Vietnam Generation

Volume 2
Number 1 *GI Resistance: Soldiers and Veterans Against the War*

Article 7

1-1990

A Matter of Conscience: Resistance Within the U.S. Military During the Vietnam War

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Shirt, Bill and Seidenberg, Willa (1990) "A Matter of Conscience: Resistance Within the U.S. Military During the Vietnam War," *Vietnam Generation*: Vol. 2 : No. 1 , Article 7.
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A MATTER OF CONSCIENCE: RESISTANCE WITHIN THE U.S. MILITARY DURING THE VIETNAM WAR

BILL SHORT
WILLA SEIDENBERG

In 1982 when the Vietnam veterans Memorial was dedicated in Washington, D.C., it was the beginning of the nation's retrospection about the war and its aftermath. But eight years and hundreds of books, articles, films and TV programs later, the GI resistance movement during the war has been consistently ignored. Frustrated by this glaring omission, we embarked on a project to tell the story of resistance. *A Matter of Conscience: Resistance Within the U.S. Military During the Vietnam War*, a series of portraits and oral histories of vets who resisted against the war while still on active duty, has been exhibited at various locations throughout the country for the past two years.

Our interviews with resistance veterans reveal common social, moral and historical threads and provide a context for understanding why some GIs felt compelled to dissent. Additionally, the oral histories illustrate why the war was so divisive and troubling to many Americans.

Resistance took many forms. It included individual acts and group efforts. It was carried out by persons who enlisted, as well as by persons who were drafted. Resistance to the war and to military authority developed at installations in the United States, and in units stationed in Vietnam and Europe. Resistance included desertion, AWOLS (absent without official leave), the refusal of direct orders, fraggings (the use of fragmentation grenades by low ranking soldiers to intimidate or murder officers), sabotage, the publication of underground newspapers, demonstrations and passive noncompliance with the war effort. In this article we present the stories of individual resisters: those who ated in isolation without the advantage of an immediate support group. This was particcularly true for servicce personnel stationed "in-country," in Vietnam, where Amerians were cut off from the antiwar movement back home..

Individual resistance developed from a deep moral conscience, usually in absence of political sophistication but with a well-defined sense of right and wrong. Most of the vets we interviewed indicated they learned a strong moral code from their parents: a sense of fair play and duty, respect for others and for private property, honesty—values reinforced by school, church, and scouting. John Tuma was an Army interrogator who almost lost his life for refusing to torture Viet Cong prisoners:

> I remember I used to think what would my parents have done. The way I was brought up, what would be the right thing to do, not the right thing to do from the Army point of view, but from my own family, and my own community's morality. I consciously thought about that and came to the conclusion there were things I had been raised not to do, things I wouldn't, couldn't do.

These ideals were taken at face value, despite the contradictions of the 1950s: a time of segregation and racism, intolerance for religions other than Christianity, fervent anti-communist witch hunts, and overwrought nationalism manifesting itself as nuclear imperialism. In addition, as a result of "winning" World War II, the United States populace developed a chauvinist attitude toward the rest of the world. Young people were instilled with the idea that the role of the United States was that of policeman and protector without thought for other cultures. As former Marine Steven Fournier said:

> I had volunteered to go, I wanted to be there. I thought it was the right thing that we should go and protect democracy there. I believed in the Domino Theory, I believed that Cardinal Spellman was right when he said "Kill a Commie for Christ." I really truly believed, I mean it was the *cause*. I was a young man, I'd been brought up in a Navy family. I was very proud of having become a Marine and fighting for my country.

By the time young men came of draft age, their sense of duty toward the United States was well-formed. Their personal values reflected the cultural norm of the early Sixties, with their roots in the Fifties. What was thought to be a new sense of duty and service to country was described by a young dynamic President John F. Kennedy when he said, "ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." The weight of family service to "God and country" lived in the stories fathers and uncles told about World War II and Korea. The young man of the Sixties saw Vietnam as "his" war, a chance to gloriously serve his country just as male members of his family had done.

Of course, the fact that the Vietnamese were an Asian people, as were the Japanese and Koreans, was not lost on these young GIs. As Marine veteran Paul Atwood told us,

> the Vietnamese were essentially in my mind the equivalent of Japs, and there was no question but that we could handle them. My father had handled them, of course I would go over and handle them in the same way and come back in one piece.

Intrigued by the imagined war exploits of their fathers and uncles (since many veterans said their male relatives were often silent about the realities and horrors of World War II), and with romanticized, even mysterious images fostered by John Wayne movies, it is not surprising then that many of these young men enlisted in the military. and because they went in believing so wholeheartedly in the "cause," their disillusionment was even more profound. Steve Spund, the son of a Jewish Polish immigrant, was a Marine who refused to go to Vietnam:

> I'd grown up seeing the U.S. defend itself against the Nazis and Japanese, watching John Wayne movies and felt very patriotic. Maybe I'd seen one too many Marine movies, but I felt, and it was supported by my father's patriotism, that what we were doing had to be right. Here there were Marines coming back from Vietnam saying what we were doing was wrong. It really shattered, totally contradicted everything I believed in about the U.S.

Upon entering the service, pressure to conform to the norm and not question authority was strongly reinforced by the military system of training. Drill sergeants and the system replaced parents and other authority figures young men and women had known as civilians. The military system isolated the new trainees from the civilian world, forcing them to focus their attention upon the immediate functions and needs of the military, and turning them into obedient soldiers willing to unquestionably die for their country. Placed in the strange and often hostile environment of boot camp, trainees banded together for their own emotional survival against an immediate common enemy: the drill sergeant. A sense of camaraderie and single identity began to form among the young trainees and they began working together as a unit. Paul Atwood recalls:

> The first process at Parris Island was to strip away your identity and reduce you to identical cogs in a machine, insofar as that was possible. So, literally we were stripped naked, we had our hair zapped right off. We were just shells of human beings. And the senior drill instructor walked up and down and said in a terrifying voice, "There are no niggers in this platoon, there are no spics, there are no wops, there are no kikes, there are no poor white whatever, there are none of those. You are all fucking maggots and maggots you will remain until you've earned the right to call yourself United States Marines." That had an effect on me.

An irony of U.S. military training is the animosity felt by the trainee for the system versus the loyalty toward the country which the system serves. The GIs saw in the drill sergeant an immediate enemy who made daily life miserable. The drill sergeant saw this bonding as the prime reason for military training. In the end, both the trainee and the drill sergeant submerged their mutual hostility in the realization that the training was all for a common good: fighting a greater enemy (in this case the Vietnamese communists).

