

asked for some arty marking rounds to help us out. After 6:30, we decided to go back and get on dry land because we couldn't even get a couple of marking rounds to help us out. To top it off, we only had about 20 minutes of daylight left.

Well, we made through, the swamp, dark and everything at about 7:30 and everybody was in no mood for playing games. And that's how we spent New Year's Eve!! Half of us, are so mad that we are ready to write the President—himself!! . . .

Take care
Swamp Fox

NORMA "NICKI" ROSKA (JOHNSON) (b. 1945) was born in Milwaukee and was living with her parents in Glendale when she was hired by the Red Cross in December, 1967. She worked with the Red Cross Clubmobile at Phu Loi, Qui Nhon, and Pleiku from February, 1968, until March, 1969. She now lives in Greendale, where she is an educator. As in previous wars, American women did not serve their country in combat as did Vietnamese women. Instead, American women contributed to the war effort in a number of other ways: as nurses, Special Services workers, and Red Cross volunteers. More than 7,300 women served with the military in Vietnam, most of them as nurses. More than 600 civilian women volunteered to serve with the Red Cross in Vietnam, and about 200 women joined the Special Services. In this letter to her parents, Roska describes the role of Red Cross workers in raising the morale of combat troops at a forward base camp.

April 7, 1968

Hi All,

. . . I've had 2 chances so far to get out in the field—one is a place called Thunder 3 (I think I told you about that one) and the other is part of the 4 Cavalry Unit (Quarter Cav. for short) called Dragoon Forward. Virginia and I went out there last Saturday afternoon and had a fabulous time walking around and talking to the men. There were only about 75 men there then but about 5:00 all the rest started coming back from their day's work—riding in tanks hunting "Charlie." I got to ride in one of the tanks, just around the base area, of course, and it was a riot. One young man was so cute—he made me put on his flak jacket and steel helmet and then took a picture of me. Found out one thing though—there is *no* possible way of getting in or out of a tank gracefully while wearing a dress! Also while we were out there I made an acquaintance with an ugly monkey that had been brought up by the VC who doesn't like girls so I ended up with a chomp in my finger and a tetanus shot to go along with it. The finger is convalescing fine—I hope the monkey is suffering!



Red Cross workers Nicki Roska (Johnson) (left) and Lori Clause conduct a clubmobile program for the 1st Division Artillery Battery at Firebase Thunder II near Phu Loi, June, 1968. ARC photo by Mark Stevens. Courtesy Nicki Roska Johnson.

We ended up by serving the men their dinner, which had to be brought in by chopper, and just barely getting out before it started getting dark. I can understand the R.C. policy of having the girls back before dark because dusk is the time when the VC pick to come out and the choppers make good targets especially when they have to fly low-level.

The social life is probably more tiring than the work if you can believe that. It's not that we're so popular, it's just that there are only 4 of us to how many thousands of them. There was a party Fri. night, 2 parties last night, and a BBQ tonight—we don't have to stay long but still it's a drain. We always have our group at the Divarty [division artillery at divisional headquarters] to fall back on which is nice because they're just like our big brothers and they don't expect us to be charming "Belles of the Ball." . . .

Love,
Nicki (yes, I go by Nicki over here)

DARRYL JOHNSON, a forward observer with the army, was stationed at Dak To when he described to his fiancée a much appreciated visit from Red Cross workers. (For a biographical sketch of Johnson, see chapter 1.)

Dak To, December 10, 1968

Hello Doll,

. . . Later this afternoon, a bird came with Donut Dollies. These are Red Cross girls who come to the field to play games & hand out presents to the GIs. It was a nice break. We had teams & played games like identifying states with clues they gave. The presents were wonderful. They came from the Ladies American Legion Auxiliary. Mine had little useful stuff like a soap dish, comb, pen, peanuts etc. What was especially nice was it also had a recording tape. I was able to get three of them by trading other guys for them. I was delighted because now I can send you more tapes and one especially for Christmas instead of a card. Pretty good huh? . . .

