prior, linear wars. If an American unit was sent to a place like
the Ho Bo or Fil Hol Woods, “it was not to hold and exploit a valuable objective, but rather seek
out enemy forces. GIs would arrive, search, possibly kill or be killed, and leave.” 46 Normally,
if contact was made, the ensuing fire fight was often fierce, quick, and deadly. Because it was
almost impossible to locate enemy forces, combat units from the 25th Infantry division were
constantly in motion. For the men of the 5th Mechanized, this meant that endless numbers of
small operations took place, day and night, over terrain visited again and again. Physical
exhaustion and mental fatigue resulted from lack of rest – even in the best of circumstances.
Beyond finding the VC, the GIs rarely understood the purpose behind search and destroy
missions, and there was something absurd about the way the war was fought, Jimmy was being
to realize that futility. Yet, he continued to believe in America’s mission, he was there to free
the “farmers” of Vietnam from communism and help to improve their lives.

46 Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning, 105.
The 5th Mechanized, with B Company on the right crossed the LD (Line of Departure) at the prescribed time of 8:30 a.m. The ARVN (South Vietnamese) troops attached to the 5th were late leaving the area and held up the operation. The frequent occurrence of this sort of negligence led many Americas to believe the South Vietnamese forces didn’t care about the war. Within a matter of hours, as if they had been followed, B Company came under sniper and light arms fire. They tried to flank the enemy, but failed to find them. In the process of trying to engage them, the company found an opening to a tunnel complex and the “rats” were called in. Tunnel rats like Gerald Rolf found enemy documents and weapons that made the 5th to stay a few additional days because headquarters wanted larger body counts. As the stars began to appear, Jimmy curled up under his poncho, which he used as a sleeping bag, and tried to fall asleep before he rain came. Throughout the night he was awakened several times for guard duty, and he had scratched his face and neck so many times from insect bites that his skin was raw. Sometimes the bugs and wildlife scared troops more than the VC. On watch, a trip wire was pulled, and the man in an adjacent foxhole from Jimmy clicked off the claymores. They killed four enemy soldiers, and an additional three were listed as wounded because heavy blood trails were found.

In the next few days, the 5th encountered a heavily fortified enemy entrenchment that left US forces with five dead, and eighteen wounded. The enemy lost a total of twenty-four, but the figures counted by platoon leaders were inflated and the AARs (After Action Reports) stated that only eleven bodies were tagged. B Company found a total of seventy-nine tunnel entrances; one was reported to open into a classroom – so they wasted it with grenades. A number of the causalities taken by the 5th were a result of foolish errors. Men who stuck their heads out of the APC during heavy fire were killed, and one man was injured when the mounted .50 caliber...
machine gun atop the APC fired accidentally and knocked the man unconscious from its hard recoil. The unit lost one APC to enemy weapons fire, and an additional two malfunctioned and needed to be towed. After Action Reports also state that heavy civilian traffic on Highway One, delayed the operation, allowing the VC time to set up ambuses and mines. The APC was also noted as having a tough time maneuvering in the woods, as some trees stood tough against the heavy machines.

Many men, including the platoon leaders, felt that forward observers were essential to timing the mission and identifying difficult terrain which could slow the operation. Other GIs questioned why air observation was not used in aiding ground troops with surveillance and supporting fire and bombing. The UH-1D helicopters used during the war were not support weapons.47 Their mobility, swiftness, rarely led to “wasting” large enemy units. The UH-1D was instead an excellent means of resupply, medical evacuation, transport, and sometimes a fragile killing machine. Similar to the APC’s vulnerability to mines, the helicopter was prone to being downed by light weapons fire and RPGs. As seen in WWI and II, air support alone cannot win wars, especially ones of attrition. The mission ended with US forces destroying 800 pounds of rice, 8 booby traps, 4 anti-personal mines, and 25 bunkers. Upon completion, Jimmy wrote home: “You always think the grass is a lot greener on the other side, but when you find out it’s not…well, you know what I mean. You get here, but this place is doing me good. I just miss home far more than I can put in words.”

General Westmorland’s strategy of attrition had an effect on human behavior that channeled deep into the emotional make up of the human psych.48 As Phil Caputo, among others has observed, “Missions were not to win terrain or seize positions, but simply to kill: to

47 See UH-1D helicopters on page 83.
48 For further information on the effects of war on human behavior and the personal feelings attached see Home From the War, Chapter 4, “Animating Guilt”, 99-133 & The Things They Carried, “Notes”. 155-161.
kill communists and to kill as many of them as possible. Stack ‘em like cordwood. Victory was a high body count; defeat a low kill-ratio, and war was a matter of arithmetic.” 49 The pressure that was placed upon commanders to produce enemy corpses was often intense, and they laid the burden of killing on their troops – in many cases high numbers meant promotions. Civilians were counted in the death tolls as enemy soldiers and the rule of thumb in the bush became, “if it’s dead and Vietnamese, it’s VC.” 50

Following the 5th return to base camp on the 25th of February, Jimmy took a shower by the well. There was no running water in the camp, so he lathered the soap in his hands, pulled up the bucket, trickled it over his head and washed his body. Naked, with soap in his eyes, a sniper locked on to him and began firing. Realizing what was happening when a bullet hit the well; he flopped to the ground, prayed to god that the man was a bad shot, and began to laugh. After a few minutes of ducking, now dirty again, he resumed his shower. He was becoming numb to fear. The next day, running on little rest since each morning started at five a.m., Jimmy was ordered to start cutting down trees on the edge of camp, burn them, and hide claymores in the cleansed areas. A claymore mine is about twelve inches wide and seven inches high, and has “little legs” of wire used to help it stand up. Inside the weapon, there is a pound of plastic explosive, and on the front, 250 steel balls bearings. It also had a back blast, so soldiers had to be forty meters away, or they were burned. Many times out in the bush, GIs made their own with a steel ammo box, C-4 explosive, and packed it with anything they found in the motor pool; pistons, sparkplugs, wheel bearings, screws, and nuts. They then punched a hole in the back and inserted the charge.

50 Ibid.
The sergeant with whom he shared the foxhole teased, “Doing a good job over her Gilch, such a good little soldier.” Under his breath Jimmy mumbled back, “How I would shoot you in a second.” Only in-country for less than two months, he had burned several villages, had yet to see a VC, and already hated the sergeants. What kept him going was the thought of home, his squad mates, and the mission America sent him on – helping the Vietnamese farmers and children. But so far he had been able to do little of the latter. It started to rain. He looked for cover and crawled under a few trees he had burned. Then he took out his poncho, slung it over his head, and began writing a letter. The flow of emotions he felt in writing it ranged from happy, sad, angry to mad. Having not heard from his family in a month, he was far past being worried, he was terrified and in need of some communication with home. He wrote about how sometimes he just laughed for no reason, and when he did, everybody else started laughing – to him the whole situation seemed like a dream, a joke. He admitted that perhaps he should have been a better student, brother, and son. “You never realize how good you have it until you lose it,” he said. I wish I paid attention to the things you told me, but don’t worry I listen here, “it’s a matter of life and death.” Then, he initialed the note.

After a pause in the rain, he resumed work. He spotted a patrol in the distance. Walking slowly behind them was a leashed wild boar that they had obviously wounded. Coming out of the jungle they tied it to a tree, not far from where Jimmy was pushing piles of burned foliage around. The area Jim was working on was once a farm, but in the war it had become nothing but scorched earth. He kept an eye on the men in the distance, while continuing to hack away at the terrain where the wet ash met and mixed with the clay, staining his fatigues. He found trying to stay clean impossible and wrote home often, “I just did laundry but my clothes come out looking like they did before. Can someone help?”
His hands held tight to the machete where green water – tree blood – dripped from its blade. He then paused and ducked down. He heard a gunshot – then laughter. He looked over at the patrol and saw they had shot the boar again – then again. With each bullet to its abdomen, the beast, unlike most pigs, did not squeal – it grunted. Jimmy could hear it breathing in slowly, and with each deep, exhaling breath from the long snout, clouds of red dust swirled. The men shot it again, this time tearing off the front hoof. The creature continued taking the torture – grunting. Finally, as if seized by decency, one of the GIs shot it in the head. Turning away disapprovingly, Jimmy tried to shake off his distress. That’s war, he thought, and continued to shovel as the earth, like it had for so many years in Vietnam, soaked up the blood while its trees were burned for “freedom”.

