

Twenty years ago, Marine units began withdrawing from Vietnam—from their longest war and from a combat experience that is still strongly felt within their ranks.

On the following pages you will read about a few of the Marines who fought and died in Vietnam. The stories are representative of what happened to thousands of others. Reading these personal experiences is a fitting way to recall this service and commemorate the 214th Birthday of the Corps.

The Marines of '64

by Philip J. Avillo, Jr.

August 7, 1989 marked the 25th anniversary of the passage of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. President Lyndon Johnson offered the resolution in response to apparent attacks on U.S. naval vessels patrolling the Gulf of Tonkin and the Congress endorsed the document almost unanimously. The resolution empowered Johnson to employ whatever means necessary, including the use of force, to prevent further aggression in Southeast Asia. He did just that, interpreting the resolution as a "blank check" for waging war in Vietnam that cost the lives of more than 58,000 Americans, as many as 1.5 million Vietnamese, and plunged our country into nearly a decade of turmoil and anguish.

Not surprisingly, the Tonkin Gulf Resolution shaped dramatically the lives of many American servicemen. The January 1964 class at The Basic School, G-64, was one group of such men. Most of its members found themselves serving in Vietnam within the next year. Many returned with physical scars; a number died there.

I was a member of that class. When the class began, all of us were newly minted second lieutenants. The six-month course, conducted at Quantico, trained us in the art of command. Among other things, we studied and practiced small-unit infantry tactics, and we were introduced to guerrilla warfare. But we were peacetime Marines. While we may not have ignored completely our instructors' admonitions that Marines in 1950 learning these same lessons suddenly found themselves in Korea, few of us took them very seriously. No matter—we were well trained in spite of our youthful indifference, and when we arrived in Vietnam, we were prepared.

We were not prepared, however, for the opposition to the war, the protests

and the demonstrations, which erupted almost immediately in the United States. Nevertheless, these seemed to have little impact on our morale or our performance. We were Marines; our country had sent us here; and what we were doing must be right. What we didn't know, or were only dimly aware of at best, was that many within the Government itself had reservations about that policy.

Two Senators, Democrats Wayne Morse of Oregon and Ernest Gruening of Alaska, criticized the policy from the start, casting the only two ballots against the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. J.W. Fulbright, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and the man instrumental in steering the Tonkin Resolution through the Senate, developed similar misgivings as Johnson escalated the American military involvement in Vietnam during the early months of 1965. As the year drew to a close, Mike Mansfield, the Senate-majority leader, and four other senators prepared a gloomy report for the President. "The war in Vietnam is just beginning for the United States," Mansfield wrote, and "all the choices open to us are bad choices." Finally, he concluded, the United States "stood to lose far more at home and throughout the world by the more extensive military pursuit of an elusive objective in Vietnam."

The Marines of 1964 knew little of this during their tours in Vietnam. And what they did know was no doubt irrelevant information. Recently when over 50 of us from that class at The Basic School met in Washington and Quantico to commemorate our 25th anniversary, such information still seemed irrelevant. We didn't discuss the war in terms of justice or morality; we didn't criticize the conduct of the war, its tactics or strategy; we didn't

condemn the country's leadership. Perhaps that is because even after 25 years we are unable collectively to confront these issues. Or perhaps our very presence at this reunion testified to our own personal resolution of the war's meaning within the context of our Nation's history.

Instead, we talked in terms of what the war and the Marines meant to us. For most of us, they provided the watershed of our lives. We developed in the Marines and in Vietnam in particular a camaraderie unmatched in civilian life. We possessed a common purpose, a selflessness seldom seen or understood in other walks of life. We realized that most of us have never experienced again the exhilaration and excitement of those days, days when as very young men we accepted responsibility for the lives of the 40 to 50 men under our command.

We recognized these truths then; we understand them more fully today. This is not to say that we were without flaws or that we have somehow managed to romanticize the war. Nor is it to diminish the great tragedy of the war in terms of American and Vietnamese lives. We all remembered vividly the mud, the muck, the smell of fear, the pain, and the suffering. Surely, none of us would wish such a war, or any war, for our own children. And yet, we all seemed to comprehend, consciously or unconsciously, this disturbing, paradoxical truth—that because of the war, because of the pain, the suffering, and the anguish, we appreciate more profoundly the preciousness of life and have glimpsed more clearly its meaning.

USMC

>Dr. Avillo received a Ph.D in history from the University of Arizona and is currently teaching at York College of Pennsylvania.