I Love You,
Darryl

Move to the Rear

Life in the rear, while replete with its own difficulties, was generally easier and certainly safer than life as a foot soldier. Infantrymen were backed by a huge rear echelon of support personnel. For every man in the field, another five to ten served in the rear, fixing and maintaining equipment, driving trucks, cooking meals, and serving as clerk-typists for officers and the large military bureaucracy. While men on the larger bases enjoyed nightly movies and television, even the men on the smaller bases generally had hot showers, cold beer, warm meals, and electricity. Despite these amenities, men in the rear faced long hours at monotonous jobs. The following letters suggest some of the differences between life in the field and life in the rear. In the following letter to her parents, Red Cross worker NICKI ROSKA (JOHNSON) contrasts the experiences of infantrymen with those of support personnel. (For a biographical sketch of Roska, see earlier in this chapter).

September 27, 1968

Hi—

Decided it was about time to write altho I don't know if I should considering I haven't heard from you for awhile! By the way, what's Mary's address so I can write and bug her. Life is as disorganized as usual here—we're still in the process of getting settled in our rooms and the center we don't even talk about! I suppose I should consider myself lucky, but I get so impatient with the girls when they complain about not having any hot water, or how hard it's raining or how hard they have to work;

or with the guys when they think they've got it really bad—a beautiful library, the beach, clubs & entertainment, the town (when it's on limits) and yes, even the R.C. Center. If they only knew. Sometimes I just want to scream at them all—tell them they don't know how good they have it, but you can't find fault with them because they have nothing to compare their living conditions to. The guys, and girls alike, can only try to imagine what it's like living in a poncho-covered hole that is filled up with water more often than it's not; going for days without a shower; getting excited because it's been so long since you've seen a television set; trying to make a joke of the war because if you don't you may crack under the strain; keeping yourself from getting too attached to your buddies because you never know how long they'll be alive enough to be your buddies. There are men in this area who do know, who live and work in the "boonies" but the majority live a safe, 8 hour workday and these are the men we see and are friends with. I see them as the type of friends I may have back in the States, tho—A light, passing relationship, somewhat superficial even with the best friends because there isn't the need here. Perhaps by not being a novelty I see the whole situation in a different perspective, but whatever it is I no longer have the patience necessary to do a good job here (meaning Qui Nhon).

I've been trying since I got here to figure out why I feel the way I do and the only thing I can think of is that I got so attached to the men we saw in respect to the 1st Division and they were so open and honest with their opinions and feelings because of the intensity that they were living their lives, that I lived just as intently, I felt just as deeply, I wept just as painfully and I cared more than they could ever know. Then I came up here and I had to let go of it all. I can't just discard all the experiences and memories and start all over. They're always going to be with me—so much so that I can't accept the people here with the same closeness and warmth. I think that's what I meant about the relationships here being light and superficial. The others are what are real, and they are the relationships that will always be special. I'm happy here, don't get me wrong, but I'm not a part as I should be because I can't and don't care enough to make myself a part. I wish every girl could experience the joys—and the sorrows—that I did down in Phu Loi because it's something that can only be felt—never explained.

As is probably obvious, I'm going to request another forward area because that is where I feel I'm the most needed, where I'm the most comfortable—I love everything (well, almost everything) about it. Fortunately for this specific program, some girls prefer the atmosphere of a center and some prefer the atmosphere of the more rugged—the field,

the chopper rides, the guys at their worst. I just happen to fall into the latter category. As I see it, I should be just about rested up enough by the end of November to forge on to a new area—keep your fingers crossed Saigon will see it the same way!

Must close or Chuck (our driver) will leave without me.

Happiness is being alive!

Write—

Love,
N.

BRUCE E. RODLAND (b. 1950), a native of Buffalo, New York, volunteered for the army in March, 1970. Rodland served as an infantryman and radio operator (B Co., 3-1st Inf., 11th Inf. Bde. [Light], 23d Inf. Div. [Americal]) near Duc Pho and Chu Lai from August, 1970, to August, 1971. After his discharge in December, 1971, he settled in Stoughton, where he is a self-employed woodworker and antique dealer. Having spent his first four months in Vietnam in the field, Rodland clearly appreciated the changes he encountered in the rear.

January 26, 1971

Dear Mom, Dad, & Mary,

Hello, finally, from me again. Sorry I haven't written for so long, I've been kinda busy. Thought you might [like] to hear the good news first. I am no longer splashing around in rice paddies or climbing mountains! I have a "rear" job, mainly, RTO at the Tactical Operations Center in Duc Pho. I have my own room, with a real bed, mattress, sheets, blankets, pillow, electricity, curtains, a Vietnamese woman to wash all my clothes and iron them, and she also cleans the room, polishes my boots, and makes my bed (after I get out of it).