Jimmy commented no further than to just to describe his feelings about the killing of the boar. But it was this type of war, one of attrition that led to horrifying slaughters of civilians and animals. Tim O’Brien comments on the ways a similar incident captured key aspects of the nature of the war in Vietnam, graphically describing a squad killing a water buffalo in *The Things They Carried*. The soldiers, from O’Brien’s novel, butcher the innocent animal out of frustration and retaliation. 51 Troops went days out in the bush, seeing their own friends die, and yet they never encountered the enemy. In their minds, and for the men who killed the boar and the buffalo, their acts were justifiable. This conviction suggest why atrocities such as the My Lai massacre occurred in which GIs entered a village in the town of My Lai and killed over a conflicted hundred unarmed civilians. One soldier, who was questioned about the events of that day in My Lai, responded, “No matter how much effort you put into it, you can’t find them [the

51 The killing of animals occurred often and such atrocities resulted from one or many GIs taking out their aggression and frustration due to the killing of their friends. Tim O’Brien describes a murder of a baby water buffalo in *The Things They Carried*, 78-80. Also, in March,1966 an eight foot Monitor Lizard was shot and killed and was documented in the *Bobcats, The 1/5th (Mech) History*, 7.
You can’t lay your hands on him. And the fact that he also might be anywhere, you know…as though you were hunting a specific deer and you don’t know which one it is and there’s a deer herd all over you…you have a need to explode…We lost a lot of guys. Pinkville [My Lai] caused us a lot of hell. Now we’re gonna get our revenge.” 52

One soldier, First Lieutenant James Simmen from the 60th Mechanized of the 1st Division found killing was indeed similar to hunting. He remarked, “You’d be surprised how similar killing is to hunting. I know I’m after souls, but I get all excited when I see a VC, just like when I see a deer. I go ape on firing at him. It isn’t that I’m so crazy. I think a man who freezes killing a man would freeze killing a deer. I’m not perverted, crazy or anything else. Civilians think such thinking is crazy, but it’s no big deal. He runs, you fire.” 53 This confidence in justified slaughter was also furthered by the resentment against the South Vietnamese troops who were late crossing LZs and often failed to support US troops. They also brutally tortured and killed innocent civilians suspected of being Vietcong. Not that Americans were innocent of similar abuses, but ARVN soldiers attached men to APCs and dragged them through the jungle, hung prisoners upside down for hours, and “put [several men and women] in water up to their necks and then underwater. They then took them out and beat them with bamboo sticks while they were still blindfolded and banded with rope.” 54 American troops became disillusioned and wondered why they should fight for them. South Vietnamese soldiers were outcasts in American military camps, and a GI caught talking to ARVN soldier was shunned by fellow grunts.

54 Michael Romano, “Dear Sweetheart”, 02 May 1969, Dear America, 89.
Jimmy was beginning to realize the war’s true nature. His patriotic feelings were slowly being sapped by each patrol, and he soon became aware of the emotional charge that comes from killing. Many of the men in his unit were becoming sadists. Having seen so much blood spilled already, and frustrated because he had scarcely even seen the enemy – he killed for self-preservation and revenge. One man from the 1st Marine Division, Desmond Barry, wrote home explaining, “[Death] doesn’t bother me at all, because self-preservation is the name of the game over here. If I didn’t get them [the enemy], they would have gotten me or somebody else.”

As dreadful as it seems, some soldiers found killing to be enjoyable and the thought of death attractive. These GIs never felt as alive as when faced with death. It also bonded men together, and that communion between them was as profound and as affectionate as anything between lovers. War became a soldier’s rose, and his thorn. Confronted with death, sharing the hardships of war, fear, and danger, boys grew older than their fathers by the youthful age of twenty-one. Corporal Kevin Macaulay with the Third Marine Division, wrote his Father, “I’ve seen bodies…[killed and mangled]. I think with all the death and destruction I have seen in the past week I have aged greatly. I feel like an old man. I am not as happy go lucky as before, and I think more maturely now. Payback for my buddies is not my uppermost thought in my mind. My biggest goal is to return to you and Dad.”

The war also had a pull on men who were leaving the field. After marking each day off on their helmets or in letters home, when the time came to leave, many refused and opted for another tour. In Dispatches, Michael Herr tells of one soldier in Khe Sanh who had to be placed physically on the plane in order to get him home. Phil Caputo comments in his book Rumor of War about the physical and emotional attractiveness of combat and the bonding soldiers found

that they had a hard time giving it up, and in seeing a man parting with his dying friend, Caputo writes “It was a conversation of two lovers who were about to be separated. Combat seemed to be the only thing the kids of the working class now knew, and many clerks at headquarters and their friends at home could not imagine what they had seen and felt. Many soldiers who went home committed suicide or lived out their lives homeless on the streets – and in the worst cases, were trapped in the padded backrooms of hospitals.

On Saturday, March 5th, Jimmy wrote home again after returning to Cu Chi from another twenty-four hour patrol. He commented on the nature of war, the frustrations, and the tensions he felt. He was becoming what the army called an “effective killer.” He was assigned to the point position, and sat atop the APC firing a .50 caliber machine gun that was noted for its ability to chop down small trees. What it did to an enemy combatant was no different. His nickname, cowboy, captured his attitude in battle and sought after similarity to John Wayne. Even the sergeants began calling him that, but it was generally to ridicule. His unruly responses to NCOs and untamed behavior in battle accounted for his new nickname. Though he continued to use Xavier (his chosen Christian middle name) to sign letters, he was cowboy to the men of third squad. He also let his hair grow out in rebellion, writing, “My hair is getting long, Elvis never had it this long, I don’t know what to do with it, a lot of guys have them like the Mohawks, I guess that brings out the animal in you.” Of the two favorite celebrities he followed as a kid, Jimmy began to phase out the better looking of the two, Elvis, writing “I’ve gave up on trying to

58 Rumor of War, 103.
59 This understanding of many young men returning to war unable to socialize with family and friends can be seen in combatants throughout the history of war, especially in attritional wars of heightened tensions, i.e. World War One, with specific regard to Eric Maria Remarque’s All Quiet on the Western Front (New York: A Ballantine Book, 1956).
60 For suicide attempts and inclinations see Home From the War, 289, 394, 397.
be Elvis (at least till I get home) because over here it doesn’t matter how good you look,” it only matters how well you fight. It was after this decision that he began to fully relate himself to John Wayne.

Upon returning from a twenty-four hour patrol, Jimmy’s new attachment to his John Wayne persona reflected a new found engagement in combat that was evident in his letters. He reported: “We just came back [from patrol] and I am starting to like it, sometimes I feel just like John Wayne, it is very exciting, don’t worry I am not going to be a hero.” During the mission, sitting atop his “horse,” the APC, Jimmy watched as his company formed up and tried to finish off fleeing VC fighters. He remarked, “We were trying to run them over…but they run pretty fast, [its] like [an] old time [western] movie. I never seen a funnier sight than that…” Though he found the effort to “squash” VC troops comical, he also found it disturbing. And it was this unease that led him to justify his involvement in the killings, adding in the letter, “our mission was to burn a small town, it is frustrating, but I would rather shoot them [the Vietcong] because then we don’t have to worry about them later, and besides I learned it takes a long time to make friends, and I don’t want to spend that much time out there.” His lack of sympathy for the enemy was a result of their well developed “hit and run” tactics that killed and wounded many American GIs, some of whom were Jimmy’s friends, and this urge for revenge allowed him to justify killing for his own preservation.

Nearing the end of his latest letter about his rowdy combat actions, Jimmy asked his mother, “Can you send me some books to read I have a lot of time, and please tell everybody that I cant write them, but that James Xavier Gilch will not fail.” In spite of the seeming abandon he displayed in combat situations, he also desired to learn and grow. He continued to write home every day, and his ability to articulate his ideas was beginning to improve. But he still wrote in a
stream of consciousness. He was certainly using the dictionary the family had sent, and periods were being used more frequently to end thoughts. He was also trying to show — and not just by his more polished writing — that he was maturing in ways his father would appreciate, thus proving that he was capable of running the business. He addressed his father: “Daddy I was glad to hear from you, don’t worry, I can look back now and laugh about the things that have happened so far here, and yes I think it is a great idea for me to make a living at the station.” He asked about the two trucks, “Has anybody checked the trans oil in the GMC truck, I worry about that stuff…,” and then abruptly shifted to a question his father had asked in a previous letter, “To answer your question Dad, there are a lot of lonely people over here.”

George Gilch Sr. was worried about his son. But, his own upbringing, and traditional American values did not allow him to openly express his growing concern for Jimmy. Instead, he indirectly asked him a question that dealt with something almost every soldier on base had to overcome – depression and loneliness. First Lieutenant Michael Murray vividly captures the sense of isolation and emotional stress that were pervasive among combat troops in Vietnam: “It’s raining outside. A damp smell in the air and the raindrops slamming onto the plasterboard roof… [I can hear] distant bombs explode in the distance. The area is flooded, and mud clings to boots with a slurp-sucking sound. Sometimes you have to pretend you’re not really lonely or else you’d find yourself going out of your mind. But when the day is done, and you’re lying alone with your thoughts, then there’s no more fooling and that’s when it really hurts, but the days go by fast.”