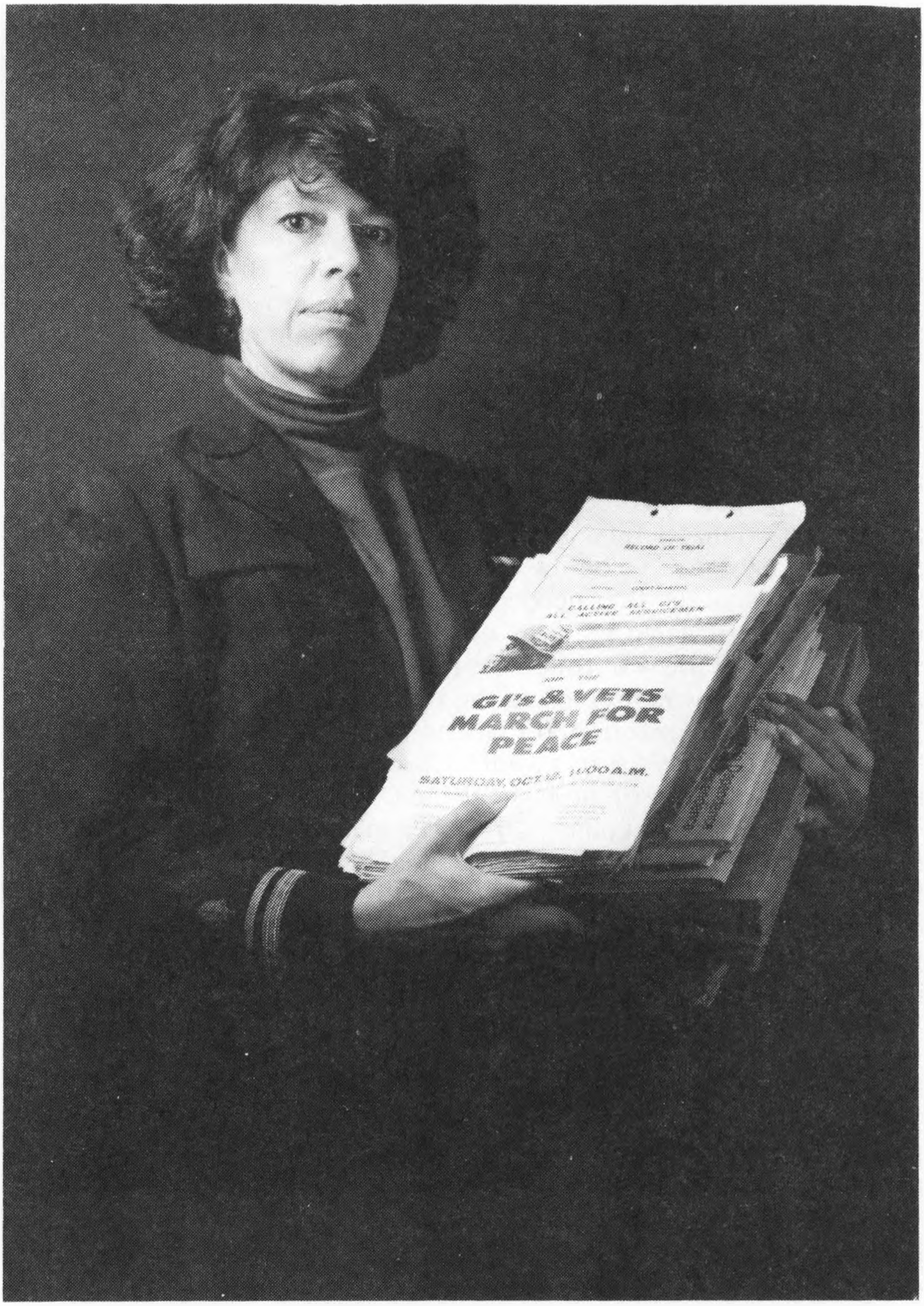
For those not already skeptical and mistrustful when they entered the service, disaffection and disillusionment with the military and the war often began during training. For others it came after they were assigned to their duty stations, whether in Vietnam or elsewhere. Dave Cline, a combat veteran and winner of the Purple Heart, recalls:

> In training they gave you basically two things: you were going over there to help the people of South Vietnam fight against communist aggression, or you were going over to kill commies. My background made me definitely be against the idea that I'm going over to kill commies, so I sort of latched onto we were there to help people. But when I got to Vietnam it really didn't take me but about one day in-country to realize that all the helping people wasn't true. The first thing they tell you is you can't trust any of them, they're gooks, they're not human beings, they're all your enemy.

Despite the intense indoctrination of boot camp, many young soldiers eventually questioned the necessity and morality of American policy in Vietnam. Faced with the dilemma of "servie to ountry" (which meant serving in the military), or following their consciences, they ame to oppose the war, and often took the chance of severing ties with family members and friends back home. Antiwar soldiers risked the hostility of their fellow soldiers and the harsh reaction of the military, an authoritarian social institution which often regarded dissent as "un-Americcan," cowardly and potentially life-threatening to combat units. The military punishment of dissident soldiers included extra work, transfers (often to dangerous areas of the war zone), constant harassment, courts-martial (often for dubious infractions), dishonorable discharges and imprisonment. Some resisters claim they were beaten and tortured by military authorities and that attempts were made on their lives.

When they got out of the military, some resistance veterans threw themselves into the antiwar movement, others remained silent about their military background, fearing retribution, and only in recent years have they begun to speak out about their experience. The veterans whose stories are presented here were profoundly changed and radicalized by their experiences as dissenting soldiers, and to this day, many former GI resisters remain committed and active in political, social justice and community causes.

A Matter of Conscience is an ongoing project. We are still looking for resisters to interview, information about acts of resistance, and archival materials, such as GI newspapers and photographs. Persons interested in the exhibit are invited to contact us.


RECORD OF TRIAL
CALLING ALL GI'S
ALL ACTIVE SERVICEMEN
GI's & VETS
MARCH FOR
PEACE
SATURDAY, OCT 12, 11:00 A.M.

Former Navy Nurse Susan Schnall holds her court martial documents, including one of the posters she dropped from an airplane onto the deck of the *U.S.S. Enterprise*.

SUSAN SCHNALL, 11 DECEMBER 1988

My father was killed during the second World War, in 1945 on Guam in the Pacific. He died a hero: they landed on the beachhead, he went back a number of times, even though he was wounded, to save the men under his command. It practically destroyed my mother when he was killed. She terribly resented the military for taking him. That's the image of war and the military I grew up with and because of that I had a very personal involvement against war and against suffering.

When I went for my Navy physical I wore a peace necklace and I remember the doctor asking me why I was wearing it. I said, because I'm against war. The recruiter told me if I were ever in Vietnam and there was a Vietnamese soldier who needed to be taken care of, I could take care of that person. So there was not supposed to be any problem against war. My rationalization for going into the Navy was to undo the damage the United States was doing abroad. These young kids were sent overseas and shot up; they needed good care, and that's what I was going to do. But there was a point at which it was obvious that I had to do something about the war, that I was no longer patching up people to feel better, but that I was promoting the war machine.

In 1968 I heard about the GI and Veterans March for Peace in San Francisco for October 12th. I went to the meetings, and got posters and leaflets and put them up on base at the Oaknoll Naval Hospital, where I was stationed. We put posters up in the middle of the night and within an hour they were all down. I remembered hearing about B-52 bombers dropping leaflets on the Vietnamese, urging them to defect. I thought if the United States can do that in Vietnam, then why can't I do it here. We had a friend who was a pilot, and my husband and a Vietnam vet and I loaded up the airplane with those leaflets promoting the peace march.

We loaded up the plane and the press was called to expect us over various areas in the San Francisco Bay area. We made a couple of trial runs; one didn't turn out so well. At a couple of thousand feet up, we opened the door to the airplane to let the leaflets out and the plane dropped about a thousand feet! So we reloaded the plane and went back. We hit the Presidio, Oaknoll Naval Hospital, Treasure Island, Yerba Buena Island, the deck of the *U.S.S. Enterprise*. Then we landed and held a press conference and I said, "I did it." They asked me to go back in the airplane and get out again, so they'd have good footage. And they had an interview. They used all of the footage at my court martial—evidence I really was guilty.

That was Thursday and the March for Peace was on Saturday. I wore my uniform in the demonstration that I was told specifically not to do. A general Navy regulation stated you can't wear your uniform when you're speaking religious, partisan, political views publicly. I though, if General Westmoreland can wear his uniform before Congress asking for money for Vietnam, I can wear mine as a member of the Armed Forces speaking out against the war. I had as much right to freedom of speech as he does. I gave a speech and I knew when I got up to the microphones, one of these belongs to the Navy. But it didn't make a difference.