In very close proximity to my hooch is a PX, steam bath, watch repair, engraving shop, Oriental gift shop, EM club, outdoor theater, and even an office where a Dodge salesman sells new Dodge products to GIs who have dreams of being greeted at home with their own new car!

I've got a radio on now, listening to Donovan sing Hurdy Gurdy man, one of my favorites. The radio station is AFBN, or Armed Forces Broadcasting Network. So, I'm really not doing too bad now. I don't have to pull guard, so I don't even have a weapon anymore. . . .

Well, I'm sorry to say it, but that's about it, as I must go shave and eat before going to work. It's 4:10 P.M., I go to work at 5:00 P.M., and work till 1:00 A.M. It's a real good shift, as I can sleep as late as I want, goof off the rest of the day till time for work. Well, take it easy, and all that.

Love,
Brucy



Judith Jenkins (Gaudino). Courtesy Judith Jenkins Gaudino.

JUDITH JENKINS (GAUDINO) (b. 1945) grew up in Appleton and completed her bachelor's degree at the University of Wisconsin in Madison prior to joining the Army Special Services in June, 1967. She served as director of several centers that offered social and recreational services for infantrymen on standdown in Di An, Lai Khe, and Qui Nhon from September, 1967, to December, 1968, and again in Long Binh, Lai Khe, and Phu Loi from January, 1969, to August, 1970. She currently lives in New Jersey, where she counsels veterans suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder.

March 27, 1968

Dear Sue,

Well, another birthday goes by, 23 yrs old, and it's hard to believe I'm in the middle of Vietnam. I never expected to be caught up in this. I'm a civilian, non-combatant—it says so on my ID card. If I'm captured I'm supposed to be treated under the rules of the Geneva Convention. Do you think the VC or NVA would read the fine print on the back of my I.D. card?

Last month there were the worst attacks ever all over Vietnam during Tet. That's what they call the Vietnamese New Year. In the city of Qui Nhon the VC were broadcasting from the radio station and flying their flag over the building. My military base is only a few miles outside of Qui Nhon. We were all scared. Military intelligence reported that our base might be in danger of being overrun from an NVA battalion in our

area. We lived in underground bunkers for several days, but the major attack never came. We only had a few rockets and a small sniper attack on the perimeter. Afterwards one of the enemy they found dead was the Vietnamese barber on our base who had just cut my hair the week before. You really don't know who you can trust here.

At this transportation unit where I'm assigned, most of the soldiers face incredible danger every day when they drive supply trucks from Qui Nhon to the Central Highlands near Pleiku. Like ducks in a shooting gallery, they get attacked all the time along the road. Sometimes you get to know the guys and then they don't come back.

Last year we celebrated my birthday at UW two months before graduation. College life seems so far away right now. I know it sounds crazy, but I'm staying in Vietnam because I feel so needed here.

Take care of yourself,

Love,

Judy

The Siege of Khe Sanh

The siege of Khe Sanh began ten days before the Tet Offensive and ended nearly two months after Tet had made its mark on the American war effort. Located in northwestern South Vietnam, six miles from Laos and fourteen miles south of the demilitarized zone (DMZ), Khe Sanh overlooked Route 9, the main road from the Laotian market towns to the northern coastal region. In 1962 the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) created a Special Forces camp near Khe Sanh for border surveillance and to train local Bru tribesmen. General Westmoreland ordered the marines to establish a base at Khe Sanh in 1966, and it was reinforced with additional troops the following year. In April–May, 1967, the marines fought NVA regulars for control of the surrounding hills, but by the end of the year, the North Vietnamese had blocked Route 9, forcing the United States to resupply its troops by air. Anticipating an attack on Khe Sanh, more than 6,000 marines and South Vietnamese rangers were prepared to defend the garrison.