Jimmy expressed similar feelings, “I know no one in my squad, all the guys from boot camp got into different units.” Imagining home was one of the more potent ways to fend off loneliness, Jimmy admitted on numerous occasions, “I write to place myself there

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Letters would become plans for his future, but they were also a way to escape from the war.

Jimmy was also aware that he still had much growing to do. He related an incident that summoned up his careless youthful ways: “the days go fast here, last night I had to set up claymores again, after setting them up, when I came back I could not find them, I thought the VC during the night took it (don’t say it pop, you have not changed a bit Jim).” Jimmy had in fact matured, but telling his father he was still the same old “drop-out” he use to be, he seemed ambivalent about leaving behind his more gregarious, socially- connected past. His statement about the days flying by was perhaps a ploy to allay his father’s concerns away about things that truly bothered him. He had little to say about loneliness, and sought to convince his father and mother that he was fine.

Jimmy pushed this line of response by regaling his parents with stories about the arguments he was having with several NCOs, particularly the one with whom he shared his foxhole. The sergeant accused Jimmy of overstepping his rank and trying to command the squad during combat. Jimmy then described a major clash: “[believed he knew] more than him, but [decided that he would] never let him know that.” Jimmy then described the clash to his father: “I had a run in with the sergeant out there, he started giving me a hard time, but I told him where to get off, he said, ‘Son, you are looking for a for an ass kicking.’ I said, ‘Maybe you are right, but it wont be by you.’ He got so mad he just walked away.” Jimmy then explained that later while out in the bush the sergeant refused to drop the argument: “He (the sergeant) said I think everything is big joke, and I’m turning the team [squad] against him…he was so mad he wanted to fight me, he kept pushing me [and then] he took me to the platoon leader, and boy did I make an ass out of him, when he starting tell on me I made a joke and before you knew it the
[lieutenant] was laughing [too].” Jimmy had clearly not lost his rebellious proclivities – and those were something of a family trait. As he told his father with obvious pride: “I learned from you [dad] not to take shit from anybody and I don’t here.” He signed the letter, “Love, John Wayne.”

Despite his cowboy image, and desire to obtain the approval of his father, while holding on to the discoveries that came with maturation, Jimmy’s responses to the kind of war he was waging were conflicted, and this was becoming more and more apparent in the letters he sent home. He wrote to his parents about a mission on which he and his unit were ordered to cross the river that flowed north of Cu Chi and find the enemy. It was this action that prompted him to inform his parents that, though he still felt like John Wayne, firing at a fleeing VC fighter was not at all funny. He also mentioned that, though he laughed, it was only to mask his feelings in front of his squad mates. He took pride in the fact that his fellow soldiers praised his abilities as a point man, but he himself did not really understand why. Even friends and family who wrote from home told him how “proud they were of [him].” His pre-induction vision of the American mission to insure Vietnamese freedom was increasingly out of sync with the realities of the war of attrition he was fighting. He wanted to help, not be a hero, and he began to more and more doubts and apprehension. These are captured in one of his more vivid accounts of combat: “When we were going through burning the houses, and trying to get VC, rounds were going over my head, I figured that was it, so I cut loose and burned 20 rounds in about 4 seconds and that went on for about an hour. I was tired and we were only supposed to be out there for a day and it turned into several since we were trapped. We ran out of water and don’t think that was not hell, ever who writes me tells me how proud they are, I don’t know, I am too, but I never thought I had it [this] in me…I haven’t killed a VC yet… I hope nobody says when I come home, boy you
look good, I bet you had a nice time, I’ll kill them.” Before ending the letter with, “Love the Lone GI, Jimmy addressed his father, “I don’t think the war will end here, just because we might stop fighting, that doesn’t mean they will.” Then he reassured his father he was “no political” like Bobby Kennedy – just a beer drinker.

After the mission was complete, Jimmy related that a colonel walked over to talk to the men. He told them, that “they had done a real fine job,” but the next time “they should hold off firing until [they] see the whites of the enemy’s eyes.” This was to insure both the conservation of ammo and a high kill ratio. But the brass did not seem to understand this war. Jimmy raised his hand and asked, “what do we do when their wearing sunglasses, sir?” Slightly amused, the colonel just smirked and walked away. But Jimmy insisted that he was being serious as orders can be confusing sometimes. After they were briefed, the squad went off to fill sandbags, then grab a bite to eat at the mess hall. For Jimmy, the war was making less sense – the army needed to kill things to save them. It was all so contradictory. A soldier from G Company of the 75th Ranger Division, George Olsen, captures the hostility that Jimmy and other GIs felt toward their leaders: “If I get the opportunity, I will kill that son-of-a-bitch [his commanding officer]. I have more hatred and contempt for him that I ever thought I could possibly feel for any human being. If there’s one thing I can’t abide, it’s an armchair leader who sends his men off to die on hopeless, meaningless operations. To be killed is one thing, to die senselessly another.”

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UH-1D helicopters transporting troops from the 25th Infantry Division, northeast of Cu Chi, 1966
Cu Chi, Vietnam, 1966. From Left to Right: James X. Gilch, Larry Van Clief
Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent…
Low, drooping flares confuse out memory of the salient…
Worried by the silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous, but nothing happens
Watching, we keen the mad gusts tugging on the wire,
Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles.
Northward, incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,
Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war. What are we doing here?
- Wilfred Owen, “Exposure”

What would become of us if everything that happens out there were quite clear to us?
-Erich Maria Remarque,
 “All Quiet on the Western Front”

It was becoming increasingly clear to Jimmy that this war was not the one he had intended to fight. It was a counterproductive process, and he was slowly realizing the absurdity of the war’s paradox – burning villages to save the farmers. Yet, he did not understand the war in terms of this ironic evil; instead, he used humor to describe and comprehend the situation. The Vietnam War was for him a lethal-joke, and he was not the only one who found this to be true. He decided in late March, to fight his own war – his own mission, calling patrols “field problems” and missions “good-will-tours”. And though the war’s contradictions still remained, he was focusing primary on helping the farmers, the children, and his soldier friends. He realized the mistake he had made in not opting for the reserves, but his American values were not going to be lost in the quagmire.

Jimmy was not alone in creating his own “development” objectives. Many soldiers, who were becoming disillusioned with the indecisive but brutal combat, turned against the military mission and focused primarily on achieving personalized aims. In a letter to the editor of the Berkley California Gazette, Specialist Rod Baltra, angered by the actions of civilian protestors and feeling abandoned by his country, wrote, “Many of us [in Vietnam are] engaged in our own civic action programs on our own time. It might be giving undernourished children C-rations,
teaching a teenage boy a little English or helping an old man tie a bag of rice to his bicycle.” 63

Jimmy, like Rod, began by helping the children.

Many GIs in Vietnam were dismayed by the way in which the children lived. One soldier commented on the how they ran around naked and disorderly, while another was surprised they even survived to adulthood, “living like such animals.” 64 Yet, the general consensus of most American troops was that the children ought to be helped, since they were victims of the devastation the US intervention had inflicted. One soldier, George Williams, who served with 1st Infantry Division near Saigon just north of Jimmy’s position, wrote, “There are a few kids who hang around, some with no parents. I feel sorry for them. I do things to make them laugh, and they call me “dinky dow” (crazy). But it makes me feel good. I hope that’s one reason why we’re here, to secure a future for them. It seems to be the only justification I can think of for the things I have done.” 65

The lost parents, whose absence Williams laments, were most likely victims of American related actions, and for many soldiers that alone was enough to push back against the ongoing attrition. As Private First Class Dan Bailey, assigned to the 101st Airborne Division, explained to his mother, “I went down to the orphanage the other day, and these little kids are pitiful. They sleep on plain floors and don’t get hardly anything to eat. The reason I want you to tell everyone to help is because I feel I may have killed some of their parents and it makes me feel sick to know they [now have] nothing.” 66 Another soldier, Bruce McInnes, a chief warrant officer with a helicopter company, wrote, “These children are victims of American terrorism [and their

65 George Williams, “Dear Ma”, April, 1967, Dear America, 105.
parents have died] defending their country.” He continued, “I am ashamed because we
[Americans] take our good fortune for granted, wasting so much that these people, especially the
children in this orphanage, so desperately need.” Jimmy often enough expressed these
concerns in his letters home in the remaining days of March. He told his sisters “that you don’t
know how well you have it, no fighting at home, leave that up to me…” He related to his
younger sister Barbara a recent encounter that he had with a child in a local village: “Barbara, I
have seen so many little cute girl’s here, around your age, just the other day, I thought I met you
down in one of those little towns, so it was when I was eating lunch that I saw you so I gave you
all the lunch I had…” The comparison of his sister to a Vietnamese child was a clear sign of his
maturity and growing empathy for the plight of the Vietnamese. He was tired of killing their
parents, it was time he gave back - and he included in the letter that he sent home addressed to
“Daddy”, a note about future plans for working together, and sent a Batman pin for his little
brother Joe, that he felt he had outgrown.