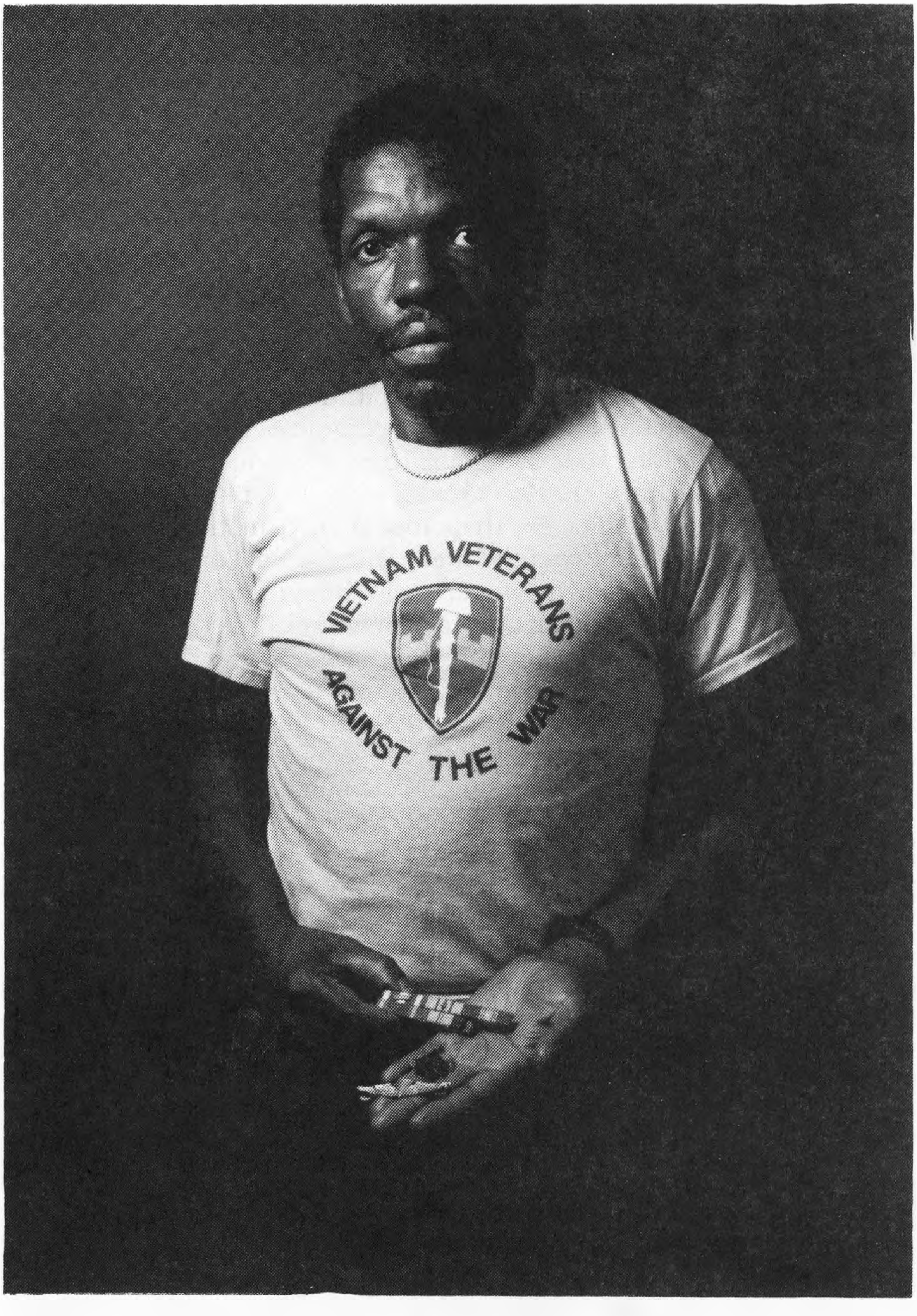
CLARENCE FITCH, 28 AUGUST 1988

My father was in the military in World War II, and even though he was in a segregated army, it was very much a part of his life experience. Being a veteran wasn't something that was looked down on, it was one of the few things black men had that they could hold up as being honorable, as being accepted, as being proof that you had just as much right to anything that was going to be given out, even though you didn't get it all the time. That's why a lot of the hostility and resentment came, because they didn't get their just due. But they did get some things out of it. My father went to mechanics' school on the GI bill. The house my mother lives in right now was bought on the GI bill. We probably would not have been able to do it without the GI bill. My father talked about his personal experiences in the war all the time. I could tell you where he was stationed because he told us a thousand times. He made us sit down and listen to the stories, but he didn't really elaborate on the negatives and the racism.

As a black GI in Vietnam in 1967 things were changing. Things going on in the States affected our behavior there. Some of the same black consciousness, the whole black power movement, was taking place there too. We were growing Afros, expressing ourselves through ritualistic handshakes, black power handshakes, African beads, hanging around in cliques, trying to eat up as much of the black music as we could get our hands on. We kind of segregated ourselves; we didn't want to integrate into what we considered the white man's war. For the first time I was looking at the enemy, not so much as the enemy, but as another minority, brown people. The North Vietnamese reminded us of it too.

People started really trying to educate themselves about how the war started, where the war was going. We read a lot of the books, *Confessions of Nat Turner*, *Soul on Ice*, all of the black publications, *Ebony*, *Jet*, as much as we could see because we wanted to be a part of it. There was some nights we had twenty, thirty, fifty brothers hanging out. When we went into a mess hall we ate together in certain parts of the mess hall. They were trying to make us get haircuts, cut those Afros off, and people were going to jail to keep their hair. We tried to spend almost all of our time together, the Bloods in Vietnam, we tried to have all black hooches. The brass would try to prevent this, they would try to assign us to integrated hooches and stuff like that.

When I was put in the brig, it was like another awareness. Because the brig was like..., there were white Marines in the brig, but the


VIETNAM VETERANS
AGAINST THE WAR

Vietnam Veterans Against the War member Clarence Fitch holds his war medals.

overwhelming majority, was black, much like the jails were back in the World. It just made you more bitter, more conscious, more hard, more militant, gave you more of a reason for being what you were and to resist and to fight, and make sure you educated yourself and educated others.

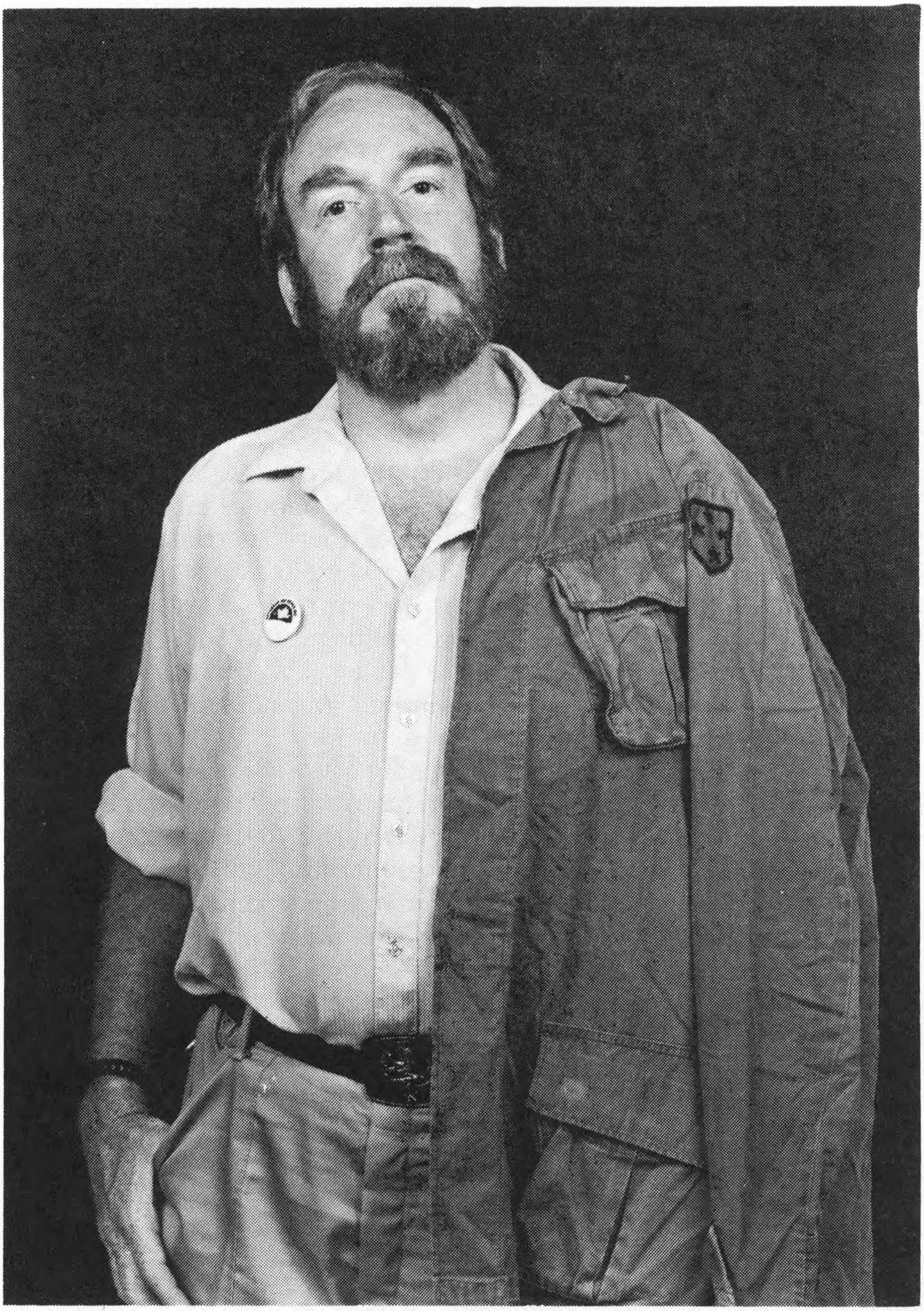
You laid down at night and there was just so much tension going through you, with all the racial stuff, the war itself and we were so young. But it felt like we were so much older. It felt like you had lived a long time. That year in Vietnam was like twenty years, you saw so much and witnessed so much.