On January 21, 1968, the siege of Khe Sanh began when the marine outpost on Hill 861 stopped an NVA infantry attack and the NVA used 152 mm howitzers to hit an ammunition supply area on the base itself, destroying nearly 1,500 tons of high explosives. From January through April, the marines at Khe Sanh endured hardship, deprivation, and the monotonous terror of artillery fire, mortar attacks, and rocket bombardment. The NVA mixed this continuous barrage with sporadic battalion-sized ground attacks on the more exposed U.S. positions. Between January 22 and March 31, B-52s and other aircraft dropped more than 75,000 tons of explosives on NVA positions, while air force and marine transport planes

July, 1970

Dear Home:

. . . I was sent to the field to join my squad on the 23rd of June in Cambodia. The action was over and I just joined them for the long walk through the jungle back to Vietnam and to the rear for the rest of three days. I took in the publicity and picture taking like a real veteran. I put down the Verona Press as hometown paper since I'm already receiving papers from Lodi and Oconomowoc.

In the field or to the jungle is called "humping the boonies." The humping means carrying the gear needed on the back. The boonies are the vast areas of dense jungle which I will spend my year in. First, the humping, I hump several things and this is the hardest of the two, adjusting to. I hump my personal gear which includes only the bare necessities as follows: Poncho liner, which is very light down, but warm and is used as a blanket or pillow on the real warm nights. Sheet of plastic which is the floor of the tent or raincoat which I don't use because the rain is our only bath. This all goes on the bottom of my pack along with my air mattress.

Our company is one of the few that let the troops blow up the air mattresses while in the field. This usually isn't allowed due to the noise they make while being blown up. The air mattress is my prize possession, one of the few luxuries I have. The pack I spoke of is called a "Ruck Sack," and each humper has one. It has a steel frame that fits the back with bags, pockets and straps all over it. Inside the large bag, I keep my shaving equipment, pipe tobacco and so forth. Everything of value must be kept in plastic bags. It's hard to believe back in the world (that's USA) that the sweat of a day's travel would soak a man's entire equipment, but it is an almost daily experience. Just the humping of my own sweat or the rain of the Monsoon season adds quite a little weight to the pack. Each pocket has drain holes which help some. That is the extent of the personal gear except maybe one change of socks. Each day I wring out the socks of yesterday and dry them for tomorrow. Along with foot powder, my feet are holding up real good. The clothes are the same ones, just shirt and pants with cads of pockets for a period of at least 3 days or longer with Log Day, which is troop supply day. The set I removed yesterday were on my body since I entered this country June 12. I was lucky midway of my short tour, we came upon a large bomb crater filled with rain water and I enjoyed the greatest swim of all time. Boots and pants still on and tied tightly to protect from leeches, and other little jungle critters. I know that sounds just terrible (jungle critters) and I'm sure you are shivering with the thought of step and a half snakes and crocodiles.



Heavily burdened GIs "humping the boonies."
Courtesy Bruce Thibodeau.

. . . Most all men here carry jungle rot which is the worst of all evil here. Worse than the enemy because the Medevac Chopper is Johnny on the spot when "Charlie" leaves a calling card. The jungle rot, one just bears with it for a year. I plan on some jungle rot, but not from the jungle critters. Nobody worries about it, just itch it occasionally and enjoy the relief. Malaria is common and is good for 2 Mo. sham time in the rear. We pill for it every morning with the little white ones and the big orange one comes on Monday. That's our only identification of the days of the week. When the big orange one comes, I know that I missed church yesterday again. . . .

To continue with my ruck sack, I hump the standard equipment of 2 smoke bombs, 2 hand grenades (handled with loving care and now I'm rid of them), 2 trip flares and sometimes a Claymore mine for night protection or could be used for a boat anchor. 2 gallons of water needed for the 3 days between logs (supply days). Often get a kick-out (chopper drop) of water on the second day. I'm adding another half gallon to my supply, in the field water is better than gold because I wouldn't hump 2½ gallons of pure gold if it was mine just for the humping. Water, for example, is not used to brush teeth, one just spits for awhile. Sweat from the shirt washes the canteen out for dinner use and all water goes

to the best of use down the hatch, along with the sand of the last swallow. Humping food for 9 meals is another must. I've really learned the body's needs of food, water, and shelter when it's all on my back. Just glad I don't have to carry the air to breathe also, just a gas mask to purify it in case "Charlie" advances to chemical warfare or a GI screws up with ours.

