Two months after I turned 18 I volunteered for Vietnam. I served there from November 1968 to November 1969. My unit was Company C, 2nd Battalion, 503d Infantry, 173d Airborne Brigade. Our area of operation was from Landing Zone (LZ) English, near the village of Bong Son, Binh Dinh Province.

Every day I spent in Vietnam something memorable happened. Life and death, sadness and happiness, joy and misery, bravery and cowardice, kindness and hate, and so much more.

When I returned from Vietnam a great deal of what I saw or heard became a very distant memory. Almost, as if it never happened.

Years later as I reflect upon those times, one thing I will always remember is that man has the capacity for absolute kindness and complete depravity. So, do not go beyond this page if you are looking for a “feel good” story because what follows is sad.

Aftermath of a firefight - In the foreground are hasty graves
I Still Don’t Know Why
(Does He Remember)

It was the pacification phase of the war and we were resettling villagers at the mouth of the An Loa valley, Binh Dinh Province. I remember that even in its devastation from previous battles, the valley was still a very beautiful place. But it continued to be a dangerous zone infiltrated with Viet Cong and North Vietnamese regulars who lived in the mountains surrounding the valley. Our mission during the day was to patrol the resettlement area. At nighttime we would set up ambush sites along the foothills from where the Viet Cong would infiltrate into the valley. It was a slow war of patrols, ambushes, and counter-ambushes. Of long, hot, sweltering days and nights. Sometimes tedious, sometimes boring, but always deadly.

One day I was in a tree line at the base of a hill at the outer fringes of the resettlement area near an infiltration route, which was just below the hill. I can’t remember where the rest of the patrol was, but I remember I was alone and leaning against a tree when all of a sudden a lone guerilla walked into my view. He was young, about my age, and wore a ragged shirt and dirty shorts. His legs were scarred from the knees down, which was typical of North Vietnamese soldiers who had trekked through the jungle from North Vietnam along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

He was about twenty feet ahead of me when I
stepped out of the tree line with my rifle raised against my right shoulder. I had him in my gun sight and was about to shoot him when our eyes met. We looked at each other and to this day I remember staring into the eyes of fear, resignation, life, and death.

Time stood still. Eventually I lowered my rifle and raised my left hand to him. “You VC,” I said several times. We stood staring at each other and then slowly, cautiously, all the time watching me, he continued walking back into the hills.

Even now, I don’t know why, but I let him go.

Sometimes I wonder if he is still alive and if so, does he remember that day?
Friendly Fire In The An Loa Valley

My father and I were in Mexico walking along a beach called Playa De Las Tortugas and it had now been almost 40 years since my time in Vietnam. As we walked along the beach I heard a distant roaring sound that initially seemed to be coming from the sky. I looked around several times, but saw nothing. The sound grew louder and louder and seemed to be coming from inland. All of a sudden, I spotted a prop-driven airplane resembling a World War II Spitfire flying at full throttle and just barley skimming the top of the palm trees. It bore down on us and then as it cleared the last line of coconut trees along the shore, it looped over and dropped down to about two feet above the water and continued along the coastline. That was quite a sight! This is an example of what I like about Mexico: Sometimes things happen here that are like a form of controlled anarchy. No one was calling the police, reporting aircraft tail numbers to the Federal Aviation Administration. There would be no investigation; no fines or suspensions; the pilot would not lose his license. If the plane had crashed into the ocean, people would have shrugged and left the wreckage there until time and the elements carted it away. This event reminded me of a time in Vietnam when my patrol was attacked by one of our own Huey helicopter gunships.