In the remaining days of March, Jimmy and B Company headed back in the bush along
the Oriental River, a major line of communication for the VC, to destroy the camps along the
embankments that resupplied the enemy villages. The mission, or for Jimmy, the field problem,
was dubbed Operation Honolulu. With the heavy rains in the recent days, the river had flooded
the base camp of Cu Chi, the surrounding rice paddies, foxholes, and bunkers. Shorty after
departing camp, nearly all of the 5th mechanized APCs became inoperable, stuck in the mud and
B-52 bomb craters that were disguised by the water. The rain was not only a problem for the
machines, but also for the morale of the men. Jimmy commented that it was like being in the
swimming pool all day and never getting out. Another GI described the condition more

graphically, “Someday climb in the shower with all your clothes on, stay there three days under the water, shutting if off every now and then, but always turning it back on before your clothes can dry out, and you’ll have a reasonably good idea of what it’s like in the boonies [or bush] during the seasonal rains.”

Early on in Operation Honolulu, Jimmy wrote home explaining the current circumstances he found himself in – hinting at his new, personal revival campaign: “The field problem we are going on, is a good-will-tour visiting towns and help the poor farmers (about time).” During the operation Jimmy wrote home about a harrowing encounter that was not all that unusual in the war: “Being point I had to go in the house first and get everyone out – what a feeling it is to hold a gun on a person, you are telling them what you want them to do, but either one of us cant understand what one is saying to the other, I had to hold this girl at gun point because she was a VC, and she could shoot a rifle just like a man.” Soon after, as if to compensate, he described a very different response to the locals: “when we were eating lunch along the road, while eating all the little kids would come out, I just could not eat in front of them, at first I could, but one of the little girls looked like our Barbara again, then I thought this could be one of them –this could be us, so I gave them everything I had. The next day an even more telling exchange occurred: “In the morning I had to go to this house and see if any young men lived there, there was just a little old lady there, she wanted me to stay and eat with her, so I did and we drank cups of tea.” Later that day while searching another village, he “mistakenly” forgot to pull the pin on the grenade he tossed into a thatched house.

Other then describing that he was almost killed several times while running through rice paddies on foot, Jimmy had nothing further to say about the success or failure of the mission. In

a statistical sense, the American forces won, but from a personal standpoint the mission was a chaotic, disordered disaster. The men of the 5th Mechanized, trained to use the APCs to their advantage in the rainforest, had to walk on foot due to the heavy downpours. Because they had left their tracks behind in the mud near the landing zone, (where after the mission five had to be towed) the squad was easily ambushed by the guerrillas. With the vehicles a long way off, many GIs became dehydrated, as the soldiers had no water to refill their canteens. Resupply helicopters also had trouble in reaching certain units because of their location in heavily forested areas.

Jimmy had begun to overstep the racial boundaries the war had established. He even sought friendships with African-American soldiers at a time when heated controversy centered on human rights and skin color. Though Jimmy did not comment at length, he did understand that racism in America was wrong. He wrote to his family on many occasions informing them about his “black friends”, and expressed contrary opinions about the deeply imbedded social issue. His father was apathetic toward the struggle blacks fought against to obtain their rights; his grandfather even thoroughly racist. But in telling his father that a majority of his friends were black, Jimmy began to demonstrate not only his ability to unpack larger issues – in this case realizing skin color was a nonissue – but that he was rejecting sentiments widely held in his community and America as a whole. In a previous letter, where Jimmy answered his father’s questions about loneliness, he also addressed the issue of race and wondered if his “black friends could become pen pals” with his sisters. In later letter, Jimmy described in considerable detail his views on skin color: “Over here you learn to live with a lot of different people, white, black, yellow, pink, blue, etc, I found out it is not the color of a persons body, but how the person
himself is…” He was teaching himself the right side of issues that men older than he was, were getting wrong – and he had never finished high school. He his desire to learn was increasingly growing in stride with his good will tour, and he even debated reenlisting for a few more years to live and learn in France and Germany.

Besides unraveling racial issues concerning the African-Americans he was fighting alongside, Jimmy was also unpacking, and appreciating the Vietnamese culture. Not only were a majority of this friends black during a time when it was unacceptable, and race relations within the US and Vietnam were becoming increasingly tense, his contacts with the Vietnamese were dangerous and very much against the grain. Solders were specifically forbidden to accept anything from the peasants in the villages. Disregarding orders, Jimmy drank tea with an elderly woman who could possibly have been a Vietcong informant. He gave chocolates and C-rations to children, risking his own malnourishment in such a hot environment, and compared members of his own family to what many soldiers referred to as “dinks,” and “gooks.” Never once did he use such pervasive, derogatory terms. He became obsessed with trying to translate the leaflets written in Vietnamese that the 25th Infantry division dropped onto villages that informed residents of a possible future search. These were, of course, profoundly counterproductive because they gave VC units the ability to foresee the US Army’s future tactics. He took great care in transcribing the flyers, paying close attention to character marks and punctuation.

Not only was skin color becoming a non-issue, but Jimmy realized intelligence could be displayed and measured in far more important ways then he had previously understood. Class issues were also increasingly evident in discussion when Jimmy would describe his house to the men of third squad. They could not imagine that it had two bathrooms and a swimming pool. It was then he realized that the war was being fought mainly by the poor and working classes, and
he jokingly described it a “grunt war.” His personal, newly discovered ideas about the logic of the war caused him to conclude, if you don’t go to college – you go to Vietnam. He later wrote to his sisters explaining that not only were the Vietnamese people poor, but the soldiers he befriended were also impoverished, stating, “you wont believe how some of my friends live, we really have something at home girls compared to what they got, so remember Chris, before you run away, school is where… [you should be running to].”

In the midst of the war, and now well into the month of April, he struggled to keep hold of his Catholic beliefs and moral bearings. Like many GIs he turned to his faith in times of despair. He was seen making frequent visits to see the brigade chaplain, Father Clarence Olszewski – asking the priest and himself the same question his own platoon commander, Lieutenant Jagosz, asked at times, “My God, what am I doing here?” Jimmy wrote to his mother one night, proposing to change his future plans for the gas station, remarking, “you are right again, the farer you get from home, the closer you really get, when I was young I always said why so many kids? And you said when you get older you’ll be glad – and I am. Don’t laugh, but do you think I could still become a priest? For some reason lately I been thinking of it again (look kids stop laughing before I get mad) I know you have got to finish high school, but I’ll bullshit my way in.” Though he was sarcastic much of his life, Vietnam was maturing him faster than he could possibly imagine. He was seen at Easter mass with some of this squad mates – trying to make sense of the war. If his good will tour was going to work, he had to pray.

His growth could be seen in his letters. Spelling mistakes were still common, but much of the language was becoming clearer, and for some unknown reason other than he taught himself, he stopped using apostrophe “s” for plurals and used the correct form of “too.” He was correcting spelling mistakes as well, his own and often in the letters written to him by his sisters.
“Barbara, you spell sun as in the star in the sky as S-U-N not S-O-N.” He even began to write a primitive form of poetry that was brought on by the books he was reading. For example, “You girls have seen the light/so there should be not a fight/but if you got to stick up for your right/than it tonight.” He had a sure sense of himself as he began to grow, but he was no saint – nor did he see himself as a hero. His flaws were all too clear. The stress of combat led to smoking. Recreational drug use was also a possibility for Jimmy, as heroin and marijuana were bought and sold in the camp by way of Vietnamese civilian workers. Many soldiers used the drugs to pass time and as a coping mechanism that dulled their experiences of the war. But they were seldom used in the bush. The risk of getting killed increased exponentially while under the influence of drugs, and placed everyone else in the unit at risk.

