

by Richard Denne, author of [Letter from a Vietnam Combat Veteran](#) .

Overview:

Here I was a paratrooper with the 101st Airborne in the mid 1960s. One of the Screaming Eagles a warrior's elite. In the back of my mind, I always knew that there was a chance I might end up in a prison camp. A chance I might be tortured, starved, beaten, stripped of all human dignity... I just never thought it would happen in my own country.

In 1965, the Vietnam War was in full swing. Since I had theater experience, I decided to enlist as an "entertainment specialist." After surviving boot camp, I found myself in Advanced Infantry Training, learning the art of killing. Not the job description of a wannabe "master of ceremony." Numerous protest and inquiries were fruitless. The military would not admit they had made an error. – A characteristic of them I was to become very familiar with.

Within the week in Vietnam, I had made my first kill. Over half of my company was wiped out. And I was scared. Had it not been for the leadership and inspiration of my commanding officer, I would never have made it. After several months, life in the jungle fell into a pattern. I was befriended, by my new platoon leader, Pepper, and I went on to survive numerous firefights, ambushes, hand-to-hand combat, booby traps, a shark attack, three helicopter crashes and more.

I thought I was fighting to save my country from the communist threat. I thought I was doing the right thing.... Until an unexpected encounter with "HIM" in the mountains of the Nam set me straight as to just what this war was all about. It had nothing to do with defending the U.S. from foreign threats. It had nothing to do with the oath I had taken as a soldier. And it sure as Hell, had nothing to do with honor. I was unable to deal with what I had learned. That, combined with my company commander's reassignment off the line, prompted me to question my place in this war of debauchery. Unable to get out of being a grunt, my only alternative was to change my combat duty assignment. I became a door gunner on a helicopter. If I was going to die, I'd rather die in the air than on the ground.

I survived my tour of duty, receiving top commendations and medals for my skills as a warrior. After returning home I did further research into communism and Vietnam. While serving out my term in the states, I spoke out against the "Unconstitutional Use" of our servicemen over there, to my comrades-in-arms. They asked me about what I saw over there and what I learned. And so I told them. I gave them the facts in black and white... And I refused to stop speaking out. Because of this, I was arrested and my real battle began.

I was held on trumped up charges. Charges of murder... Murder I had committed while in Vietnam. My record, "exemplary" until then, began turning black. The madness continued through threats, abuse and kangaroo courts. Seeing no other option, I demanded a

“dishonorable discharge.”...The just desserts for an “honorable warrior” participating in a “dishonorable war.” No one would oblige. They said, “ I was simply confused.”

So, I deserted the army.

There were over “half a million” less than honorable discharges given from 1966 to 1973. It was as though many of us who had been in the war realized there was something wrong with what our country was doing and wanted out. Because the system was so overcrowded, makeshift “concentration camps” were set up around the country.

After being hounded by the FBI and government authorities I was turned in by my own family and friends. Being from Orange County, California, they were doing their duty and thought it was for my own good. Once in the grips of the military system, my life became worse than it had ever been in combat. Sadistic guards wanted to make an example of me because they believed I was a veteran who disgraced his uniform. I was tortured, stripped, and had a gun put to my head. I was thrown naked into solitary confinement where the shadow of the stars and stripes --{designs cut into the ceiling} – covered my body. Where I was forced to eat cereal and water from a bowl like a dog while others watched. I witnessed other prisoners being tortured and murdered.

By the time I attended my final trial. I was facing twenty years in prison. This including five years for my escape from Leavenworth and for trying to destroy government property --[ I tried to commit suicide} – I would have served that time had it not been for my ex comrade-in-arms from the past. Pepper, my old platoon leader, sat on the court. After excusing himself from the bench because he knew me, Pepper went on to defend me in front of the court. I was finally discharged from the madness...

Now, I proudly show my military records. Because they illustrate the hypocrisy and the immorality of our country’s involvement the Vietnam War. My discharge states that I was “unable to adapt to military service,” that I had a history of not being able to work with the system. On many other pages in the records. I’m said to be, “the perfect warrior.” The grand paradox, which was the conflict of the Vietnam War, is illustrated in black and white.

I have all my military records to back me up even my old outfit of the 101st Airborne.

Richard Denne

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Read *Letter from a Vietnam Combat Soldier* [here](#)