We were patrolling in the An Loa valley, which was a free-fire zone at the time. This meant that anything moving in that area was fair game and a target. Essentially, the people in that valley were
considered to be either Viet Cong or North Vietnamese. Many local villages had once dotted the valley, but since the government could not control the terrain, the “solution” was to empty the valley and relocate all its inhabitants. This must have been a tragedy for the poor farmers and locals, who had been living in and farming that valley for generations, just like their ancestors hundreds of years before. Anyway, if friendly forces were in the area there was supposed to be coordination with other friendly units to make sure we would not mistakenly fire on each other. Apparently, in our case one combat assault helicopter unit had not been informed that we would be patrolling in the valley. At the time of the incident there were about six of us walking in single file on top of a rice paddy dike. All of a sudden I heard explosions and looked to my left. Flying at treetop level and bearing down on us at full speed and firing away with aerial rockets was a helicopter gunship. It was so close that I could see the exhaust trail of rockets whizzing toward us, and the outline of the pilot and co-pilot looking down at us. I took a step to my right and rolled off the rice paddy dike, which provided me a two-foot earthen wall that shielded me from the exploding rockets. Several rockets flew overhead and hit the ground to my right, exploding and throwing their shrapnel forward. Shrapnel and explosions from rockets to my left were absorbed by the rice paddy dike, which saved our lives. Machine gun fire, shrapnel, explosions, and the smell of cordite engulfed us. And as I lay there I wondered if I would have to try to shoot down the helicopter gunship to save our lives. Instead, I threw
several smoke grenades hoping that the pilot would figure out that we were American friendly forces. Luckily, he did and as quickly as the helicopter had appeared, it left us there in the mud. We were stunned, and silent in both our disbelief and in our prayers to God. Everything had happened in a matter of seconds, but it felt like a lifetime. After the gunships flew away we resumed our patrol and nothing more was said about the incident.

So, that is how friendly fire casualties occur in the haze of battle and war. There were several other similar incidents that occurred during my time in Vietnam; in one case, one of my comrades died in my arms. His name was Ayers.

Huey gunship firing rockets

Click onto below web link for a short video on the use of Huey helicopters in Vietnam

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RISrJKp__Yo
An Loa Valley, Binh Dinh Province, Vietnam
May 21, 2000: On the way to work I stopped at Red’s for a cup of coffee and a glazed donut. I picked up a copy of the Monterey County Herald newspaper and saw a small note from the editor in the lower corner of the front page. It asked for Vietnam War veterans to submit recollections of their experiences for a special section in the newspaper on Memorial Day. I don’t know why and to this day it amazes me, but as clear as crystal a sentence formed in my mind. And I knew I would send it to the newspaper. When I got to my office, I sent an e-mail to Andy Rose, the paper’s editor. The e-mail said, “His name was Ayers, and he died in my arms.”

Andy called me and said he thought that that one sentence spoke volumes and was very powerful. I felt the same way.
That one sentence was featured in a Vietnam Veterans’ recollection series in the Monterey County Herald on May 27, 2000.

In May 2001, I called Andy several weeks before Memorial Day and told him that if he was interested, I would share my recollection of the circumstances of that tragic night.

Little did I know that the article Andy would write was going to reveal a painful truth that I had not been aware of since Ayers’ death.

Published Sunday, May 27, 2001 – Monterey County Herald

A face etched in soldier’s memory

Into the Bong Son Valley they walked, one by one, spaced just far enough apart so that one
coming down from the hills for raids and food. Then they set up Claymore mines and crawled into cover to wait for someone to stumble across their trap. It was a game of watch-and-be-watched. In fact knowing that the enemy was out there, the Americans in the Bong Son Valley would often go out, set up their ambush, wait a short while, then move somewhere else. Cat and mouse. All night long.

On this night, the six Americans taking their turn decided not to follow orders, at least not to the letter. This was the era of Vietnamization - the gradual pullout of U.S. troops and the handing over of all combat and strategy decisions to the South Vietnamese. In the Bong Son Valley, the new program was put into force in this way - each ambush unit would consist of three Americans and three South Vietnamese working together.