Before heading out on his second “good-will-tour”, otherwise known as Operation Circle Pines, Jimmy wrote a letter to his friend Gerry, who was about to join the US Navy. The letter was a clear demonstration of his different side – a dimension found in most, middle class twenty-one year olds serving in the military. He began, “Its Easter Sunday and I got off for the day so I figured I drop you a few lines. In your letter you said it was hot where you were, you should be here, and the insects are very bad too. Just think when you and I get out – every girl fucks over here, from about ten cents on up, but I don’t bother with any of them, I wait till I get home…I really miss you and Louise, I cant wait to get back down the shore – and it will happen because it will take more than a VC to kill me. Pray for me Gerry because I sure need prays, and remember shake it easy, wish you were here, I’ll tell you my war stories when I get back, Your Sea-Chest Friend, Jimmy.”

Like most soldiers, Jimmy preferred not to tell “war stories” in his letters, particularly to his parents, and even to his best friend. Letters to Louise were filled with happy memories and
presents like the white and pink dress he bought her, and a promiscuous fitting nightgown that he thought “she would look go in”, but he admitted that while he was buying the outfit he “felt bad” and embarrassed. He asked her to send him a sexy picture to show the guys. But, like Jimmy, Louise also had a sense of humor, and sent him a photo of her as a little girl in a bikini. For soldiers, telling war stories would only bring back the memories of the recent past – and he had enough trouble sleeping at night without intensifying those. And possibly Jimmy found his stories were too gruesome and cruel to tell – like the one he might have heard or even witnessed where during a failed ambush several men from B Company were caught raping a young Vietnamese women. Like so many of his buddies, he was just a kid trying to get back home from the wrong turn that led him into Cu Chi. His plans for the future and especially daily letters became coping mechanisms to block out the war. He admitted in one, “I only write to place myself there [home]. His ambition to become a priest was to make up for the killings he committed, and becoming a tow truck station owner was to prove to his dad that he had in fact learned valuable life lessons.

Operation Circle Pines in early April led directly into Operation Kahuku and that was also pronounced a “major success” for the 25th Infantry Division, to which again included the 5th mechanized. Though the death count for the Vietcong for both missions was fifty-six, with an additional seventy-six wounded, the Americans had also paid a high price with twelve men killed and sixty-six wounded – and one out of the sixty-six was Jimmy’s friend and squad mate, John McGough, who was hit in the right side of the neck by shrapnel. The mission also cost the US taxpayers at least - 9 destroyed APCs, 46,000 M-16 rounds, 62,000 M-14 rounds, and 22,200 .50

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rounds, with an additional 1,860 pounds of explosives. Jimmy wondered if his good will tour could survive such carnage. The missions were continually getting worse in terms of lost lives, and he was tired of, as another soldier put it best of, “looking for nothing but a body count of the enemy so some gungho lifer [officer] can make a stupid promotion.” Jimmy wrote home after the mission, “Thank God [its over].” He sensed, like most GIs, that his experiences in Vietnam pitted him against the American values he had learned growing up. It was becoming increasing clear that his personal mission was futile, and he was close to fully giving up on the war.

Following on the previous operations, Jimmy took part in Operation Kalamazoo that led members of B Company, under their replacement Captain, E. Vickery, into the Fil Hol Rubber Plantation where they were to search for and destroy enemy forces that were harassing ARVN camps. On the way there, US forces found the roadways and trails had been heavily booby trapped and mined, forcing units to swerve into “thickly wooded areas that offered limited visibility.” The operation had started with 484 men, and it finished with 452. The VC had lost nine men, while the 5th mechanized body count totaled seven. It was a narrow “victory” – after which Jimmy was informed of the death of third platoon’s commander Frank D’Amico, who was fatally wounded by a sniper’s bullet that hit him in the head. The Fil Hol Plantation became a place to be feared, just like the Ho Bo Woods. It was clear that his good-will-tour was over.

In May, he wrote “I have stopped washing my clothes, there is no point, I’ll wear them dirty.” In an undated letter, he wrote approvingly of his friend Gerry’s decision to leave the Navy: “How are you. I got your letter today, I am glad you might be getting out (if you can)

74 Ibid.
because it [Vietnam] is no place to be. Frank F. will get killed, it always happens that way, [new recruits] he doesn’t even know what we are fighting for – for Pres. Johnson does [not] know either, if you can get out, do, I’ll say a prayer for you about getting out, but about the prayer-that is only if I can remember one, Your ‘toothful’ Friend” Although Jimmy’s sarcasm is hard to read at times, knowing that he and Gerry were both rebellious, Catholic youths, gives one sound reason to assume that the prayer comment was a joke. Evidence of Jimmy’s claim that had forgotten prayers due to the nature of fighting in Vietnam is contradicted by his steady attendance at Sunday mass, his visits to Father Olszewski, and the fact that he had kept his military-issued bible with him in his pack. He had talked about several saints in previous letters, and quoted sections from the Gospel of Mathew to his sisters, “Remember kids, Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.” He began telling his family to “keep the faith”, and at times remarked on the feast days of specific saints. But midway through the month of May, with his good-will-tour losing meaning – he even began to question his religion. From that point onward, he never again mentioned becoming a priest. And inside, Jimmy was figuring out what Corporal Mike Jeffords already understood, “Hey, how about telling Pat to change frequencies when she goes to church. Somebody’s got their wires crossed. For eight months she’s been praying I didn’t go to Vietnam. I’m here. Wha’ Hoppen’ed???”

That same May, President Johnson and his military advisors, including Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, were adamant in their statements to the press that America was winning the war in South Vietnam and beginning to stabilize the region. And it would not be until two years later when US Marines at Khe Sanh were under siege, and the VC launched massive coordinated assaults throughout the southern regions, that most politicians in the US seriously reevaluated the war. But they still let it go on for another decade. Yet, for Jimmy in

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76 Michael Jeffords, “Dear Mom and Dad”, 02 August 1964, War Letters, 397.
1966, and other GIs fighting in-country at that time, the war was already becoming a lost cause. Not only did the troops feel they were losing their country, but their faith, and all their family values as well. Through sarcasm, Jimmy expressed his disdain for Johnson, writing, “Give my love to everyone, even President Johnson, wait… I’ll take that one back.” Protestors and GIs in the field routinely shouted, “Hey! Hey! LBJ, how many kids have you killed today?”  

One soldier commented, “They [politicians] sit in their carpeted homes and say, ‘Control yourself, don’t give in to your emotions.’ They’ve never had a friend hit a booby trap and shipped the pieces home in a rubber sack.”  

On May 6th, 1966, Jimmy turned twenty-one years old, and for his birthday he asked, “Serious, send me socks, underwear and t-shirts, and please dye them green.” He was losing his taste for consumerism as material things no longer mattered much. What he needed now were only the bare necessities that kept him alive. This was also the moment when he wrote home remarking that he had recently talked with an officer, who came to his foxhole, saying “I don’t think we can win this war.” Jimmy was arriving at the same conclusion. But instead of writing home about the problems he faced, he made friends with office clerks in the rear who knew nothing about what it was like to be in combat. At the same time his letters became little more than personal notes written to each family member – telling them about the facts of life, and asking about the latest news in town and at school. He even sent pictures home of himself, and when his mother asked why the mean, sad faces, he replied, “I have to act like a killer, but if I don’t they’ll think of me as a little boy.” As the war continued and he witnessed more and more atrocities he closed in on himself and worked hard to find excuses to escape combat. His

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77 Andrew Carroll, “Narration” War Letters, 412.
withdrawal is graphically revealed by the photo on the title page of this section. He has ripped
his name tag off his fatigues.

Though not all soldiers rebelled by removing their ID patches, many felt and did similar
things, and began to question their own motives. One platoon commander wrote home to his
wife explaining, “Why am I here like all the other men in my platoon – age makes no difference
– there are few kids over here – a few yes but they grow up so fast [and] or get killed. Why do I
have to watch a man die or get wounded – why do I have to be the one to tell someone to do
something that may get him blown away – …Babe, I just don’t know the answers.” And like
Jimmy, even this educated man had succumbed to the war of attrition and atrocity to such an
extent that his once-disciplined writing lacked any punctuation. “Some letter, huh! I don’t know
if I have one sentence in the whole thing, I just started writing.” Jimmy fell into this same
pattern, and as his self-taught writing style slowly worsened, he stopped referring to the war and
even admitted, “Sorry for the messy writing I cant help it.” The Vietnam War had stifled
Jimmy’s maturation, and the most demoralizing symptom of this stunting was the fact that, like
many other young GIs, he was consciously in his letters preparing for his own demise.