The food is C rations or "Lurps." The Cs weigh more because they contain fruit. One can of pears or peaches is all I can down for lunch in the heat of the day. The night meal with tents up and time to spare is a real treat. Lurps are dried food like powder. Add water heated with C4 (explosive that just burns in small quantities) inside an ingeniously cut tin can stove, and before the eyes appear the beans, peas, meat, potatoes, and all kinds of good things. The peas taste more like beans and the beans kinda like potatoes, but all food is good over the open fire out-of-doors. After the humping of the day is over, the remainder of the day and night is as a camping trip except for ½ hr. spent on guard duty. Then too, Ginger usually had me pulling at least a ½ hr. guard duty every night of our camping vacations.

I believe after this year, our family vacation plans are going to undergo drastic changes. Dad, you just inherited one Coleman lantern and any other camping equipment presently in my name.

Finishing off my ruck sack with 2 and on the 5th day 3 mortar rounds at a chubby 15 lbs each. Bandoliers of rounds criss cross my chest containing 16 magazines and some 3 or 4 hundred M16 (rifle) bullets. The M16's primary function at present for me is a walking stick.

Under the weight I carry, I think you can see its need. Its other purpose, I don't know if it works, and I pray that I never have to find out. By the look of it, I doubt if the last owner had to use it except for a cane. I believe with the first aid pack and pistol belt, my pack is completely described and weighing in at something I don't like to talk about. Dad and Gram, don't think you're slow at getting up from a sitting position because you're like Jack the Ripper compared to me in full gear. The first day is the worst, and the second is better. Why, simply 3 less meals and a gallon less water. The third day is like air-borne until the Log hits. So that's the humping part and now a little about the Boonies.

Dense—is the best word. Solid and thick fit also, with visibility 5 to 20 meters at best. Often I can smell the man in front of me on the trail before I can see him. Bamboo and vines, and fern, and more bamboo. Overhead is complete shade which is nice. The only open spaces are the bomb craters and just before them the bamboo is all twisted and crossed, making travel very slow. We walk for maybe ten minutes then

rest, 5 minutes up to an hour. Up a hill—rest, over top—rest, down the hill—rest. Over and over the cycle continues. Our biggest day was 3½ (1000 meters to a click) all in 13 hours' time. Cambodia's border and North Vietnam's border where I will probably spend my tour has all hills and little or no swamp or rice paddies, just rubber plantations. The hills are hands and knee action, going up from bamboo to bamboo and then on the butt to slide down the other side. Sometimes gaining inches at a time especially if it rains and the red clay holds no friction. During this time we rely strictly on the bamboo. Once in awhile I look to my front and tell the Lord he missed a spot in his planting. Then the M16 becomes a step-ladder and drive on.

During the real heat of the day the feeling can't be described with one word. Sweat runs like I've never seen it before. The humidity clings like smoke and the air is heavy and hard to breathe. The entire body is sore from hours under the weight of the pack. Often blood dripping from the many cuts of the hands from sharp bamboo ends and thorns of the vines. The insect repellent burns every pore of the skin and as the sweat washes away, the mosquitos find the weak spots. Tempers grow short and the body is so weak it trembles under strain and the rest period offers little relief.

Drive on, there are no boys here, all men, some quite young, but they're men now. Human torture describes the feeling, it has really amazed me what the human body is capable of functioning through. My hands heal very quickly and no rot sets in. There is no exaggeration to the heat of the day, tis true only men going through it know the real story. It can't be told and believed in the world. I was at my worst the first bad day when we all took our swim. Money couldn't buy that feeling of cool water. Sometimes the rain comes just at the right time when I think I can't go on. Well that's how it was the first week for me. Getting better by the day now as I'm getting conditioned to the environment. Also learning tricks from the longer term men to ease the situation. A towel pad placed just right on the lower part of the pack, rearranged shoulder straps, shifting the weight, using the M16 as support for the pack whenever possible, continually wiping the heat away with the sweat. All these things really are making the difference for me and I can make it O.K. now. Days are going by fast, June is all gone. There is no place in the Army I would rather be—just where I am—and what I'm doing. One big camping trip and now and then a vacation from that. When our Co. got in last night, some guys for the only time since April, showers flowed constantly, and the beer was cold. GIs were like wild animals set free. Quite a sight to see and good feeling to be a part of.

So that's my version of "humping the Boonies" told like it is so you can understand and live this year out with me. The Army provides quite adequately. Send lots of letters, mail call on Log day is a big thing here.

I won't be able to write often as I'd like, but I'm sure you can understand.

Love,
George

TOM MCCABE, an infantryman near An Duc, described some of the difficulties of life in the field in the following letter to his parents. (For a biographical sketch of McCabe, see chapter 1.)

