

**“RETURNING TO THE WORLD --
VIETNAM VETERANS JOURNEYS”**

by
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The Animals -- a 1960's rock band from England. A gritty bluesy sound best known for their huge 1964 hit -- "The House of the Rising Sun."

The group had a series of hits in 1965 -- "Don't Let Me be Misunderstood;" "It's My Life" and "We Gotta Get Outta this Place;" all of which were released in the U.S. and Britain.

As described by Tina Benitz Eves, in Behind the Lyrics, "We Gotta Get Out of This Place" captures the angst of being stuck and wanting to get out."

"We Gotta Get Out of This Place" was quickly adopted by soldiers in Vietnam and was the most requested song on Armed Forces Radio. In a survey in 2006 of Vietnam veterans by the University of Wisconsin-Madison - "We Gotta Get Out of this Place" was found to be the touchstone. "This was the Vietnam anthem. Every band that ever played in an armed forces club had to play this song," reported Doug Bradley, the director of communications for the UW system.

The lead singer of the Animals, Eric Burden, in 2004, commenting on the meaning of the song. "Everybody at some time wants to get out of the situation they're in."

The lyrics, so popular to soldiers in Vietnam --

"We gotta get out of this place if its the last thing we ever do.

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We gotta get out of this place cause, girl, there's a better life for me and you."

Vietnam Veteran Robert Parson said, "We knew it word for word. That was kind of our theme song." And Vietnam Veteran Russ Eaglin commented, "Bands would come in and they would always play "We Gotta Get Out of This Place." As they're playing, you're sitting there homesick. Yeah, its emotional."

It is estimated that about 2.7 million Americans served in uniform in Vietnam. 58,148 were killed;75,000 severely wounded. 61% of those killed were younger than age 21. It is estimated that fewer than 600,000 of the 2.7 million Vietnam veterans remain alive today.

And just about all of those soldiers, sailors and airmen who were sent to Vietnam were originally sent to Vietnam on a one year - 12 month tour of duty.

Just about all of the soldiers serving in Vietnam were not sent there as part of a unit, troop, squadron, or platoon. They were sent one by one. Each left their home alone; journeyed to Oakland or Seattle, or wherever on the West Coast, and boarded planes with others all of whom had arrived alone and headed for Vietnam.

They were not sent for the duration of the war; rather they were sent for 365 days. So when these soldiers heard the Animal's song and adopted it as their

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own, each had their own DEROs - their date of expected return from overseas. DEROs -- the day a soldier would climb aboard the Freedom Bird and return to the World.

August 1964 - Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

Congress approves and supports the determination that the President, as Commander-in-Chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.”

House: 414-0 with little debate.

Senate: 88-2 (Morse and Gruening voting no)

Senator Gruening -- “This resolution is an authorization for escalation unlimited.”

March 1965 - Rolling Thunder --the codename for an American campaign of massive bombardment -- commenced for a variety of reasons including

- 1) bolster the sagging morale of the Pro American Saigon regime;
- 2) to persuade North Vietnam to cease its support for the insurgency in the South.

Rolling Thunder was the first sustained American assault on North Vietnam and represented a major expansion of U.S. involvement in the war.

In April, 1965, 2 battalions of Marines went ashore at Danang in Vietnam to assume responsibility for the security of the airbase there.

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As the Pentagon Papers described it, “With this, the question was no longer whether U.S. Combat troops would be deployed to Vietnam; rather, how many units and for what strategic purposes.

According to Bill Moyers, on April 20, 1965, President Johnson’s top officials concluded that bombing alone was insufficient and it would not stave off the collapse in the South.

June 10, 1965 -- General Westmoreland requests 41,000 more troops and 52,000 troops later “to take the war to the enemy.”

June 18, 1965 -- Coup in South Vietnam. The 10th government in 20 months-- described by the Pentagon Papers as “a series of coups has produced revolving door government in Saigon.”

In July, the buildup of combat troops begins - The Reserves and the Guard could have been called up and the Joint Chiefs of Staff were united in their belief that those resources needed to be mobilized.

According to James T Currie, in his article, “The Army Reserve and Vietnam,” in July, 1965, Secretary Robert McNamara returned from Vietnam with the recommendation that the number of U.S. personnel be raised immediately from 75,000 to 175,000 with an increase to 275,000 in 1966. McNamara wanted

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to call up 125,000 men from the Reserves.