79 Dean B. Allen, “Dear Wife”, 10 July (year unknown), War Letters, 404.
The Triumph of Death is an oil painting on panel, painted c. 1562 by Pieter Bruegel the Elder.
I felt sorry. I don’t know why I felt sorry. John Wayne never felt sorry.
-Former infantryman remembering feeling after killing an VC guerrilla

Starkly I return to stare upon the ash of all I burned.
-Wilfred Owen

America I’ve given you all and now I’m nothing.
I can’t stand my own mind.
America when will we end the human war?
You made me want to be a saint.
I won’t say the Lord’s Prayer.
It occurs to me I am America.
Asia is rising against me.
I haven’t got a chinaman’s chance.
America you don’t really want to go to war.
-Allen Ginsburg, “America”

During June the wet monsoon season flooded all of Southeast Asia. The weather usually followed a daily routine of heavy showers that lasted forty-five minutes, and in between there were pauses when the clouds opened for the sun. By the late-afternoon and evening the sky was again covered with heavy clouds, but thundershowers gave little relief from the humidity and ninety degree temperatures. Vietnam was not the best place to feel at home, but Jimmy gave it his best “drop-out” effort.

Cu Chi was beginning to look more “live able” to the GIs stationed there. Beer halls were built, baseball fields were erected, better defense structures were installed, and the camp now had electric power, allowing Jimmy to finally use “the electrical shaver Louise gave [him] for [his] birthday.” Not only were buildings being constructed, but also false reports concocted that Jimmy bought into, writing his parents, “I heard I might be coming home in 150 days.” When these proved false, he was angered by what he called “the usual barber shop stories” and
the continued confusion. He also came to realize that the army had been cheating him twenty-five dollars every month since he had arrived in-country, and his irritation was clear in his letters: “I just don’t trust these people anymore, especially with my money, I’ll just send it home by money order.” Perhaps coincidentally, it was also during this time that he was put in for a field promotion from private first class to corporal.

With each day he was becoming increasingly more disillusioned by the war. He was becoming more and more fixated on owning part of the gas station and buying new trucks for the tow business, and no longer thinking about returning to school. His good-will-tour had failed and, trying his best to avoid combat, he chose an option other GIs also adopted – Kitchen Patrol (KP). The new beer and mess halls that were built excited Jimmy, but in ways that had little relation to what they were built for. Even though he did drink a lot of beer, the new buildings, he wrote, “will now pull over more KP duty for us.” He had found an alternative that allowed him to escape the bush at least most of the time. One soldier, whose name has been withheld because he was suspected of fragging, wrote, “I volunteered for K.P., trash run and other nasty details, like burning human waste in a barrel while my company went out on this four day mission.”

Jimmy wrote home informing his family that, like the GI above, he had taken advantage of KP as it allowed him to say on base, and he confessed, “it feels good to wake up late.”

During these weeks he had already befriended several clerks from headquarters, and as a result of the friendship, his letters became shorter, and recounted parties and baseball games. He also became good friends with an ARVN soldier, something American troops rarely did. Jimmy wrote home explaining the uncommon companionship: “On the latest field problem I feel l

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80 For other examples of using KP as an escape for duty, see Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning, 34,
81 In the U.S. military, fragging refers to the act of attacking a superior officer in one's chain of command with the intent to kill that officer, typically with a fragmentation grenade.
really found out a lot of new words to speak, I found a good friend who is in the South Vietnamese Army, I will send you his picture, he is 19 years old and has helped me a lot as far as learning to speak, things went real good out there like always, I hope they stay like that, pretty soon it will be five months here for me, but time is really flying, I don’t think I will have a chance to live and learn everything I had plan on, but one thing I really want to do is speak Vietnamese – my friends name is Lê Vañ Tán.” 83 The US soldier’s general attitude towards the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) was one of disgust. Many GIs thought their “allies” were lazy, thieves, and by some accounts, (and possibly, in some instances) spies for the PAVN (People’s Army of Vietnamese) and VC guerrillas. A Marine colonel, Robert Tschan, describes his feelings about Vietnamese forces after a recent fire fight with the VC: “They [ARVN soldiers] would not come out of their bunkers to help with the medevacs, but while Sergeant Green and I were loading the medevacs on the choppers, the bastards came out, went into out
two bunkers and stole everything we owned, personal property, clothes, food, cigarettes, personal gear of our dead and wounded, and two radios. Our sole purpose is to help them and with... air power, navel gunfire, artillery, and advice – and this is our reward?”

Possibly, Jimmy found a way, however modest, to make up for the killing and destruction, and learn a language while forging a new friendship that typically ran against army practice and even the inclinations of his fellow grunts.

The field problem Jimmy mentioned when writing his parents, the one where “things went real good...” was, as usual, not at all what he made it seem. His reluctance to tell his parents about the deadly details or discuss his disillusionment at any length was part of an ongoing effort to relieve his parents apprehensions. Jimmy sought to assure them his tour in Vietnam was mostly an adventurous learning experience. The reality had something of that, but since his tour began in February, the 5th Mechanized had experienced less than twenty days without enemy contact, and the patrol on June 18th was no different. The 5th conducted a recon mission into the Fil Hol Plantation, where two APCs were hit by RPG (Rocket Propelled Grenade) missiles and enemy ambushes killed two US soldiers. In the following days Jimmy’s letters home became less and less frequent. Early in his tour of duty he had written once, even twice, a day but now he seemed to be more concerned with avoiding combat and hanging out with his new friends at headquarters. As had been the case with most soldiers throughout history, and Jimmy turned to friends to mollify the trauma of combat. Though most of them were clerks, he found he could relate to them (as many were stationed in the field before obtaining their desk jobs) better than family and friends back home. He was able to share certain

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85 The RPG-7 was designed by the Soviet Union and became a widely-produced, portable, shoulder-launched, anti-tank, rocket-propelled grenade launcher for the VC.
feelings associated with combat that only other soldiers would understand. When he made his way up to headquarters on his time off, he was often reminded of the missed opportunity in not being able to obtain the colonel’s aid position back at Fort Dix. But he had more immediate things to worry about as he made clear in a letter following Operation Coco Palms. He wrote: “Just got done K-P, so I thought I would write a letter home. Two more guys in the squad got their leave (one was good friend, John McGough, or JW as Jimmy called him), so I am next.” By the time he mailed the next letter, which was addressed to his sister Maureen, he was already leaving on another search and destroy operation. This time he was unable to escape the mission and confessed to his sister who asked where he’d be going on leave, “I received your letter from July 13th last night…My leave come up soon, I don’t know where I will go, but it does not make a big difference because if it was hell and back again I would take that…”

The army called the new operation Mokoleia or Mokuleia. Many of the mission names for the 25th Infantry Division were Hawaiian terms, because its home base was located in those islands. The name Mokoleia comes from the name of a coastline in Maui called Slaughterhouse Beach, and its translation means “district of abundance.” The Fil Hol and Ho Bo Woods were both slaughterhouses and plentiful in enemy guerrillas, and third squad had a “bad feeling” about venturing back to the plantations. Jimmy found he was especially nervous with R&R so close, and by this time he had even considered visiting China on leave. HIs letters were suffused with anxiety, and he developed a kind of “tunnel vision” that blocked out the rest of the world, while he focused on family, his increasingly narrowly conceived future, and R&R. This mindset came to be categorized by army psychiatrists during the war as Short Time Syndrome. It developed in soldiers who got nervous and worried about getting killed just before going home or on R&R.

86 If he meant mainland China, he would have been well aware the Americans could not even visit there at this period in the Cold War. The prohibition was clearly stamped on US passports.
One doctor observed, “[it was a sign] of their reluctance to face relationships, responsibilities, and future plans they had when they returned home.”  

Down time on R&R often reduced the effectiveness of soldiers who were left with no choice, but to return to the bush. With their thoughts still centered on leave they proved more vulnerable to being wasted. In other situations R&R turned into despair due to a perverse variant of the premier combat tactic – surprise. Specialist Bob Leahy explains, “…A man [came] back from R&R and everyone [was] looking at the pictures he took and joking with him. He [then] looks around and [says], ‘Where is Monte?’ The joking stops and there is silence. Finally someone says, ‘Monte died two weeks ago, a 105 booby trap.’ Then everyone sorta drifts away to let the returning man grieve alone.”  

Post R&R setbacks also fed into Short Time Syndrome. When the GIs who longed to leave finally received their wish, many refused to go, as they were worried they might come back to find all their friends – dead. Lieutenant James Simmen, succinctly captured this response, “I feel like a crudball leaving my men.” Yet, as Private Ken Bagby countered, sometimes seeing a friend die was worse. He recalled, “On Monday morning, the 15th of November, my friend [Dan Davis] died in my arms of two bullet wounds in the chest. He said, ‘Ken, I can’t breathe.’ There was nothing I could do…The odor of blood and decayed bodies, I will never forget…I will never, never, never, be the same. If I have to go into battle again, if I am not killed, I will come out insane.”  

