

Episode 8
4/69 - 5/70

In July of 1969 I became a civilian. I now had new responsibilities. Chief among them was taking care of myself. Where would I live, how would I pay my bills?

I thought, "I will become a cop, shooting people is fun." My stepfather and brother were both City of Miami police officers. I went down and put in my application. Everything was looking good. I received bonus points for my 2 Purple Hearts. Then came the lie detector examination.

They told me, "All you have to do is be honest." I was totally honest.

They said, "Have you ever murdered anyone?"

I said, "Yes."

They said, "Where?"

I said, "In Vietnam."

They said, "That's OK. Have you ever murdered anyone in the United States?"

I said, "No."

They said, "Have you ever committed arson?"

I said, "Yes."

Interviewer: "Where?"

Me: "Vietnam."

Interviewer: "In the United States?"

Me: "Never."

We went down all the list of crimes, none of which I had committed in the United States, but it just sort of got me that this activity was OK to do somewhere else, but it wasn't OK to do it here. Then it came to drugs.

Interviewer: "Have you ever smoked marijuana?"

Me: "Yes."

Interviewer: "Where's the first time you smoked marijuana?"

Me: "Vietnam."

Interviewer: "Have you smoked marijuana since you've been back?"

Me: "Yes."

Interviewer: "Have you smoked marijuana in the last year?"

Me: "Yes."

Interviewer: "In the last six months?"

Me: "Yes."

Interviewer: "In the last 30 days?"

Me: "Yes."

Interviewer: "In the last week?"

Me: "Yes."

Interviewer: "In the last 24 hours?"

Me: "Yes."

They then told me that they would not hire me because my marijuana smoking showed that I had no respect for the law. I was devastated. I thought of all of the things that I have done, the thing I'm least ashamed of is smoking marijuana. All of those bad things are OK, but this wasn't? I didn't really get it. But that left me without any income. I knew I could get money on the GI Bill if I went to school, so I applied to go to school. In September 1969, I started Miami Dade Jr. College.

A lot of my male classmates were there to avoid the draft and I was asked, "You don't have to worry about the draft, why are you here?." "For the money" I replied.

I still blindly supported the war. I often wore my Marine Corps tropical shirt to school. There were anti-war students and they would wear black armbands. I was hostile to them and would purposely bump into them and try to pick fights. I saw them as unpatriotic cowards.

In history class, we started studying the Vietnam war. I did not like the history I was being taught so I made an appointment to see my professor and complain. I told him that I was a Vietnam Veteran and that the history was wrong. He smiled at me and gave me additional reading.

I was soon overwhelmed by what I was reading. In particular, I did not know that Ho Chi Minh had been our ally in WWII, that the OSS had trained and armed the Viet Minh, that we had promised to support Vietnam's independence and self-determination once the war was over.

It pissed me off to learn these things and I started thinking that I had been lied to and used by my government. I was angry that we broke our word.

When I learned that we undermined the Geneva accords and did not

support free elections to reunite the country because we knew that Ho Chi Minh would win, I was flabbergasted. My country doesn't break its word - how could this be?

I was also aware that what I was seeing on the news and hearing from my government about Vietnam did not square with my experience. They talked about winning Hearts and Minds. We used to say "Grab them by the balls and their Hearts and Minds will follow."

I thought, "Well, the government has access to info that I do not have, I don't know the whole picture and it is important to support the government and trust our leaders. If you can't trust your leaders, who can you trust?"

So now I was learning new information but was reluctant to change my mind about the war. It was too much to ask at the time. I stayed focused on my grades.

Episode 8 starts with 2nd Lieutenant Joan Furey and the voice-over says "Nothing could prepare her for what she saw and did." I thought this really applies to all of us that were there.

Here it is January 1969. Nixon knows that we can not win this war; he is looking for a way out without surrender but he still widens the war. Kissinger tries to threaten the north but they will settle for nothing less than reunification.

Nixon decides to politicize the POW MIA issue. He ties the accounting of all POWs and MIAs to any progress. There is never a full accounting for every single person in war. There are still 78,750 MIAs from WWII and 7800 from Korea. I recommend the book MIA or Myth-making in America by H. Bruce Franklin. <https://www.amazon.com/MIA-Mythmaking-America-Bruce-Franklin/dp/0813520010>

I also recommend, POW: 2 years with the Vietcong by George E. Smith. <https://www.amazon.com/P-W-Two-Years-Vietcong/dp/0878670114>

There was talk about how we treated our prisoners. Don Luce was a civilian aid worker and then a journalist. He was in Nam from 1958 until he was kicked out in 1971. He was kicked out for exposing the Tiger Cages of

Con Son Island where prisoners were kept. I recommend <http://www.historynet.com/transformation-don-luce.htm>

Hamburger Hill: once again we mount a major battle to take a hill and then leave it.

When asked about this strategy, General John Wright said “No piece of ground as such is important to us...”. Edward Kennedy called this strategy “Both senseless and irresponsible”. Hill number 937 was renamed Hamburger Hill because of all of the blood and life lost taking it. 66 Americans died and 420 were wounded. This is a microcosm of what went on, what we were doing the whole time.