JOHN TUMA, 15 AUGUST 1987

At my first duty station in Vietnam, a military intelligence [MI] detachment, I refused to work with South Vietnamese interpreters who were using physical coercion in order to extract "the truth" from North Vietnamese and Viet Cong soldiers. There were four or five ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam—the South] interpreters who were working with the MI unit. And although I was language trained in Vietnamese, it was standard operational procedure to have a Vietnamese interpreter with Americans in order to make sure no nuances of the language escaped anyone and maybe to check up on us.

The first person I was to interrogate was an NVA soldier who had been brought in during Operation Iron Mountain. I started doing basic debriefing of the individual and realized that the Vietnamese interpreter was pulling and twisting on the man's ear lobe and had it stretched down somewhere below his chin line. I told him to stop, and he did, only to start again after a few moments. I stopped the questioning and requested another Vietnamese interpreter and the same thing happened. I decided to end the debriefing session. My next interrogation was of a suspected Viet Cong from a small village on the Laotian border, who had been shot. We had nothing to show he had ever been a Viet Cong and I classified him as being civilian, possibly civilian defendant. The South Vietnamese I was working with trying to debrief the fellow, kept pinching off his IV tubes while we were talking. I told him several times to stop, but it was totally out of my control. I tried using three other Vietnamese interpreters after that and they also abused the prisoner; either cutting off his IV or pulling and twisting on his ear lobe or twisting a handful of flesh from his side in order to create pain. I refused to work with them. As a result, I was transferred out of the MI detachment.

I was later asked to interpret at the evacuation of a refugee camp and was sent in unarmed to an area with several South Vietnamese from the Province Recon Unit. I felt something was wrong, very, very wrong. I was told we were looking for a woman and some children who were supposed to be on the farthest edge of the village. We got to the village edge and they told me it was just a little further. We went through the tree line, and still further. I realized they were acting very nervous and



John Tuma risked death by protesting the torture of Vietnamese prisoners.

suspicious. They ran forward to a small ravine and I started running back. When I got to the edge of the village I heard gunfire behind me. The fire was directed at me; they were not supposed to bring me back alive. Earlier I had reported the use of a "birdcage" (a cage constructed of barbed wire wrapped around a captive and then hung in a tree) in a Vietnamese compound and they were forced to take it down. Shortly after this incident my hooch was fragged with a percussion grenade.

I was threatened with court-martial several times, but I always thought about what would my parents have done. What would be the right thing to do, not from the Army's point of view, but from my family's and my community's. I consciously thought about that and came to the conclusion there were things I had been raised not to do and couldn't and wouldn't do.

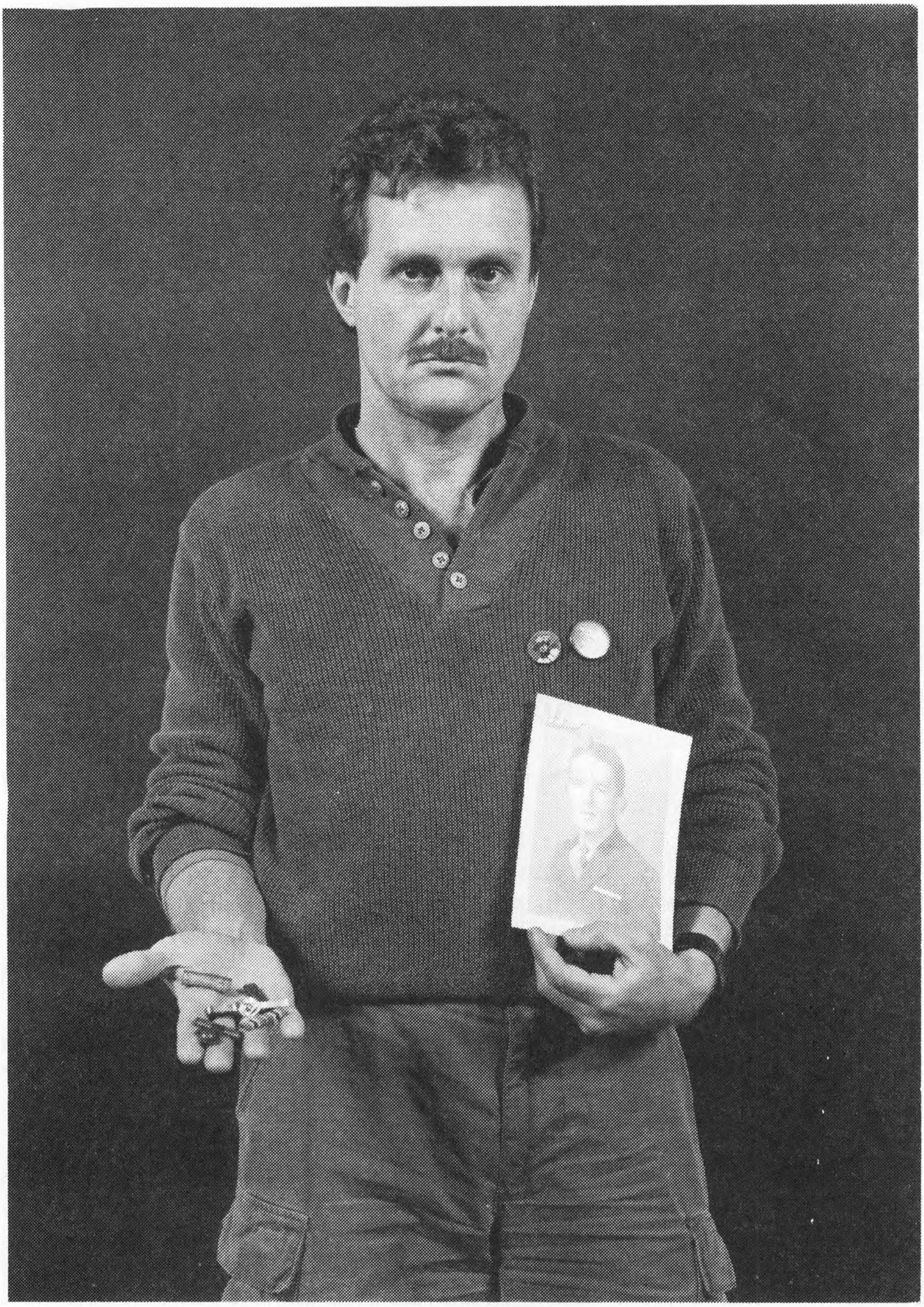
Paul Atwood, 10 December 1986

I was born immediately after the Second World War. I always think I was born in the shadow of the bomb, and there was never a time in my childhood when I thought that men didn't go to war. My father was a perfect example of a modern day warrior, and I thought he never looked better than he did when he was in his uniform. Once I knew my father had been in the Marine Corps, I always knew that I was going to go in the Marine Corps some day.