GI s who witnessed buddies killed when they had little time left in the bush were deeply traumatized. This often led them to commit unnecessary, yet, sometimes heroic acts toward the end of their tours of duty that cost them their lives, or worse –left them wounded or limbless.

Men who had R&R coming soon grew more and more fearful of being wasted in the last days remaining in action. As army psychiatrist Doctor David Forrest makes clear, “While it was reasonable to fear being zapped, it was unreasonable to be more afraid of being zapped in the last few weeks or days of [their tour before R&R].” 91 This fear was at times an unconscious wish that something would happen and one wouldn’t be able to leave one’s fellow soldiers.

In 1969, a group of American GIs who were aware of these patterns, wrote President Nixon asking that troops be allowed to obtain jobs in the rear for the last three or four months of their tour or be excused from search and destroy operations when they were close to R&R. In Robert Lifton’s book, *Home From the War*, and in collections of Vietnam letters, it is well documented that combat infantrymen “would rather take permanent KP or burn human waste on a fire support base than spend another night in the field” so close to their departure. 92 This was exactly what Jimmy was doing, and at times he even purposely got into trouble to avoid another day in combat. But he could not avoid the operation to search for enemy forces in the Fil Hol plantation, even though he was physically and mentally shutting down. His letters became no more than long stream of conscious blurbs about how he was ok – when he wasn’t. Those assurances then led into questions about his family. He never mentioned the war beyond noting that he was going “down” to see his friends. The letter to Nixon that was addressed to the White House and signed by twenty-four soldiers of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade was never replied to. 93

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91 “Dear Lynne”, *Dear America*, 256.
93 For more information on GIs mentally and physically shutting down from death anxiety, See *Home From the War*, 69-71, 213.
Operation Mokoleia was initiated when the 25th Division was informed by a local leader that several members of the Vietcong were in his village at Ap Ben Do. B Company – including Jimmy – was dispatched to the village and detained thirty-five civilians there. The civilians were interrogated, and one VC was identified with another two taken as suspects. The After Action Report states, “That while the village chief’s information [was] usually reliable, this time it failed to develop, and the village was leveled.”

By July 19th, the 5th Mechanized had made its way to the Tan Phu Trung area to apprehend twenty-four VC guerrillas who were reported to be collecting taxes. A sweep of the area met no resistance, but four Vietnamese were killed when a tunnel was flushed out with grenades and heavy charges. Twenty-two people were rounded up as suspected Vietcong fighters. The local leaders had told the officers from the 5th that the VC had recently dug up dead bodies and carried them north. These reports were used to set up patrols in the areas identified in order to add to their count totals. None were found. GIs searching these areas noted that they had once been leveled by Rome Plows, but now thick underbrush had proliferated, making foot patrols difficult. Though GIs on the APCs had no problem moving through jungle areas, they would now not be able to see the forest floor.

On July 20th, Jimmy and B Company, along with A Company, were ordered to leave Cu Chi at 6:30 a.m. to participate in a recon mission aimed at finding nineteen missing soldiers from their sister unit, the 27th Mechanized. At 9:10 a.m., B Company stumbled upon fifteen dead US soldiers, laid neatly on their backs in a row. They were clothed, but stripped of all weapons and equipment. It was a horrifying sight for Jimmy and his company. But at the same time, the professional courtesy of the enemy left a deep impression on them all. “Perhaps this wasn’t our war to begin with,” one soldier commented. Returning to base, the recon patrol also found a

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95 AARs and additional documentation found state that only two of the suspected total were confirmed members of the communist movement.
downed helicopter still smoldering from the enemy fire that brought it down.\textsuperscript{96} The APCs were used to turn over the mangled mess of metal, and they unearthed the charred body of a door gunner, still clutching his M-60 machine gun. Jimmy hoped – and tried to pray – that R&R would come before he had to go back out again on patrol. Vietnam was beginning to look like hell, and for one soldier it already was. He wrote, “This place can only be described in terms of a medieval or early German Renaissance vision of hell, with flying monsters in the air (helicopters) preying on the huddled sinner masses (the combatants in this senseless war) [or better], this place looks like [Bruegel’s depiction of] death’s victory over man.” \textsuperscript{97}

PART EIGHT

RETURN TO THE FIL HOL
Men who died were never referred to as killed; they were simply “wasted” or “zapped.” They were casualities, not deaths. Only the enemy was “killed.” Gerald Rolf was “wasted”, and since he been dead for over three weeks, Jimmy tried to block out the loss, and he became fixated on making it to R&R. He was scheduled to take it in the coming week. While he waited, he found it hard to forget the bloody face of his friend. If a man was shot through the guts; or shot in the leg, and bleeding to death, he was never reported as being “shot through the abdomen” or “shot in the leg.” It was recorded that he suffered a “GSW,” (gunshot wound). Rolf’s death certificate, simply reported “upper body GSW.” Even the word certificate seemed unfair. That was supposed to be something good, like winning an award or completing school. Sadly, Rolf’s only certificate was death, and he wasn’t even there to receive it. He wasn’t present for the seven guns that fired three times, saluting him – nor was he there to accept his purple heart. He was just another number.

On the night of July 20th, six days after the army declared Operation Coco Springs a success, B Company was exhausted. Nevertheless it was again ordered back into the Fil Hol Rubber Plantation. Jimmy’s squad would head out the next morning. Complaints were murmured that evening as several men, including Jimmy, had bad feelings about a return to that place – and the mission itself. The Fil Hol plantation and the Ho Bo Woods had an eeriness and a dangerous beauty that was all too familiar to the GIs. The men of B Company tried to rest easy that night, but the constant throb of helicopters, outgoing mortars, and enemy sniper fire made dreaming, as usual, impossible.
The next morning Jimmy woke to orders to start packing his APC with claymores, C-4 explosives and command-detonated mines. Command-detonated mines were similar to claymores, but were packed with hundreds of steel pellets and a few additional pounds of C-4 explosive. When the mine was set off, the expanding gases of the C-4 sent steel shot down range at 26,000 feet per second. Philip Caputo calculated, “that terrific force made the explosion of a command-detonated mine equivalent to the simultaneous firing of seventy twelve-gauge shotguns loaded with double-0 buckshot.”

The mission as usual was to search for the enemy and destroy anything and everything in the target area. It was reported to be the site of a new VC training camp, and within the last few days the enemy seemed to be taunting the US forces. The spark that ignited the mission was when twelve VC soldiers, who usually hid during the day, were reported south of the town Ap Ben Do, recruiting guerrilla fighters, in some cases visiting their families, and making sure the village would be able to supply food and resources to the local Vietcong forces. Another twenty-four communist guerrillas were operating in the Tan Phu Trung area, just outside of Cu Chi – collecting taxes and repairing tunnels. Most of the twelve near Ap Ben Do were out in the fields and rice paddies, the remaining guerillas were walking the trails, setting up mines and using recycled American munitions for booby traps. These explosives were responsible for many shrapnel wounds, which the US army euphemistically called “multiple fragment lacerations,” or MFLs. They were also the chief cause of a much more gruesome injury, dismemberment; the term the military coined for that was “traumatic amputation.” This was listed as the cause of death when soldiers accidently tripped the booby traps or hit mines in tanks or APCs. Jimmy saw plenty of those go off – taking limbs with them. He had even been in an APC when one exploded while he was on point.

98 Ru**m**or of War, 167.
One man, Second Lieutenant Robert C. “Mike” Ransom, Jr, commander of a tank platoon in the 11th Light Infantry Brigade, wrote home describing what a mine was capable of doing to the human body:

“The tracks were returning to where we would stay overnight. When we reached our spot we jumped off the tracks, and one of my men jumped right onto a mine. Both his feet were blown off, both his legs were torn to shreds – his entire groin area was completely blown away. It was the most horrible sight I’ve ever seen. I am now filled with both respect and hate for the VC and the Vietnamese.” 99

The interesting thing about the word “traumatic amputation” is that soldier’s body, hit with such explosive force, does not just simply break cleanly apart. It is torn and frayed. Legs shatter, abdomens are disemboweled by steel, and heads pop like unripe hard tomatoes, squeezed in the summer sun. The shattering or fragmenting effect resulting from high explosives causes extreme difficulty in reporting the injuries of men who have undergone extreme mutilations. Dead men who were mangled in pairs made for a difficult and intricate search in identifying whose body belonged to what leg or arm. If injuries for men who died together were severe enough that the bodies could not be identified, dental records were used. Some injuries were so horrific that words could not describe the damage done, so the army label “traumatic amputation” made things a bit easier for those reporting stats.