One problem: the Americans spoke no Vietnamese, and their counterparts spoke no English. Some of the U.S. soldiers also worried that some of the SVA men might be communist sympathizers. So, rather than split up and risk being cut off as a three-man unit, the Americans decided to pool their resources. They would go out on patrol but stay together, then radio in and confirm two ambush locations, instead of one. That was fine with Alex Kerekes, a young Canadian who joined the U.S. Army in a John Wayne and Vic Morrow-fueled search for military glory, then volunteered for Vietnam.
The communication problem was symbolic of a lack of knowledge further up the command chain, he figured, and the 19-year-old had no desire to die. Kerekes, who is now the Presidio of Monterey police chief, recalled that night in a recent interview. It was the first time he has publicly acknowledged the truth of what happened. Not that it preys on him. He doesn't have nightmares, and he's a well-adjusted man with a family and a successful career. But it's always there. It's a memory that many veterans of Vietnam and other wars carry with them. Some unburden themselves; others deal with it and carry on. But none of them ever forget. Kerekes remembers many details, and others come rushing to him suddenly as he tells the tale. One thing he can't forget is the face and the last breath of a man he knew only as Ayers, a young man from Chicago, who was a soldier in the other ambush unit. Kerekes carried the unit's radio, along with an M-79 grenade launcher, which fired a 40-mm grenade. They set out into the valley, moving quietly as night fell. Ayers and two other Americans led the way, followed by three SVA soldiers, then Kerekes' team, including the leader, a man from Jackson, Miss., named Tomlinson, followed by the other three Vietnamese. There must have been no moon, because it was soon as black as a cave. "As we started walking, it got dark pretty quick, a lot darker than expected. It got so dark, you could barely see the person in front of you," he said. "Unbeknownst to us, we got separated." Nobody realized what had happened. The first six men walked straight down the trail, while Kerekes and the others moved onto a section that branched
off before curving back to the main path. At some point, the first patrol realized they had lost the trailing group. They turned around. Meanwhile, the others had rejoined the trail. Now two groups of heavily armed men marched toward each other in the middle of a coal-black night.

Kerekes remembers coming to a spot where he could see a thick hedgerow that ran through the brush and crossed over the path, creating a leafy natural archway. "All of a sudden I see Tomlinson," Kerekes said. "He gets down to a crouch and he starts firing." The night air crackled to life with blasts and the ring of bullets and the sounds of men crying out. Kerekes' hand went to his weapon. "The M-79 I was carrying in the open position," he recalled. "I remember clicking it shut. I got an M-79 round off and it hit the hedgerow. ... Then I run up and I see Tomlinson aiming his machine gun, with someone lying on the ground, and he's firing three- or four-round bursts. He's trying to shoot someone. "Every time he fires this burst I could see this body rolling around on the ground. And this person kept rolling and rolling to get away from the bullets." That person finally rolled off the trail and into a rice dike. As quickly as it started, it stopped, and the first thing everyone realized was that the voices in the dark were Americans. The man in the rice dike was a soldier they'd nicknamed Gomer. By some miracle, none of Tomlinson's bullets had struck home, although Gomer's leg was injured in the fall. Ayers weren't as lucky. "I heard someone yelling, 'Ayers is hit, Ayers is hit,'" Kerekes said. The reality began to emerge - that this was a friendly-fire incident -
along with the realization that they couldn't report it that way. They were already disobeying orders. How would they explain this? "I immediately got on the radio and I called in," he said. "I realized we couldn't tell them the truth. We couldn't tell them the truth, so I called in to the battalion and I said ... 'We've been ambushed and we have a man down.' "I could hear people working on Ayers and I could hear them say, 'He's not breathing, he's not breathing.' And I'm calling, saying, 'We need a Medevac, we've got a man down.'" Headquarters quickly put a helicopter in the air but then they started asking questions - "What's the force that attacked you? What kind of weapons are they using?" Before he could answer, Tomlinson got on the radio, and in a transmission punctuated with obscenity, told headquarters to quit asking questions and get off the air. Kerekes got back in touch with the helicopter crew. He told them they'd been ambushed and they had taken automatic weapons fire. The pilot said he planned to wait for helicopter gunships to arrive and provide cover. Kerekes nixed that plan, telling the pilot, "You can't wait. Ayers is going to die." The pilot told him to prepare to ignite flares to mark the landing zone.