When I was a kid my father kept these medals and ribbons and other Marine Corps paraphernalia in a little cigar box that he had tucked away in the back corner of his dresser. My brothers and I used to visit that little cigar box as though it were a shrine, in which these magic talismans were. I never tired of going there and opening the cover, tingling with anticipation, looking once again. I guess I saw them as badges of courage and of honor, and there was never a time in my childhood that I doubted whether I would myself wear these emblems and earn these badges.

After I refused to go to Vietnam, I wanted only to get rid of them, to forget about them, forget what they had once meant to me. I was angry at the time because, at least in that period of my life, I felt that every symbol I once valued as a symbol of something good and decent, was not in my mind a symbol of its opposite. And I think I wanted to be rid of the ties that still bound me to my father; I have to say that I wanted to be rid of his disapproval.

It's only been in the last five years or so that I've been able to pick these things up. You know, it's funny that I even have some of them. I threw virtually everything I had away, but there were some things I kept. But I never looked at them until five years ago. It's funny, I began going to that little corner of my own life, one by one pulling out some things; I guess a kind of talisman again. To pick, for instance, this globe and anchor; to pick that up was like picking up something radioactive. I



Former Marine Corpsman Paul Atwood holds his father's World War Two medals and a photograph of his father.

didn't know what it meant to me. I know that it still meant something deep, but I was afraid of it because, even now looking at it, I get that old sense of patriotism. There's nothing wrong with love of country, but I get afraid of where that feeling leads; into a mindless, unquestioning, uncritical acceptance of policy by governmental leaders that got us involved in Vietnam in the first place.

Without exception, the people I knew who had gone to Vietnam felt they were doing something honorable. But many people would say to me it was the most fucked up thing they have ever done in their lives and wish they could get it out of their sleep, their nightmares. And in that sense, I felt I had made the right decision. I knew from listening to them that I would have been—if I survived at all—a complete basket case. I also felt convinced that my analysis of the war was correct; that it was not a self-serving one to justify my own behavior, but it was real. A more fucked up war couldn't be imagined. And it was clear to me that the Vietnam veteran was being scapegoated for the war, that collectively the United States had called upon vets to go and do something and then had turned its back on them afterwards.

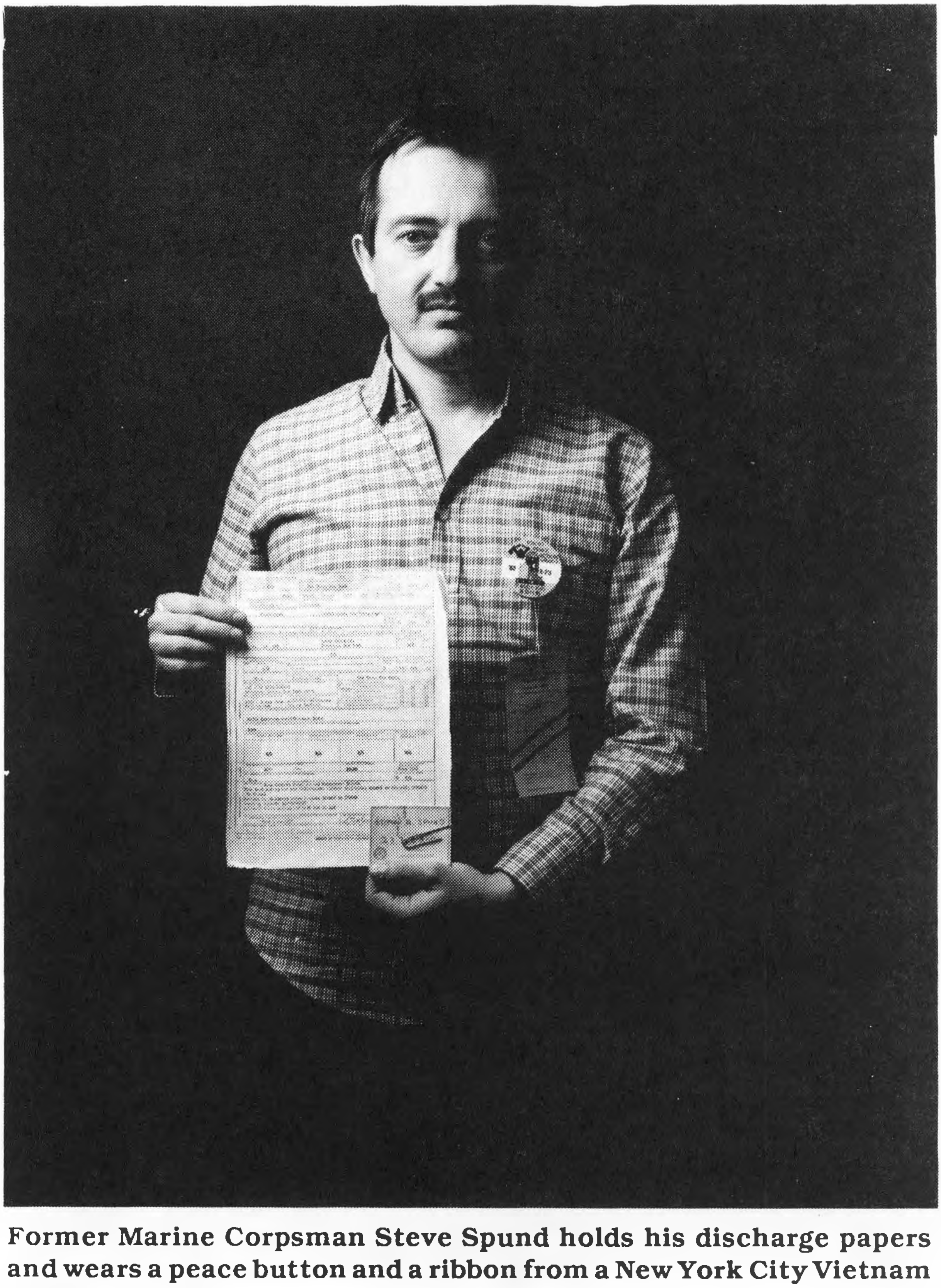
STEVE SPUND, 14 JANUARY 1989

I told my family I was on thirty day leave. But after thirty days were up, my father became suspicious and knew something was wrong. A short time after the thirty day period, I was awakened by the police. My father had called the police and reported me.

They took me to this compound at the Brooklyn Navy Yard with barbed wire fence, jagged glass on top of the high walls and one main door in the front with Marine guards at the door. They asked me if I would consent to going back. I said sure. I probably would have said anything to get out of the Marine barracks at that point. So, remarkably enough, they gave me a bus ticket and told me to go back to North Carolina. I didn't go back, I went home to my parent's house, hoping for more time to think of something. It wasn't too long later before my father turned me in again. This time the MPs came.

They took me to the Naval Brig and I started to get worked over by the Marine guards. You'd be stripped of all your clothing, they take your unmentionables and put them through the bars and hit them or stretch them or choke you until you're white or out of air. They usually tried to do things that would not leave bruises or blood. They called you the lowest thing on earth, but not just terms that they might use in boot camp to break you down, this was of a personal nature to them, 'cause usually these Marine guards had done at least one tour of duty and they'd seen a lot of their buddies die. And you were the worst thing on earth.