Back with his old company commander, Captain Robert Vanneman (who had been previously wounded by shrapnel), Jimmy and B Company crossed the LZ at nine a.m., entering the Fil Hol by early-morning. They were headed in the same direction where in early April, B Company had lost its third platoon commander, Frank D’Amico to a head GSW, that eventually took his life in June. They then held their breath as they continued into the Ho Bo Woods and around the village of Phu My Hung, which was a well-known, well-secured area that held two

99 Robert C. “Mike” Ransom, Jr., “Dear Mom and Dad”, Date Unknown, Dear America, 181.
VC hospitals, a fortified headquarters, and a training depot—all mostly underground. But they breathed a sigh of relief as the APCs maneuvered past the ground that had claimed so many of their friends, including Gerard Rolf. The Ho Bo and Fil Hol areas were notorious for hidden enemy entrenchments and snipers, who climbed high into the trees and hid in the foliage. The GIs in B Company expected to be ambushed and to run into mine fields. There seemed to be no way around the fact that, if you were going to die, you were going to die—all you had to do, as the sergeant who lectured Jimmy and other GIs on their arrival in-country mused, “was lay your body down and let the earth swallow you.”

The plantation was immense in size, and it stretched north of the town of Cu Chi, which was along the Saigon River, facing the Iron Triangle. The Triangle existed only on maps and was a 120 square mile area in the Binh Duong Province. It was originally called that by the French during their fight with the Viet Minh because it was heavy fortified, and the US Army picked up the name. The Fil Hol was also another space the French controlled during their war. When they abandoned it during the anti-colonial resistance of the late forties, its organized lines of rubber trees became a Vietcong sanctuary. In the early months of 1965, the Vietcong held a victory parade in the town square of Cu Chi. During the spectacle, the local ARVN force, the 49th Regiment, took refuge in a military camp in the Fil Hol plantation. It became a struggle to hold it as a communist takeover of South Vietnam looked more and more likely. By the mid-1960’s American GIs and Jimmy were fighting local guerrilla forces to keep the camp secure and the area free of communist infiltration.  

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100 Frank D’Amico Tribute, 3-9.
After a search of the preselected objectives on July 21st, B Company had by early afternoon found and destroyed only one bunker near where the Ho Bo Wood and Fil Hol Rubber Plantation met. The places targeted by the high ranking officers at headquarters appeared to be based on bad intelligence, as not much was found. Late in the afternoon – relieved and happy there had been little action – the Company headed back to Cu Chi. On their return trip, nearing the Fil Hol Plantation at four p.m., B Company was ambushed in the same place where earlier that afternoon they had dismounted from the APCs, thoroughly checked and then destroyed an enemy bunker. It seemed obvious to them that the bunker and trenches had not been used in weeks – but they were wrong. The ambush began with a muzzle blast from the earthworks one hundred meters away. Then an RPG was seen flying towards the commander of second platoon’s vehicle, just missing him and it by inches. After the RPG missed the APC an ammo box inside the platoon commander’s track was struck, knocking, Lieutenant Ted Jagosz unconscious and his fall caused several ammunition boxes to pile on his chest and shrapnel from the struck container also blinded the driver, specialist Ronald Wynn, who later lost his left eye. The VC had placed command-detonated mines all around the area, and had hung in a tree about 200 meters away a booby trapped 155mm howitzer shell. In the fight a stray US bullet struck the shell, sending shrapnel and large wood splinters through the air. The projectiles wounded several men, including Captain Vanneman. In an effort to flank the enemy, Jimmy and third squad in another APC, took it upon themselves to move around the enemy trench line in support

of the others who were pinned down. They were also hoping the assault would disrupt the enemy ambush and allow A Company to move in with support. 102

Moving across the trench, their track was hit by a command-detonated mine. The hood covering third squad’s APC engine, weighing several tons, flew at a supersonic speed through the air, cutting the radio antennas off the CO’s vehicle, stopping any future contact. Second Lieutenant Charles Burgardt, who was standing on the cargo compartment of his track, to the right of the COs, was sucked into the explosion of third squad’s track—which almost dismembered him, but miraculously he escaped unharmed. The explosion had caused the ammo crates on Lieutenant Jagosz’s chest to slide on the floor. Specialist Earl Irving, who was shaken by the detonation and would later die in September, placed his foot on Lieutenant Jagosz’s chest, and unknowingly gave him CPR—all the while his track was moving in reverse since the driver was hunched over the gear sticks, unconscious with his left eye gone. 103

The detonation set off the several pounds of explosives located inside Jimmy’s APC. The only thing left of track twenty-two was the floorboard and the driver’s steering sticks. All seven soldiers aboard were killed instantly. There was great difficulty in recovering and identifying their remains, as several body parts were found in and around the rubble and the rest were mixed together inside. Others were never located. A Company under Captain Renner broke through the enemy ambush and a mortar barrage to rescue the cut off company. But, before heading back to Cu Chi they had to wait for another M-578 towing recovery track (the original one broke down in the ambush) to bring the scraps of what was left of third squad’s APC back home. It was noted in the medical evaluation report that "There was difficulty identifying the remains of seven men, who were mutilated when their track exploded. A careful search for

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102 A Company was in front of B Company on the return trip. The ambush had cut A off from supporting B, and the VC started to mortar Company A.
103 Jagosz interview.
remains should be made if tactically possible whenever a body has been mutilated. This could assist in the positive identification of the remains." Back at camp, Lieutenant Burgardt, handed the commander of second platoon all the dog tags he could find.

No hell was not being devoured by these flames
   It was not in dying
   It was in living
   Hell was our existing in the embers
The embers that shot skyward in the warmth of the evening
   Fading into the night and being lost forever...
   Screams of fragile young men
   Never heard,
   We exist in the silence
   Hollowed within
   Numbed by it
   This is what we had become
   We were emptied of all hope
   Of all faith in humanity
   Emptied of any spirit of innocence
   That young men carry with them into the world . . . What happened?
   What happened?
   What happened to the boy in me?
   What happened to us all?
   We all became the embers
   But some of us still returned from hell
   WHY?

- Juan Carlos Heredia, “Darkness of War”

James X. Gilch
On the morning of July 21st in Runnemede, New Jersey, Jimmy’s mother Catherine had decided to attend a craft show with Mrs. Shield. Midway through the event she left suddenly, telling Mrs. Shields that something was wrong. She uttered, “One of my children needs me.” Jimmy’s youngest sister Christine was home that afternoon with a cold, but when Catherine pulled up the driveway she saw her daughter playing outside. It seemed her intuition was wrong.

The last letter Jimmy wrote home came the following day. It was addressed to his sister Maureen, and included the comment he’d rather be in hell. On the same day of the letter’s arrival, two Casualty Notification Officers from the US Army drove into town. Those who saw the green car immediately knew what had happened – some even rushed to the gas station were George Sr. was working to maintain the shop until his son came home. Not yet knowing that Jimmy was dead, the Gilch family went about their daily lives, but when the officers arrived the family knew the worst had happened. Dressed in their green fatigues the two men got out of the car and proceeded to the door. When they found that George Sr. was still at work, they refused to break the news to Catherine. Regulations required that the father be present.
Upon hearing that the army officers were at his house, George quickly started the car, passed Eighth Avenue on the left, and sped down the Black Horse Pike. When he arrived home the officers broke the news of his son’s death, but refused to explain the cause. Instead, they said no more than that Jimmy had received “multiple fragment lacerations” to his body. George was enraged, and the possibility that the situation could have been avoided if he pushed Jimmy harder to join the guard hung heavy on his shoulders. One officer came forward, “Sir, there are medals involved. Your son James has been awarded the Bronze Star and Purple Heart.” George looked up, blurry eyed and angry, and turned that rage on President Johnson. Knowing that the president’s daughter Luci was to be married that August, George blurted out, “Pin the damn medals on the wedding cake!” Months later, on a cold night in a ceremony at Fort Dix, Jimmy was posthumously awarded the Purple Heart and his younger brother Joey received it in his honor.
In the following year, Lyndon Baines Johnson met with Soviet Union Premier Alexei Nikolayevich Kosygin at Glassboro State College in New Jersey, not far from where Jimmy grew up. During the conference, a New Jersey State Trooper stayed with the Gilch family to insure that George Sr. didn’t threaten President Johnson. In that same that year George sold the gas station, and in 1972 he put his last tow trucks up for sale. Three years later he died of a massive heart attack. He was 62.

His wife Catherine, my grandmother, gave me Jimmy’s letters in an effort to save them from being burned. Most of the family felt it made her sad to read them. But she confessed to me she found enjoyment out of still being able to hear from her son. She lived to be ninety years old.
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