But first, the broader questions at the time needed to be answered:

1. whether to pull out of Vietnam entirely,
2. continue current state of involvement, or
3. “give our commanders in the field the men and supplies they say they need.”

President Johnson chose option 3 and chose not to follow the recommendations of McNamara and the Joint Chiefs of Staff to call up the reserve.

Mark DePu, in his 2006 article on the Vietnam War, “The Individual Rotation Policy,” wrote that President Johnson elected not to mobilize the Reserve and National Guard because he worried that it would lead to a fierce debate in Congress as to the merits of the war -- a debate he wanted to avoid for fear it would derail his domestic agenda in the legislative session of 1965.

To call up the reserves, Johnson would have been required to declare a national emergency. In answer to questions from the press, Johnson indicated he did not want to choose between guns and butter, but would have the government do all it could to continue the unparalleled period of prosperity. According to the *New York Times*, the next day, the President “had become increasingly sensitive to the possible political effects of a reserve call up.”

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“Activating the reserves,” according to James Currie, “would have had political repercussions from Members of Congress who reported “heavy flak” from families of young men who had joined (the Reserves) to avoid the draft and who did not want to be activated.”

As Baskir and Strauss, authors of *Chance and Circumstances - The Draft, The War, and the Vietnam Generation*, put it, “Reservists and guardsmen were better connected, better educated, more affluent, and whiter than their peers in the active forces and the administration feared that mobilizing them would heighten public opposition to the war.”

As depicted by David Halberstam in his book, *The Best and the Brightest*, Johnson was not about to call up the Reserves, because the use of the Reserves would blow it all. It would be self-evident that we were really going to war and that we would, in fact, have to pay a price.

And so Johnson, decided to meet the need for troops with active duty forces, increased recruiting and larger draft calls; He raised the monthly draft call from 17,000 to 35,000.

The draft and enlistments in the service resulting from the worry about being drafted was the means for increasing the number of troops. The Army went from 965,000 troops in 1964 to 1,527,00 in 1968. In 1964, 112,386 men were

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drafted. In 1965, the number of draftees rose to 230,991. Ultimately, close to 1.43 million men were drafted from 1965 - 1969. The number of troops in Vietnam increased to a high of 536,000 in 1968.

In 1948, the U.S. had passed the Selective Service Act of 1948, requiring each male in the US to register with the Selective Service. In 1951, Congress passed the Universal Military Training And Service Act which extended the length of service of a draftee to 24 months - 2 years.

Mark Depu writes, “The draft was deeply embedded in the fabric of American society.” But the draft’s two-year requirement meant that for a soldier who was drafted, training initially could be 4 to 6 months plus transportation and leave time. And so DOD determined upon a 12-month rotation of troops in and out of Vietnam.

Mark Depu writes, “The 12 month rotation policy eventually spanned a lexicon of its own. One of the more derisive labels of the Vietnam War was the one given to the newest members of a unit -- f___ new guy (FNG). The label illustrated the sense of alienation, fear and isolation that a new soldier felt when first arriving to a unit.”

Bill Koriath, a draftee, who served in Vietnam in 1966-67, said, “You know, the day I got in there, I walked in (to my unit in Vietnam) and this guy comes up to

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me and he said, "You're my replacement." and he grabs me and hugs me and says, "Let me show you where you're going to work." He takes me back to one of those bunkers at the outer edge of the perimeter. And he says "Don't worry about this shit, just hang out here." And he took off. I never saw him again. So my first night, I was sitting there all alone in this bunker, not knowing what could happen, with my gun on my lap, just scared shitless. So I said, " Well this is stupid sitting underneath a light. So then I went back to the corner of the bunker, where the rats were and kind of hung out there."

So regardless of the problems the 12 month rotation had on unit integrity, and cohesiveness, the 12 months tour of duty was born and existed throughout the war.

For many soldiers, as explained by Mark Depu, they understood the mission: "Stay alive, finish your tour, and go home."

DEROS was very much anticipated - days were counted - get below 100 days left and you were "short," in terms of time left. The soldier knew that, if he survived, the date when he was going "to get out of this place." After serving the year, survivors were flown back to the U.S. and for many mustered out of service -- a Vietnam to home tour journey that lasted only a few days.

And when they returned home, there were no parades.

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Ultimately, in 1968, a small number of Army Reserve Units were deployed to Vietnam.