Two of these guards told me this was my last weekend, that they were going to kill me. I checked around with other prisoners and quite



Former Marine Corpsman Steve Spund holds his discharge papers and wears a peace button and a ribbon from a New York City Vietnam veterans parade.

a few of them told me that they hung a few Marines and made it look like suicide. I couldn't believe at first that anyone would do that to another American, or another Marine. but they assured me it was so, and at that point, I wasn't going to take any chances. I started to believe that they'd sooner see me dead at their hands than free at mine.

I was faced with another tough choice. One was going back to North Carolina and then to Vietnam, or take my own life. I decided that was the right thing to do. They took us to the PX to get a shave kit and all that other kind of stuff. They were supposed to take out the blades from the shave kits, but the guards were busy and I took the moment to put a package of blades in my pockets. There was one Marine guard that wasn't crazy like these other two and I told him if he could to get in touch with the chaplain or the rabbi, that I wanted last rites. He came back and said they were both unavailable and for a while I felt that this was it, I was going to do it, 'cause the next day the other guards were coming back on duty. Unexpectedly a visiting psychiatrist heard what I was up to. He came in and saw my condition and knew I was going to do it. He sent me to St. Albans Hospital in Queens, for observation in the psychiatric ward.

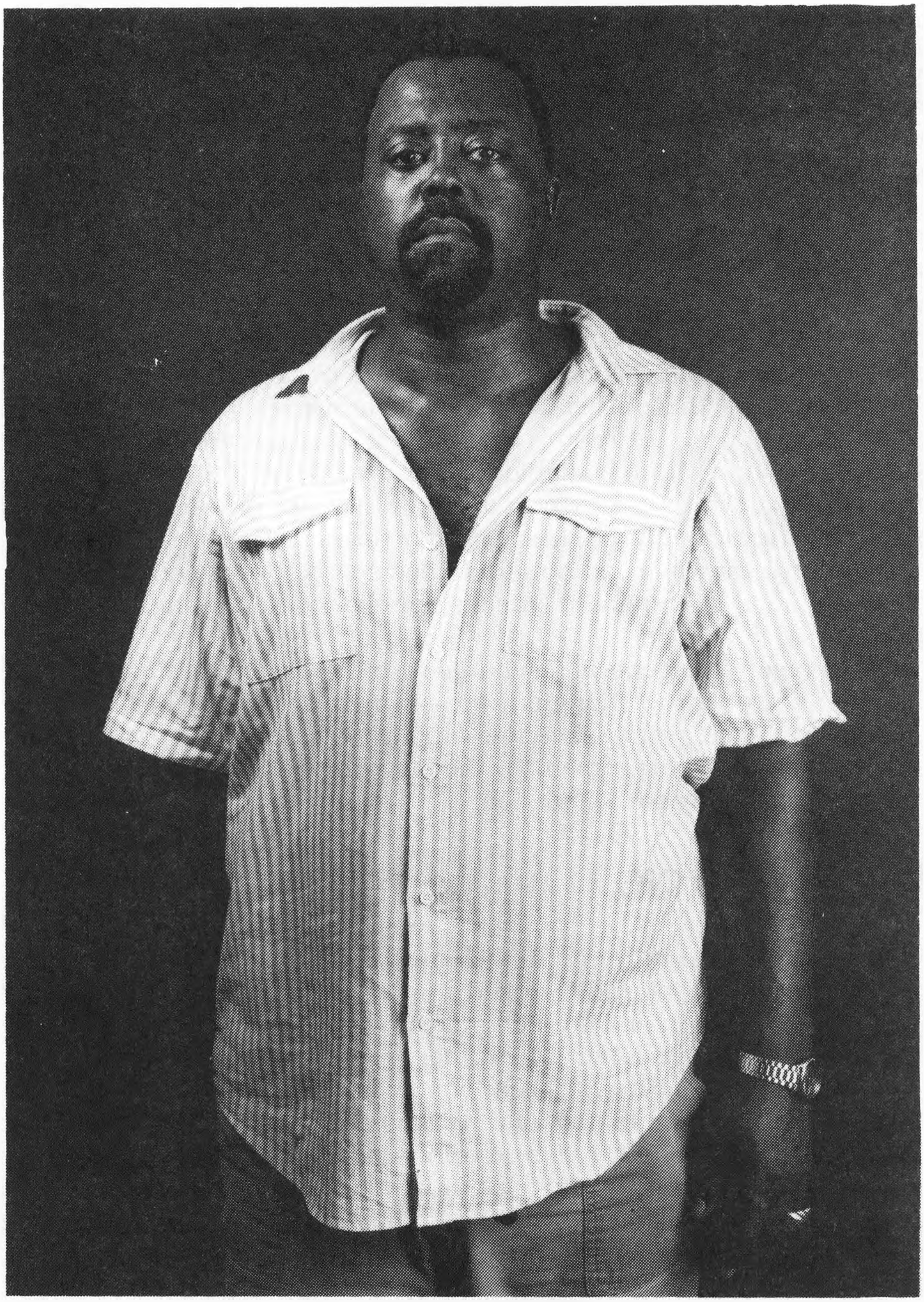
I received a general discharge with honorable conditions at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. I thought it was strange, not only to be back there again, but the sergeant asked me—and he was serious—if I would like to enlist again. I don't remember the vulgarity I used, but I'm sure I let him know that I wasn't interested.

GREG PAYTON, 13 AUGUST 1988

I was in a supply unit in Vietnam located in Long Binh. We went out on the field depot and I worked a location deck. What they told us was, is if we come in and do the right thing in the beginning, that we're doing the menial jobs now and as other groups come in they will get the jobs and we will get a better situation. So I accepted that for words. So in the beginning we had a lot of dirty jobs: burning feces, cleaning out urine pits and all kind of different things. But what I began to notice is that a lot of white recruits were coming in and they weren't getting the same assignments I was getting. It seemed like we was always pulling up the short end of the stick.

One time the first sergeant was talking about these gooks or something, and I replied, "Yea, the gook is the same thing as a nigger." It was like a light went off, it was a real revelation. I was naive about a lot of things. I had to develop a racist attitude. I never was raised with that. The first sergeant told me I was a smart nigger, that's just what he said.

One incident that really opened my eyes was with a white GI named Muncey, from Kentucky. He was really a typical super artificial macho guy. A group of Vietnamese kids came up to our truck as we were



In Vietnam, Greg Payton concluded that a "gook is the same thing as a nigger."

coming back from guard duty. We had food and stuff and we'd feed the people out in the field. We had leftover food, bushels of apples and oranges and stuff. These kids came up to the truck begging and you could see it in their faces, these kids had that I'm hungry, feed me, kind of look. So Muncey says look at these gook kids and he took a bite out of an apple and threw it in the dirt and about four or five kids dove on it. It was just like when you drop a piece of bread in the fish tank. It just really set me off. I damn near threw him out of the truck and it was still moving. I was brought up on charges for that.