Kerekes could hear the rotor blades, and as he peered into the night, he saw a silvery flare arch through the night at the opposite end of the valley. In the light, he could see the helicopter, and he watched as it turned toward the flare. He grabbed the radio. "Abort, abort. It's an ambush," he said, just in time to warn the pilot and crew - the enemy had monitored the transmission and
tried to lure the helicopter to the wrong site. Kerekes lit two flares one by one and tossed them high above the rice paddy, the only place where the helicopter could touch down. They both hit the water and went out, but his third and final flare stayed lit, and the aircraft was soon down and waiting to take Ayers out. Two other soldiers lifted the injured man and scrambled into the rice paddy. But they bogged down in waist-high mud. Kerekes tore off his radio pack and followed them in. Somehow, he managed to stay free, picking up Ayers and carrying him in his arms to the Medevac. "As I ran up I said to the medic, 'He can't breathe, he can't breathe,' and that's when he died. I didn't know that he died at the time, but as I was handing him over, there was what they call the death gurgle. There's a distinct sound when a person breathes his last breath," he said. "As I gave him to the helicopter and they started flying away, I hadn't realized that he had died in my arms, but I could hear the transmissions, and I heard the pilot say, 'We're inbound with a DOA.' "And it still hadn't hit me, and I remember saying out loud, 'What's that mean - DOA?' And then Gomer turned around to me and said, 'Shut ... up.' Then all of a sudden I realized DOA meant dead on arrival." Oddly, there was no inquiry, routine or otherwise, into what happened that night. In the days to come, it was truly as if Ayers had never existed. "That next morning when we walked into base camp, nobody ever said a word. Nobody asked us what happened, how it happened. There was never a word said about it," Kerekes said. "Nobody came up from the leadership to ask what happened."
For a time, Kerekes figured that at least it wasn't his shot that killed Ayers. Now he's not so sure. "I thought, well, it couldn't have been me because I had a grenade launcher, but when a grenade launcher goes off, it has hundreds and hundreds of pieces of shrapnel that go flying," he said. "I thought it couldn't have been me, but maybe it was. I don't know. I really don't know."

In the years that followed, Kerekes has told the story very few times. As he gave the interview, he realized he probably hadn't even confided in his wife. It's a hard story to tell, and he also had a feeling that nobody would care about it in light of the many terrible stories that men and women brought home. He's not even quite sure why he's telling it now, except that his memory of the incident was rekindled when The Herald published a special section last June to mark the 25th anniversary of the end of the war. "I'm lucky. Don't get me wrong. I don't have nightmares. I think I'm OK. I don't believe I'm suffering from post-traumatic stress. My life has gone on. I'm not fixating on any of those things," he said. "A lot of people who've been in combat really don't talk about it. After a while, it's so what, who cares. It's a story you don't want to share unless you share it with someone who was there with you."

Since the war, Kerekes hasn't seen any of the men he fought with in the Bong Son Valley, nor has he felt any desire to contact Ayers' family or to correct the record. In his opinion: What purpose would it serve? He's put the moment out
of his conscious mind; a tactic he figures is a defense mechanism. But he never forgets.

The man whose face is etched in his memory is memorialized along with 58,000 other names in shimmering black granite on the Mall in Washington, D.C. Carl Bracy Ayers is listed on Panel 18W, Row 005 of the Vietnam Veterans Wall, and his record shows facts that do nothing to reveal the truth of his death.

"Name: AYERS, CARL BRACY JR," it states. "Sex: Male ... Race: Negro ... Marital Status: Single ... Posthumous promotion (to corporal) ... Age at time of loss: 20 ... Casualty type: Hostile ... Reason: Multiple fragmentation wounds."

Kerekes has never visited the wall, and he probably never will. "I don't want to go there," he said. "I get emotional thinking about it. I don't want to go there and feel sad."