June 1, 1969

Hello

. . . As for a rundown on our mission last month, let me first summarize it by saying it was very miserable. We started out with a Charlie Alpha into an area just northwest of Dolly. Since I was on one of the first birds in I had to wait out in the open field for the rest of the company to fly in. It was about 120°F out there so I commenced to inhale my water supply which I had reduced from 5-4 qts since the previous mission. Well that was the beginning of a long dry mission. Supplies never came regularly & when they did they were never adequate and furthermore they would come in the morning so we would have to hump all the excess supplies all day. To say the least it was a miserable set-up. I was usually stuck with a 5 gallon plastic lugger jug of water which was heavy, bulky & very cumbersome. We only stayed in that area for a few days and then CA'd to another area more north of Dolly. Here we continued our crazy supply scheme with much suffering from the troops. We changed from a search and destroy type tactic to one of wait and ambush. This meant that some 20 men would find a likely spot for gooks to walk by & then set up and wait. We stayed on ambush for about 36 hours at a time. For some reason the Company commander figured that since we were just sitting on ambush that we didn't need more than one or two qts of H₂O a day. Well we proved him wrong, but we were the ones that suffered the consequences. We were so dry by the third day that we couldn't even sweat. We were finally forced to dig some water out of the bottom of a bomb crater. The water was 70% emulsified clay and didn't taste worth a damn even tho we boiled it, put iodine pills in it & numerous types of artificial flavoring. Although it was wet it didn't quench our thirst one bit, in fact it had a detrimental effect on my system. After about a week and a half of this type of tactic we

Nha Trang, March 8, 1970

A Soldier's Lament

—Dedicated to the One I Love—

As I look out at the sea, with waves breaking white on the sand beach, I think of you. Across these crystal blue waters, another continent lies. A continent of peace, a place where freedom is a meaning not just a word. . . .

As a soldier, I am obligated to fight for my country, right or wrong. Maybe my country makes errors and mistakes but it is the best country in the world. Other countries look up to it for leadership, for aid, for counsel yet they condemn it at the same time. This could be the very clue that indicates our country is the best. The others are constantly complaining and criticizing it. They want what we have but they fail to realize what the men and women of our country had to forfeit and had to die for. We were strong, willing to do the ultimate, so our offspring could enjoy the fruits we had.

For generations after generations, there were wars. The American Revolution, The War of 1812, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, the Korean Conflict, World War II, and now the Vietnam War. Why is there war? Why does it continue? Will it ever end? These questions are very hard to answer. There never will be an honest answer, only myths.

These wars, they are understood by the mothers of sons, the sons, and the loved ones of these sons. Yes, they have a clear picture of the true meaning of war! It is an insane institution! People dying for the wants of greedy individuals. These pigs are not satisfied with their power or borders. They want more and for some reason these individuals believe the end justifies the means.

In the process many people suffer undue hardship, many people die. Mothers mourn, wives mourn, loved ones mourn, and fathers are outraged. War reaches all directly or indirectly.

Our country had to put up with aggression since its birth. This country does not believe in aggression but it had to go to war over and over because of other countries. The fact is, we want to be peaceful and left alone but others do not see it this way. That is why our country is the best! We are willing to fight for what we have and for what we are, the greatest nation in the world!

As a soldier in Vietnam, I see much suffering, killing, and despair. My way of life has been altered because of this. All that I have been taught, all that I have experienced, and all the goodness I have known is twisted and distorted here in a war zone. People are not the same,

they do cruel things, their culture is much different, their viewpoints are much different. Only those who have experienced war can truly understand the predicament of war. It changes history as well as men's lives. . . .

Your GI in Nam,
Ron

JAMES A. CARLSON (b. 1945) was living in Oconomowoc and working as a journalist prior to being drafted into the army in November, 1968. He served as a reporter for the *Ivy Leaf*, the newspaper of the 4th Inf. Div. (2-8th Inf.), in the central highlands from June, 1969, to July, 1970, when he was discharged. He subsequently returned to his career in journalism and lives in Milwaukee. By late 1969, when Carlson wrote this letter to his brother, the lack of a clear American strategy for Vietnam had become glaringly apparent to the men in country.

