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As a young boy, I was raised in the Holiness tradition and later became a member of Christ Tabernacle Church which was an organization of the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World. At that time, all Pentecostal churches held fast to pacifist teachings and beliefs. As church members, it was frowned upon to attend dances or movies or anything that gave an appearance of being worldly. Upon entering the service, I soon realized my school and religious experiences contributed to my naivete about the military.

Soon after my graduation in June 1966, I was drafted and sent to Fort Knox, Kentucky, for processing. Once there I declared my conscientious objector (CO) beliefs due to religious teachings. After induction I was transferred to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas, for basic training as a combat medic. I was there with hundreds of other young men from throughout the United States who also adhered to pacifist beliefs and teachings.



These young men valiantly served both their God and their country. Many were not as socially connected as some of the other traditional peace churches which offered options of placement for their members to serve out their terms of duty. Only one choice remained for us. We had to face the real deal! Sadly, these men's gallant service to God and country is all but forgotten by our churches and country today, particularly as my once pacifist organization now supports the popular drum beat of war as an option.

There were several of my Richmond classmates who traveled with me by bus to Fort Knox for processing. Once they learned of my resolution to declare my status as a conscientious objector, I was treated like a leper and they completely avoided me and wanted no association. This was the beginning of learning hard lessons of what one's convictions can cost you socially. As a conscientious objector, I was considered to be an "outsider" by the majority who held different opinions. I was shunned by both black and white recruits. This was a real culture shock for me.

said, pastor, I am going to Vietnam. He responded by saying, you have to remember it is a war zone situation for you. If you go by the way of the grave, you win and if you live until God calls you, you win. You can't lose." I took strength in his words.

In August 1967 I landed at Cam Ranh Bay, South Vietnam, and was then sent to An Khe. I thought I would remain in a safe demilitarized zone (DMZ) medical facility area but this was not to be. After about two weeks, I was assigned to the First Air Cavalry Division as a combat medic. Once there I wasn't accepted by the other guys because of my CO status. Many of the white GIs didn't want to be treated by me because of my race and religious beliefs.

While serving as a field medic, some black soldiers approached and told me that I had better be careful and watch my back. When I asked why, they said because some white guys had been talking about shooting me in the next firefight to get rid of me. This really increased my angst as I began to encounter the horror of war and racism. It was at this time that I learned to use the word of God as my protector. And it wasn't the last time I called upon His help and mercy while I was in Vietnam.

I was involved in a major firefight in the spring of 1968. It was monsoon season and we were walking all night through torrential rains. We cut through a village heading to our next location. I was so wet and cold that all I thought about was being at home in a warm bed. All of a sudden, "all hell broke loose!" Viet Cong (VC) soldiers had come down out of the hills and were in the village hooches seeking shelter. Sergeant Jesse Barlow yelled for us to hit the ground as the VC hit us with heavy automatic rifle fire.

I remember diving on the ground and a VC soldier opened fire on four of us huddled in one spot. We crawled over the side of a bank into some rice paddies for protection. The other guys were shot up bad and I was administering first aid to them. I realized that Sergeant Barlow was still on the top of the embankment. We were still under heavy fire and I did not want to go get him but I knew it was my job. When I was able to pull him back to our location, I noticed that he was dead. He had a large gaping hole on the left side of his head. I will never forget his open blue eyes and the wad of tobacco that remained his cheek. He was a good man and expected all of us to do our jobs.

It wasn't long until I felt like someone was watching me. I looked in back and about fifty yards away in the rice paddy, I saw a VC staring at me, holding his AK-47. Our eyes met and the glory of God settled on me. Immediately, my hands lifted in praise and I prayed and began speaking in tongues as the spirit of God gave utterance to me. The VC soldier looked at me, smiled, waved, and turned to walk away. One of our soldiers saw him and shot him in the back. Once the firefight was over, the guys

asked me why I had my hands in the air and why he didn't shoot me. My only response was that God once again was my shelter in times of trouble.

There were so many casualties that we had to call in air support to evacuate the dead and wounded. I had to attend to the wounded and get them on the helicopters. Another duty of mine was to help identify our dead soldiers.