Andy Rose's column appears on Sundays and Thursdays. He can be reached at 646-4355.

On 27 May 2001, I was in Austin, Texas, with my wife when the article was published. I recall downloading the story off the Internet. I was stunned when I read it. I knew that one of us had accidentally killed Ayers, but I always assumed he had been shot with an M-16 rifle. Now the article indicated that perhaps my round from the M-79 grenade launcher had killed Ayers. I showed the article to my wife. I remember the worried look on her face. She said she thought the article would cause me great difficulties. That
legal action would somehow be taken against me.

In all those years since Ayers died I had not known the actual cause of his death.

I flew home the next day. At my front doorstep I collected the old newspapers that had been delivered while we had been in Austin. I immediately searched for the Memorial Day edition and was again stunned: Ayers’ story was the featured front-page article, along with a picture of me. I had thought the story would have been one of several printed in the local B section. And the thought of a front-page story with headlines shocked me.

There was a message on my telephone answering machine. I pressed, “Play.” “Hello,” I heard, “I read your story about Ayers and it was very moving. I would like to speak with you. I am the mother-in-law of Tomlinson, who led the patrol that evening. Please call me.”

I couldn’t do it.

Several months later Andy called me to say that he was leaving the Herald for another position. He told me that when he submitted his draft of the article, there had been several discussions with the editorial staff about how to approach Ayers’ story. Some of the staff felt the story was incomplete and that the family of Ayers should be located, provided with the actual details of his death, and then interviewed. Andy said he had
opposed this because he felt it would bring needless pain to Ayers’ family. He also felt an obligation toward me to not go beyond the parameters of my sharing a personal war recollection. Despite his objections, Andy said he was directed to attempt to locate Ayers’ family. He confided that he half-heartedly approached this task and finally reported to the chief editor that he could not locate Ayers’ family. I sometimes wonder why I shared this story.

Bong Son coastal plains area where Ayers died
COMBAT PATROL

It was my first combat helicopter air assault as we fell out of the sky in a sudden frenzy onto a sleepy village in the Bong Son coastal plains. It was an unopposed landing and we fanned out through the village. I remember the ground was sandy and very difficult to walk on. At that time I was assigned as an ammo bearer with the machine gun team and carried an 80-pound rucksack with a 200-round ammo canister for the m-60 machinegun. I was new and heavily weighed down—I hadn’t yet learned to travel light. I would take one step forward and then slide back two, and ended up being the last guy in our file. It was scary because no one slowed down for me. As we swept through the village I could barely see the guy in front of me as the company snaked its way between village trails and grass-and-mud homes. I kept thinking that it would be very easy for a Viet Cong to step out of a village hut or a hidden bunker and shoot or capture me.
The company finally settled in for the night and split off into platoons that sent out night ambush teams. I was in the machine gun team and that night we joined with the point team. Our objective was to ambush a trail leading out of the village. As we walked into the village we met several villagers on the trail. I think they were trying to leave because Americans were in the area and things were going to happen. One of our guys had an idea: take these villagers prisoner as insurance for the night. We figured we wouldn’t be counter-ambushed with them as hostages. When we took them prisoner they started yelling in Vietnamese—then someone told them to shut the fuck up. I think they were letting the other villagers or the Viet Cong know they had been captured. We herded them inside a village hut and tried to make ourselves comfortable.

That night we took turns watching the villagers and the trail. I can’t remember how many of them we had taken prisoner; it could have been four. I don’t think any of them slept that night, and I’ll always remember their wide-eyed look of fear through the flickering open-hearth fire in the hut.

At about midnight, while on guard, I heard a loud explosion on the other side of the village. Shortly after that I heard a medical evacuation helicopter flying in as night illumination flares lit up the area. One of our platoons had set up across the village and during the night one of the Kit Carson Scouts rolled over in his sleep and onto a booby trap.
It took his leg off; he died before the helicopter landed. Kit Carson Scouts were former Viet Cong or North Vietnamese who had come over to our side. I never really trusted them because you couldn’t communicate with them. They didn’t speak English and we couldn’t speak Vietnamese and you could never be sure that they still weren’t loyal to the other side.