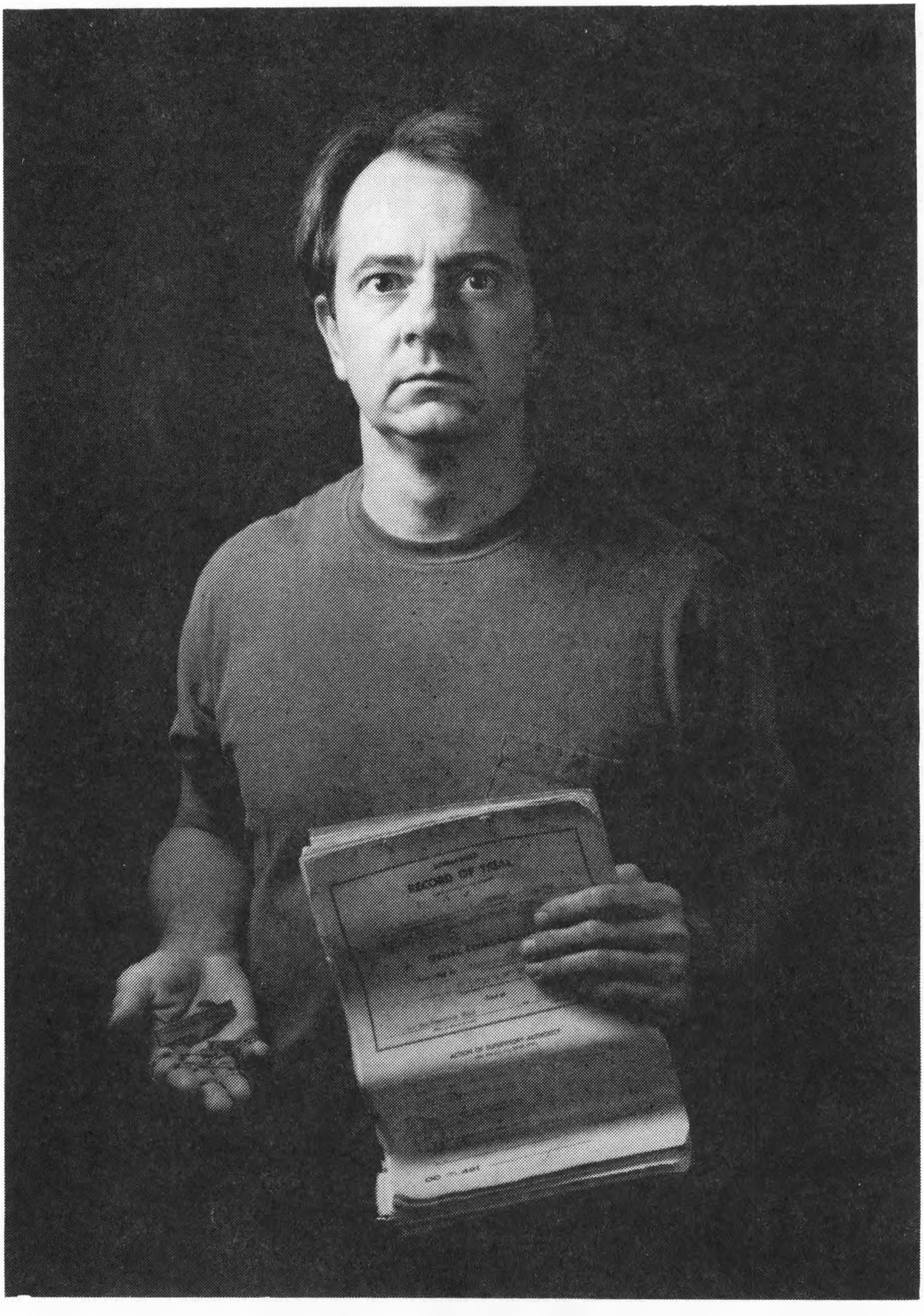
I had three courts-martial and I went to the stockade and it was all these black people, all these brothers. That blew my mind. After I'd been in the stockade about two months, I made it to minimum-security and I had a work detail. I used to bring in kerosene to burn the feces with. Some guys got together and said they were going to have a riot in the stockade. They asked me to bring in an extra can of kerosene every other day so they couldn't see build-up. So I did. It started in minimum-security but they went to maximum-security and broke the locks and let everybody out. They picked 12:00 because that's when the guards change and most of them were eating in the mess hall. They broke the gate, broke the lock, let everybody out of maximum-security, and started burning the hooches and what not. There was a lot of chaos. A lot of people got hurt and I imagine some people got killed. I remember seeing white guys, in particular, and guards getting beat up with bunk adapters. If you were white you were in trouble, whether you was a good guy or a bad guy.

I've never been as violent as I was in Vietnam. There was a lot of rage; it just began to build and build. I did so many things that were unnecessary and hurt some people and it really wasn't their fault. But I had to take it out somewhere, I had to vent this anger in some way. Today I work on not becoming violent, I'm scared of violence.

Bill Short, 30 August 1987

I served with the Blue Spaders 1 BN 26 INF First Infantry Division, otherwise known as the "Bloody Red One" from February, 1969, to July, 1969. I was an infantry platoon sergeant with Mike platoon in Alpha Company. My "tour of duty" was cut short by my own volition.

My unit patrolled the Michelin rubber plantation, operating in company strength by day and splitting up into platoon size ambushes for the night. We usually spent three to five days doing this before we rested in a fire support base for a couple of days. Whenever we made contact or blew an ambush the body count came next. I would never view the bodies, I was afraid to. I didn't want to know what I was doing. So when the guys would say, "Hey Sarge, we got to check out the dead gooks," I always made up some excuse. I knew it was my responsibility



Former platoon sergeant Bill Short holds his court-martial documents, CIB (Combat Infantrymen's Badge) and a peace symbol attahed to a string rosary he wore in Vietnam.

as platoon sergeant to be on top of all situations, but somehow the body count was something I had no desire to be part of. After a firefight I felt drained and empty, it seemed pointless, our battles were never decisive and tomorrow always came with the welcome of surviving one day only to have to face another. The last thing I wanted to do was count bloody body parts so we could compete with the Second of the Twenty-Eight, the Black Lions, our sister battalion, for first place in the division. I carried my weapon and fired many rounds through it, but I always felt protected against taking another life because twenty or eighty other guys fired too. For years after the war, when people would ask the inevitable question, did you kill anyone, I always answered I don't know: but in reality I did.

On one company size operation we broke for a rest at midday. My RTO [radio telephone operator], because he had a feeling, put his claymore mine out, something we only did for ambush. Halfway through our lunch all hell broke loose. Barney blew his claymore, and after a three hour firefight things were calm again. The attack came from three Viet Cong, two of which we got. When the body count came I went for the first time to see the remains. Both VC had been killed by the blast from one of our grenades, and as I approached the first thing I noticed was a piece of bone protruding from the hand of one of the bodies. It seemed to glow white hot, I thought it was the brightest thing I had ever seen. The next thing I noticed was how heavy the body seemed to my eyes. It looked as if it were glued to the ground. One of the new NCOs [non-commissioned officers], a staff sergeant and second timer, decided we should booby trap the bodies and he asked for my help. We rolled them over and pulled the secondary pins on two grenades, leaving the primary detonation lever in place. Each grenade was placed, lever side up and under the rib cage beneath the dead men. Later that night, while positioned in a company size ambush, I heard the grenades go off. I knew the comrades of the men we had killed had come to claim the bodies and quite possibly had gotten something extra to go with their grief. I *knew* I was responsible for taking human life. Two months later I refused to go out on any more combat missions.

HOWARD LEVY, 15 JANUARY 1989

I was part of a plan whereby doctors could defer being called into the Army to allow them to finish whatever specialty training they were doing. I really didn't want to go into the military, it just seemed that since they were drafting young doctors, I was going to go whether I liked it or not, so I might as well go on my terms. At the time I made the commitment, the war in Vietnam was just a little blip. As the war began to escalate, and my time to go, which was '65, began to draw near, my opinion about the war changed drastically. By now there was no question where I was coming from with regard to Vietnam. The only question was, what the hell do I do about it? I went into the Army figuring number one, I'll buy time. Number two, I worked it out so I would be sent down South, where I figured I could at least do some civil rights stuff that I'd been wanting to do anyhow. And number three, I figured I'll draw the line somewhere. I knew where that was going to be—when they ordered me to go to Vietnam.

I was stationed at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, where I ran a clinic, and every night and on weekends, I would go to the town of Prosperity to work with an organization that was registering blacks to vote. At some point the Army assigned some Green Beret guys to me and I was supposed to train them in some aspect of dermatology. I did that for a number of months, which really allowed me to get to know them. The more I got to know them, the more upsetting some of their stories became. I reached a point when I just said, "Look, I've figured this out and I can't train you guys anymore." I said, "I don't really want you in the clinic, so let's not make a big fuss about it, but I want you to leave." And they did. Each month a new guy would come and I'd give him the same schpiel. That went on for a number of months.