Nixon starts bringing troops home. Once this begins, it becomes obvious that we are no longer fighting to win. Can you imagine being drafted and sent to Vietnam with this realization?

Nixon’s policy of Vietnamization is really more BS. Every single department within the US government connected to the war acknowledged the fact that the South Vietnamese government would not survive.

If the war couldn’t be won with the US, how could it possibly be won without the US, yet our policy was still going to send 18,000 more Americans to their senseless deaths. Someone says, “Our only purpose was to survive” and I can relate to that. In the meantime, Nixon saw his approval ratings climb.

It is really no wonder that fragging increased under this new policy. Fraggings is a term used to describe Americans killing Americans on purpose - those being killed were mostly leaders. In the summer of 1969, the military was investigating 800 suspected cases of fragging. One GI says, “Maybe he had it coming”, referring to an officer who died at the hands of his own men.

There was talk about racism in relation to black and brown Americans. I knew that black men were disproportionately sent to the infantry and died at about twice the rate of their proportion of the American population. I did not know that the Pentagon had made changes so that black Americans would die at the proper rate. This is very surreal to me. They should have changed it to where no one else would die in this worthless war.

I have been to several reunions of my Vietnam units. The most respected people at these reunions are the Corpsmen. Many owe their lives to these very brave individuals who risked their lives to keep others alive. The army equivalent was called the Medic. It was sad to learn that 2000 of them were killed in Vietnam.

The Movement as it was called had expanded to include Anti-War, Civil Rights, Women's Rights, Environmental Rights, and Farm Workers' Rights. I loved when someone said that this was all tied together and supported by music. My generation had the best music; it is part of this series and even my children and grandchildren know our music.

The juxtaposition of Woodstock with the war reminded me of how I felt when I came home and everyone was partying. I felt awkward and out of place. There were 2 different realities - it was very strange at first.

Many felt that they had no control over the government. The primary duty of citizens in a Democracy is to control their government. Some were frustrated and turned to violence.

Tim O'Brien spoke of the "Courage of the walk". This hit home immediately. I have done a lot of speaking about Vietnam over the years and I learn a lot from the audience. I matter-of-factly talk about how we had to keep 20 to 30 meters between men so when someone steps on a mine, it only gets them.

Everyday we walked through the jungle looking for people to kill and every day people stepped on mines and blew up. We all knew that each step could be our last, but this was what we did.

The audience always seemed shocked by that, to me it was normal.

Tim also spoke of the lack of a sense of mission, but we all knew that survival was the mission.

A North Vietnamese soldier spoke about how miserable a soldier's life was, how hard it was to find food and get supplies. I chuckled when he said that the Americans always had food and that we each carried enough food for a picnic. I never really thought about their hardships. We may have had the

food which wasn't exactly great unless you really like C-Rations, but they had all of the hiding places.

He said that they did not fight for Marx, they fought for reunification and expelling the foreigners.

My Lai: This was a tough topic and the filmmakers tried to find a way to mitigate it: "This was not policy or routine but it was not an aberration." What does this even mean? They gave all of the reasons why guys wanted paybacks. When these men were explaining their reasons, I could hear myself. One soldier said that he felt that it was the right thing and that he felt good about it.

The real hero of this story was Hugh Thompson Jr., the helicopter pilot who placed his chopper between the American soldiers and the unarmed villagers, threatening to fire on the Americans if they tried to hurt these civilians. Over the years, Hugh was the target of personal attacks by the right wing. He died in 2006. You can hear him in his own words here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hkFa2ISNAGc>

Another hero was Ron Ridenhour, a helicopter door gunner who heard about My Lai and pushed and pushed until the story broke. Ron was an extraordinary person. He died in 1998. This is an article about the letters he wrote. <http://time.com/3732062/ronald-ridenhour-vietnam-my-lai/> For more about him with lots of links, go to https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ronald_Ridenhour

The third hero was Seymour Hersh who received at the Pulitzer Prize in 1970 for breaking the story on the massacre and the cover-up. You can read his original report here: <http://pierretristam.com/Bobst/library/wf-200.htm>

Anti-war demonstrations continued and there was more violence. Nixon expanded the war into Cambodia while he claimed that he was winding down the war. He said it was an incursion, not an invasion. Still to this day this vocabulary is used to try to make things appear as they really are not.

On May 4th, 1970, the Ohio National Guard killed 4 students and wounded 9 more. I think of it not as killing but murder. I was astonished to learn that when students gathered to get an understanding of what just happened, they were told to disperse or they would be shot. I am very glad that I was removed from riot control. A Gallup poll said that 58% of Americans thought the shootings at Kent State were justified.

11 days later, 2 black students from Jackson State were killed and 12 were wounded in demonstrations relating to racial unrest. This time the shooters were 40 state highway patrolmen.

On February 8th, 1968, before these 2 killing incidents occurred, 3 black students were killed and 27 wounded at a demonstration protesting a segregated bowling alley. The students were from South Carolina State University in Orangeburg, SC, and were shot by South Carolina Highway Patrol Officers.

The Kent State killings are what propelled my friends John (Gunny) Musgrave and Bill Ehrhart into the Anti-War movement. I would be joining them soon.