November 5, [1969]

Dear Ralph—

I'm writing you my first confidential-type letter because there have been some things going on here that you might want to hear about and perhaps consider in relation to the current pull-out and Vietnamization talk.

For the most part my first 4 months in Vietnam were really soft and safe. My battalion had almost no combat casualties in all this time and our assignments were mostly road security on well-paved highways. However, a month ago there was a sudden change in the situation when one company was sent to Plei Mrong, an infamous village 15 miles northwest of Pleiku. The company first stumbled onto what apparently was a company-size enemy bunker complex. Two platoons were out on a patrol on foot in the afternoon and one walked right into the complex and spotted 5 dinks cooking chow around a fire. There was a firefight. We had a man killed and we got 6 NVA. Then there were small events—a few snipers and “enemy movement” reports—for the next week. Finally the same company hit another at least company-size enemy force, only this time the men were on APCs and the enemy was dug in for an ambush. The NVA have a weapon called the B40 rocket which they use to great advantage against our tracks. The rocket can go right through a track, and it explodes throwing shrapnel all over. They have all kinds of these rockets in the Plei Mrong area—I mean they have a lot of them. Well, I won't go into more details. We've had about 13 killed in the past 2 weeks and there have been many other casualties, with a lot of guys going home due to wounds—lost eyes, arms, legs—the whole gruesome lot. We apparently originally hit either a battalion or regimental NVA



Jim Carlson. Courtesy Jim Carlson.

headquarters, and each of our companies has been ambushed by company-size units. We've used artillery & air strikes and killed a lot of enemy troops—I think it's at least 200 and this is a fairly accurate count. Now I believe the enemy has split into squad & platoon size groups while the big leaders have most likely moved back into the mountains around the Cambodian border. But these small units with B40s can still cause us tremendous problems.

So that's the situation. As for me, I've played it pretty safe. Most of the time I am either at our battalion headquarters at Plei Mrong or at base camp. I've been out with 2 companies in the boonies for 2 days each, but I didn't see any real action. I hope it stays that way. So while most people back home think there is a lull in the war and think the war is slowly petering out, for the 2d of the 8th it has just started. We don't know how long we'll stay in this area. Activity has increased all around us lately, so we might be here a while. I am just lucky that I'm not out in the boonies with the other infantrymen—seven days a week,

come what may, seeing your buddies hit and just having to go on. I've seen a lot lately. You see people change. You see guys jump at the sound of a mortar firing—not just jump, but a guy's whole body makes a nervous twitch, a ducking motion. You see people really scared—leaders who don't want to lead and soldiers who don't want to go—all becoming harder and tougher and better, but no more willing. And then I watch the commanders with their maps, designing attacks, patrols, and other tactics, thinking they're doing well according to the kill ratios. It all emphasizes the big question of what we are fighting for. The answer—our lives and our friends here. U.S. Policy means nothing because it was simply a blunder on the part of the government. Most guys here would agree that the biggest crime of the whole deal is this lack of definite purpose—we didn't have it when we got drafted and we don't now.

Maybe I shouldn't burden you with this stuff, but I know you will be able to accept it as information—a report on a sad state of affairs that should never be repeated. . . .

Our recent action hasn't been all bad. Our reenlistment sergeant won an award for having the highest number of re-ups in the brigade. Of course, when a guy re-ups he can choose a new MOS or specialty, and I think our guys have decided on non-combat MOSs. In other words, taking 3 more years to get out of their present spot. Sorry to send you such a gloomy-type letter. As I said before, I am learning a lot and this is one bright spot in it. . . .

All for now
Jim

On November 3, 1969, President Nixon made a speech in which he elaborated his plans for the Vietnamization of the war. American troops would gradually be withdrawn from Vietnam, and the war would be turned over to South Vietnamese fighters, who would then determine the fate of their country. In the wake of this announcement, platoon leader Bob Rock wrote his reactions in the following journal entry. (For a biographical sketch of Rock, see chapter 1.)

[November 5, 1969]

There were a lot of disappointed faces as we listened to Nixon's speech on 3 Nov. We all knew he was right but still felt discouraged. I listened to the whole thing with mixed emotions. There's no doubt in my mind I want to be Home but at the same time I can't say, nor can any of my platoon, whether we'd support Nixon or demonstrate against the [war] but we're all convinced we'd do one or the other. Too many people are apathetic to the situation over here. Take for instance Dodgeville or any