During the night and later in the morning one of the guys in the team mentioned that he would like to have a woman. I didn’t pay much attention to him until I realized he was talking about one of the young village girls we had taken as a prisoner—and that he was considering raping her. While several of the ambush team members kept talking about how much they too would like to have a woman, one of the point team members, Bernie, came up to me smiling. He showed me his class ring. Stunned, I saw pieces of human flesh and hair stuck to the ring. Bernie said he had just fucked up some mamasans on the way to the market. These were old ladies (they looked like they were a hundred), and I couldn’t believe it. Around the corner of the hut I saw crumpled baskets, fruits, and vegetables strewn along the village trail. He had stopped these old women on their way to the market and kicked the shit out of them—and wrecked their food. I started back into the hut and saw two machine gun team members, Kirby and Basel, carrying a girl off into the grass. Kirby held her around the chest and Basel had her feet, and she was yelling and struggling. They were going to rape her. No one else in the team said anything and so I stepped toward the two of them
and asked Basel and Kirby to let go of the girl. They did, but I could tell that they were angry with me.

When we left our ambush site I could feel tension in the air and I remember the team members were mad at me for not going along with the program. I was the last one in file and as we walked onto the trail I turned around and looked at the villagers. I wanted to apologize, I wanted to say something, but all I could do was throw them a pack of cigarettes.

Air assault, Bong Son coastal plains
Standing Next to Me is a Former Viet Cong Who Crossed Over to the American Side,
Referred to as Chieu Hoi or Kit Carson Scouts
These were dropped in Viet Cong and North Vietnamese controlled areas to try to entice the enemy to surrender. Surprisingly, some did and with catastrophic results for them as American forces withdrew from South Vietnam the eventual collapse of the South Vietnamese army.
**THE MISSING ARM**

He said he wasn’t going to make it back home alive and was convinced he was going to die in a godforsaken rice field. All he wanted to do was to go home to his girlfriend and let his acne clear up. One day he asked me to shoot him in the arm. I guess he felt being minus an arm was better than going home in a body bag. At first I said OK. But, then on second thought I realized that a single shot from an M-16 could forever separate his arm from the rest of his being. A week later we were setting our Claymore mines around a night defensive position when he asked me if I would set off the Claymore detonating cap while he held it in his hand. I said OK. But, again, on second thought, I realized that the detonation could separate his hand from his arm. So we eventually agreed to place the plastic detonating cap inside the hollow end of the Claymore’s wire spool. The spool would absorb the majority of the blast and maybe he would only lose several fingers. In a span of a week he had negotiated the lifetime loss of an arm, to the loss of a hand, to the loss of some fingers. Losing a couple of fingers was a lot better than losing a life. We crept from our positions and started setting up the Claymore mine. While he planted and aimed the device I rolled back the 25-foot detonating wire and inserted the detonator. I heard him whisper, “Go ahead, I’m ready, go ahead.” But I couldn’t do it. I kept saying, “Are you sure? Don’t do it, don’t do it, man.” “Yes, yes, go ahead,” he kept saying. “If you won’t, I’ll do it myself.” And so I walked over to him and handed him the detonator. I then walked back and in a pleading
whisper kept asking him not to do it. Then I heard the whirl-click sound of the detonator, followed by a loud explosion, and saw a blinding flash as his body was flung back against the silhouette of darkness. I ran forward, grabbing him by the shoulder and dragging him back into a foxhole. Already I could hear the medic calling for an emergency evacuation helicopter; the perimeter tensed as everyone else locked and loaded their M-16s waiting for the rush of the enemy. I remember he was holding his hand, moaning and groaning in the darkness as the medic shone a light on it.

For an instant everyone went silent—they saw that nothing was wrong with his hand.