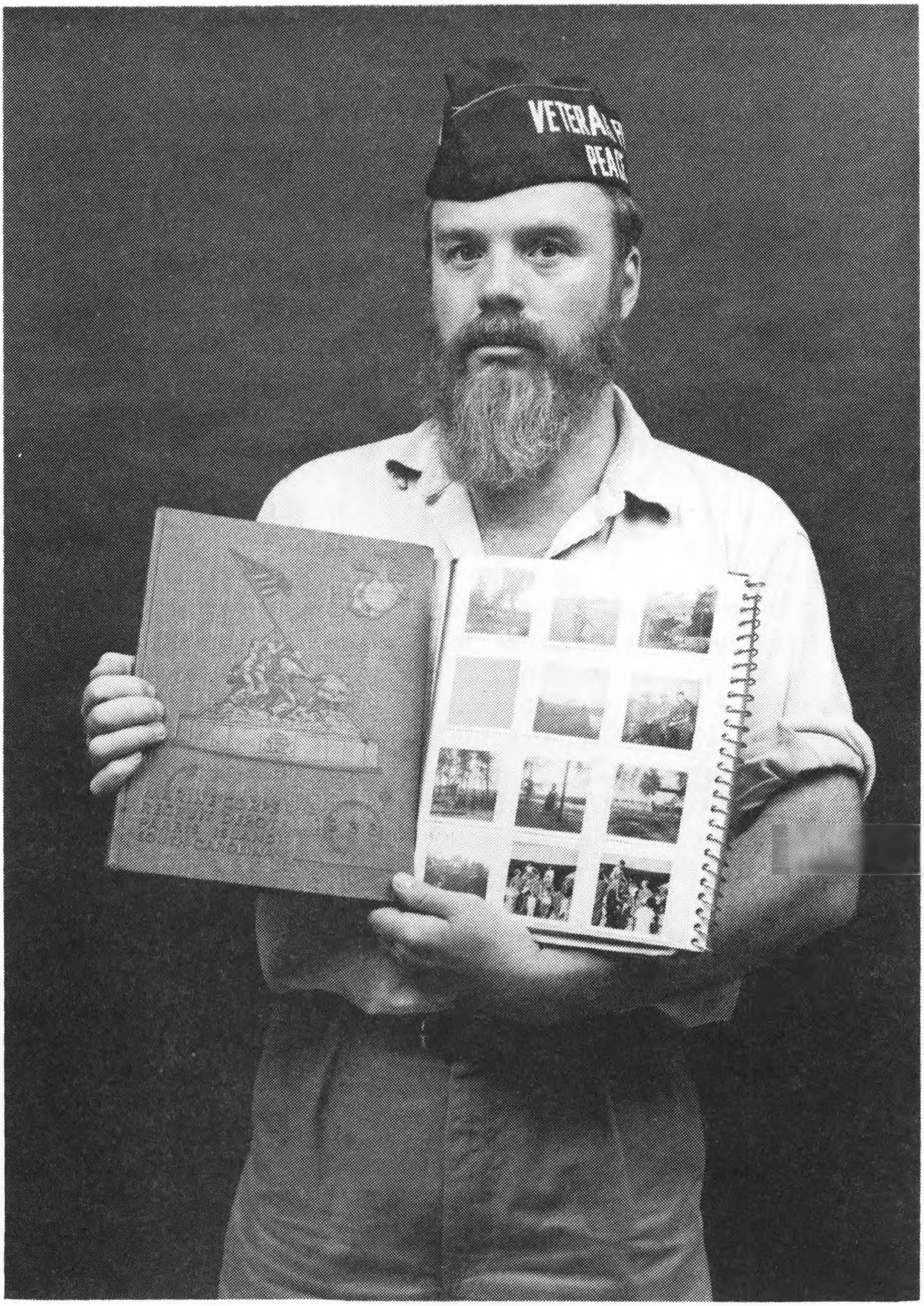
By the time charges were brought against me, I only had another two or three months in the Army. It turns out from the trial testimony, military intelligence knew of my activities within days, maybe hours of me arriving in Prosperity. But actually they had been tracing me from my days when I was involved in some Socialist Worker Party stuff, before I went in the Army. My CO [Commanding Officer] was only going to give me a slap on the wrist until they threw the intelligence report on his desk, which detailed the fact that I was a fucking Communist. That's basically what it said. He then decided it was going to be court martial.

We tried to put the war on trial, but the military court said the truth is no defense. Another defense we used was medical ethics, saying the real objection to training the Green Berets is they were using medicine as just another propaganda tool. If you had a bunch of kids in a poor village in Vietnam, and you gave them a shot of penicillin and cured them of their impetigo and suddenly they looked much healthier and didn't have ugly skin things all over their goddamn body, you would probably make some friends in town. That strikes me as illegitimate because it can be taken away as easily as it can be given. That's not a basis for doing medicine.

I was sentenced to three years in prison. The only shock was it wasn't nine.

STEVE FOURNIER, 17 AUGUST 1987

I volunteered to go to Vietnam. I wanted to be there, I thought it was the right thing, that we should go and protect democracy. I believed in the Domino Theory and that Cardinal Spellman was right when he said, "Kill a Commie for Christ." My mother and father were both in the Navy during World War II and there was a lot of pride in military service in my family. I was proud of being a marine and fighting for my country.


VETERANS FOR PEACE

Steve Fournier holds his USMC boot camp book and his Vietnam war photo album.

My first night at Dong Ha I can remember being really excited looking out over the DMZ and seeing artillery fire start to walk in toward our positions, and saying, "This is wonderful, I'm really here, this is real war." The guy next to me, who had three more days left in-country, was lying on the bottom of the trench begging, "God not now, just three more days, God not now!" I looked at him and thought, "That's a marine?" The next thing I knew a round blew up one of the outposts and some guys were wounded. I saw, for the first time, the effects of war.

After three months I was hit by friendly artillery fire, medevacked to Guam for recovery and shipped back to Vietnam two months later. I went on a mine sweep through Con Thien that was a real living hell; it had been defoliated, napalmed, burned and constantly shelled by both sides. The death and destruction were nothing I ever could have imagined. That was the beginning of my new look at the war. I witnessed Vietnamese torturing other Vietnamese, marines cutting ears and penises of enemy bodies and displaying them proudly. I even saw an eight-year-old boy shot in the leg for saying, "Fuck you marine," and an eighty-year-old woman beaten by a marine with his rifle butt.

One night during a firefight I dragged in the body of a North Vietnamese lieutenant. I thought I heard him moaning, but when I reached him I found he was dead. I searched his body; he had a scapular medal around his neck and a holy card pinned inside his shirt. The holy card looked very much like the one I had from Catholic school when I was growing up. There was a picture of himself and a young woman with a priest in front of a Cathedral, evidently in Hanoi where he was married. He was obviously a Catholic like myself, and I thought, my God, *Catholics* are involved.

After being wounded a second time, I was sent to recuperate at Chelsea Naval Hospital where I was born. With only two weeks to go before being retired from the Marines, I went to a demonstration at Boston Common. For about an hour I listened, and then I finally got up the nerve, walked to the microphone area and with my Marine haircut said, "Look, I'm just back from Vietnam and I'd like to say something." There was a bit of hesitation, then I was introduced as a marine just returned from the war. The place got very, very quiet. I said, "I just wanted to tell you that myself and some other marines have been calling you people back here in the World a lot of lousy names and claiming that we'd like to do some terrible things to you and well.... I want to apologize. I think you're doing something wonderful for America and I'm proud to be here with you today." I got a wonderful ovation. I felt like, God, I'm home, I'm finally home.