One of those units deployed was Indiana Company D (Rangers) 151st Infantry Regiment. In May 1968, the unit was sent to Ft. Benning for training.

12-20-68 to vietnam

11-69 returned home

In celebration of the Reserve Company's return home, Indiana Governor Edgar Whitcomb declared 26 November, 1969 as Unity Day -- all state and local offices were closed in recognition of Company D's return. A ceremony celebrating their arrival was held at the Tyndall Armory and Company D was awarded a key to the city by Indianapolis Mayor Richard Lugar.

In the movie, "The Deer Hunter," the 1978 movie, which won best picture, Mike - played by Robert DeNiro - returns home to Pennsylvania in 1970 from Vietnam and experiences difficulty reintegrating into civilian life. Friends of his who did not serve treated Mike in the same manner they did before he left. Life had not changed for them; it had changed dramatically for the returning veterans. And the movie makes that plain.

When Vietnam veterans returned home one by one, they returned to a country fiercely divided over the war. Some identified the veterans with the war and

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treated them harshly. Some blamed the veterans for losing the war and treated them thoughtlessly.

A soldier went to Vietnam alone; and he returned to the United States “the world,” and subsequently, his home town, Alone.

Last year, I embarked on a project called, “Vietnam Veterans’ Journeys.” The project would involve my interviewing 25 or so Vietnam Veterans in central Indiana, taking their portraits, and putting together a photo exhibition that highlighted the Veterans’ stories.

The project focuses on the veteran’s anticipation of returning home, what they carried with them, the reality of that return and a 50 year perspective.

With the kind assistance of Craig Williams, Jim Brown and many others, I have interviewed 14 veterans so far and transcribed their stories.

For Vietnam Veterans returning home --

1. No demobilization -- the war just kept going along; You might come home and a neighbor would be leaving.

2. Guns and Butter -- the only ones sacrificing were soldiers and their families.

One veteran described how it was for his mom:

“My mom took it worse than anybody. They kept calling her up in the

middle of the night and calling her son a baby killer and all stuff. My mom also got calls in the middle of the night telling her that her son had been killed.

3. The late 60's and early 70's was a turbulent time for the economy. The costs of guns and butter complicated monetary policy.

4. A nation divided

5. A veteran was expected to fit back in a society that had not changed much.

And the veterans interviewed reflect the above, with a general impression of the younger the veteran, the less-educated, the greater the likelihood of struggle.

Veterans interviewed frequently reported the indifference of people other than their families. More than a few faced hostility.

One veteran, from the suburb of Indianapolis, reported that the evening of his return, after his family warmly welcomed him, he went to see high school buddies at the local pool hall/bar still in his uniform.

“So, I go into the pub. And I could see my buddies, they are all back there playing pool. And the bartender stops me, puts a mug of beer upon the bar and he says, “The first round is on us. I said okay, thank you.” He says, “But do me a favor. Drink that, go home, take that uniform off and you can come back...We do not want you in here in your uniform. That will cause trouble.”

“Returning to the World -- Vietnam Veterans’ Journeys,” an exhibition reflecting the portraits and stories of the Vietnam Veterans (--and their endurance--) opens on September 1, 2023, in the Underground Gallery of the Harrison Center, at 16th and Delaware Streets here in Indianapolis.

BIOGRAPHY OF JACK WICKES

Upon graduation from Indiana University in June, 1969, Jack was drafted into the U.S. Army. He served a year with the 101st Airborne Division in Vietnam, leaving the service as a Sargeant on Independence Day, 1971.

After law school, which he attended with the help of the GI Bill, Jack's first legal job was as Counsel to the U.S. Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, where he was significantly involved in veterans' readjustment issues.

Jack and his family returned to Indianapolis in 1979, and he entered the private practice of law. In 1984, he co-chaired Senator Gary Hart's successful Indiana Presidential primary win. In 1988, Jack was the Democratic nominee for U.S. Senate, finishing second in the fall election.

In 1994, Jack was one of a small group of lawyers selected as Indiana "Trial Lawyer of the Year," for the development of case law expanding ratepayer remedies in actions against public utilities.

Jack retired from the practice of law in 2013, became a full-time fine art photographer, and joined his wife, Julia, in an art studio at the historic Stutz building. He was juried into and became a member of the Indiana Artists Club, an organization of 150 professional artists from Indiana, founded in the early 1900's by T C Steele and others.