Several days later I rotated back to the United States.

In the end he didn’t die in that place so far away from home. He’s married and has a family, but he hasn’t slept during the evening for sixteen years. He’s still out on night patrol looking for his missing arm.
You rarely saw the enemy. You mostly heard him through a rustling branch, swaying grass, or moving bushes. But he was out there, so a lot of stealth was involved. One day we made a helicopter combat assault into the An Loa Mountains. We apparently went in to rescue a long-range reconnaissance team, which had been spotted and was running for its life. The rescue assault took place on a high, grassy mountain knoll filled with pungi stakes and booby traps. After landing we quickly regrouped and started down a trail after our elusive enemy. I passed a large flat rock beside the trail and on top of this rock was a pile of human feces. It was so fresh that it was steaming in the cool, high mountain air. That was about the closest I really got to see my enemy that day.
I remember our platoon was patrolling the Bong Son coastal plains as we were sweeping through a village at dusk. Many huts had Buddhist shrines and the air hung heavy with the smell of incense and earthen stoves cooking the evening meal. Mid-way through the village a loud gong sounded. Then again and again. Everything was still except for that rhythmic, repeated sound.

It was an eerie feeling and we all moved cautiously. Suddenly, after the last beat of the gong, we heard a frightening scream, cry, and then a sadistic laugh. We stopped in our tracks and I sensed we were in for a perilous night.

Just before dark our platoon separated and overnight encampments were set up at opposite ends of the village.

Later, in the dark night the gong started beating again and we started to hear explosions, screams, and the sound of gunfire from the other position.

Throughout the night that patrol was surrounded by movement, sniping, exploding hand grenades, beating gongs, and the sound of screams and cries.
COMING HOME

I was wearing my uniform when I came home from Vietnam; when my father and I met, we embraced each other. It was a happy moment for both of us. Later that evening I decided to go next door and visit my childhood friend. I was still wearing my uniform when I knocked at the kitchen door and entered. The kitchen was dimly lit with a single lamp hanging low over the table. My friend’s mother was sitting at the table and with a sullen expression asked me where I’d been. “Vietnam,” I answered. She then asked me if I was still in the Army. No, I had just been discharged, I told her. She then silently looked at me for several seconds, and I still recall the way she said, “Then why are you wearing that uniform?”

I left the house without a word. That night I took off my uniform and never looked at it again. I guess I was lucky—at least no one spit at me.
The backdrop for this poem is that moment of horror after walking into an enemy ambush

The Ambush

He heard that shot
And as he turned around
His comrade fell in his arms

Screaming as his life’s blood
Drained from his belly

And in that instant
As the world around him
Exploded in that fury

He screamed for help
Only to see his rushing comrades
Clutching, gasping, and grasping

Lifted in the air
And thrown about the exploding earth

The smell of powder and flesh
Everywhere

Falling dirt and falling branches
Through the haze of battle

He kneeled
And rolled his fists

With his head held high
And his back arched
He let out a scream

That chilled a man’s spine
As his soul turned to stone

And in that instant
As it started

It was over

As he survived that moment in hell
In that far away place

Whose name
So many wish to forget
Much of the year I spent in Vietnam involved daylight patrols and setting up night ambushes. To this day when I see a full moon I think, “This is a great night for an ambush.”

**MOONLIGHT**

Back Home

Under The Moon’s Soft Glow

Lovers Caress Each Other

In A Far Away Land

Lying In The Shadows

On The Jungle Floor

A Detonator In My Hand

I Am Thinking - This Is A Great Night

For An Ambush
The backdrop for this poem is a veteran visiting the Vietnam Memorial who knows that he can never again experience love.

**IMAGINE**

He sat restless
Lonely and bored
Waiting for that soft whisper
That velvet touch
That caressing lover’s hand

He sat watching
That black granite wall
With so many names

And as he turned
And wheeled himself away
A tear fell down his cheek

For he knew he could only
Forever Imagine