Later, while working to obtain my Master of Divinity Degree, I wrote about an incident while I was in Vietnam. My professor wrote on my paper, "How arrogant of you. How could one not feel guilt when others had died?" I never responded. Survival guilt is only for those who can afford it. I come from a long line of survivors that passed through the horror of the middle passage, slavery, Jim Crow, and numerous other racial pitfalls. I grew up learning the theology of praise and remembering the old Negro spiritual, *How I got over, my soul look sback and wonders how I got over*. Inwardly I laughed and wondered where he thought we would be as a people if we wrapped our spirits in the luxury of survival guilt.

In another battle, we lost a lot of men when we were taking a hill. I don't remember the hill number. At night we were running out of water and some guys crawled down the hill to get water off the dead enemy soldiers. The next morning two of our guys were picking up "dud" grenades and placing them in a wooden box. One of the guys was a short black man we called "Papa." The other guy was a taller white man. Due to their difference in height, the box tilted and the nose of a missile slid and hit the side of the box exploding and killing both men. It was an awful sight. Hardly any of their bodies remained. I was charged with identifying who was who and the only way I could tell was from a small patch of hair on the neck of the black guy.

After I returned home, I met up with a Richmond man, Jimmy Majors, who had also served his country in Vietnam. I had told "Papa" that I was from Richmond, Indiana, and he was so excited because Jimmy Majors and he had become good friends during their basic training. It was a very sad message I delivered to Jimmy that "Papa" had been killed.

My older brother, Simon, Jr., was also in Vietnam serving in the air force. He flew down to visit me one day. During his visit, I was called to ID some dead bodies and he went with me. He was visibly shocked because he had never seen anything like this. He became angry that I was also in Vietnam. The law was that not more than one son could serve in a country of war at the same time. He told my commanding officer I should not be there.

That night I completed paperwork requesting to leave Vietnam and mailed the letter. In the night, the Lord spoke to me again and told me I was called to remain in Vietnam. The next morning I went to try

and retrieve my letter and was told I could not do this. I persisted so long that the guy in the mail tent finally let me get my letter and I tore it up.

I optioned to stay in country and finished my tour serving in Van Tau assigned to the 36th Evacuation Hospital and Burn Center. This was difficult duty, especially in the burn center, because I saw the devastating burns of the native civilian population. I was asked to go help on the burn ward that housed the South Vietnamese soldiers, men, women, and children who had received serious burns from our napalm bombs. Many white medics and orderlies refused to provide service to the South Vietnamese. I was called a "gook lover" for helping them. When I served as a medic in the field, many GIs resented me because I treated the villagers. They felt this was wasting medication on the gooks.

Constantly seeing and treating the victims with these terrible burns and experiencing the smell of burned flesh made me ill. I couldn't eat and lived on lemonade which resulted in significant weight loss. The smell and sight of burn victims is something you never forget.

During my service at the 36th Evacuation Hospital, on April 4, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was shot and killed. This is a day I will never forget. Some of my white comrades broke out the beer and partied throughout the night. Some chanted, "The coon is dead, the coon is dead"! For the first time in my life, I fully understood the meaning of the spiritual hymn, *I couldn't hear nobody pray*. A few of us black soldiers found a chapel on the base and only with moans and groans we offered up our brokenness to God. I will never be able to fully interpret my feelings of that day in April, nor really understand what being an American meant. I still remain guardedly optimistic for the future of America, the land that I love.

I returned to Richmond in June 1968 due to the illness and death of my eldest sister and was discharged from the military in August of 1968, after a brief period at Fort Benjamin Harrison in Indianapolis. I had successful careers in a variety of social service positions until my retirement.

After the war, and still today, I am not sure how much has really changed. Racism and discrimination still exist.

(On a brighter side note, during my time in Vietnam, I collected works of handcrafted art from villagers and when I was on R and R in Hong Kong. Through the help of a chaplain friend, I was able to ship the art work home, some of which is very valuable. It all remains in a showcase in my home.)