

# **We Served Together, but Returned Alone**

**By Ted Lyman**

## **Background**

A few months ago I wrote a story about finding an MCB 11 buddy's grave, 48 years after he succumbed to injuries in Vietnam. His name was Cliff Mullen and the story appeared in the Spring Edition of the Navy's MCB 11 Association's newsletter. The story with a picture of Cliff is also on the association's website (see [www.mcb11.com](http://www.mcb11.com): find "Lyman Letter to Mullen.")

I got some nice feedback from fellow Seabees who shared their memories of Mullen and their memoirs of with him. One correspondent filled me in on his years since our return and we really enjoyed talking about that whole period of time around Khe Sahn, Dong Ha, Quang Tri and on coming home. This got me to thinking about my return from Vietnam and I thought I'd write a story, below, about my return. I'm pretty sure that many returning Vietnam vets experienced what I did and what I experience still in my relationships with friends of very long standing due to my role in the Vietnam War. Maybe other Vietnam returnees have similar stories and ongoing experiences.

## **Being a Vietnam Vet in the "Home" of the Anti-War Movement**

I grew up and lived in Berkeley, CA when I joined the Navy. My father was a custodian at the UC Berkeley campus. I mention that only to say that ours was a blue collar family that just happened to live in the scholarly world surrounding a renowned university.

Vietnam was very much on the minds of people in Berkeley in the mid-1960s. Antiwar protests were increasingly common, peaking in the early 70s with the invasion of Cambodia. It is fair to say that there were few supporters of the war living in Berkeley during those years that I was engaged in combat along the DMZ, specifically in Khe Sahn and Dong Ha, both very dangerous places in 1967.

I returned home in mid- August 1968 with plans to marry my fiancée of two years within weeks (September 7, 1968, an important date still for the two of us!) and return to college that October. On the day of my return I went directly to the hamburger joint my buddies and I and our girl friends all hung out at, just a block or so from the UC Berkley campus. I just wanted to see who was there and tell them that I was back from Vietnam. I had been gone since Christmas 1967 and sure enough a high school friend—a pretty good friend-- was sitting there having lunch all by himself. He knew I had gone to Vietnam in the two years before and he said "hi," somewhat uncertainly I thought. When I told him that I just got back from Vietnam a few hours earlier at nearby Travis Air Force base, he immediately asked me quite seriously, how many

babies I had killed. This was a poor start to my return home, to say the least. I looked hard at him and it was clear he was very serious. I paused, and quickly said “none.” I then stood up and said “see ya.” I haven’t talked to him since.

As I caught up with other male friends I noticed a pattern to those early conversations just after my return. Nobody asked me about my experiences in Vietnam, I mean not even if I saw “any action,” a question you would think would be on the top of minds of guys in their young 20s. Now, I wasn’t particularly interested in telling war stories but I did think these guys would at least be somewhat curious what I did during two tours on the Vietnam DMZ in the years around Tet, widely reported at the time as experiencing very serious combat. I think it’s not that they weren’t curious but that the topic of Vietnam in Berkeley at that had only one tone-- “get out now.” Except for the activists, the topic was just ignored as being too toxic for general conversation. Now, almost 50 years later 4 or 5 of these guys are still very close friends (we all live in or near Berkeley and get together several times a year) and they still show exactly zero interest in my Vietnam experiences. The topic simply doesn’t come up from them, and certainly not from me perhaps remembering the “baby killer” comment on my immediate return.



Pictured is one of many protests on the campus of UC Berkeley in 1968



This not so subtle photo was aimed at returning Vietnam vets and the few pro-war residents of Berkeley later in the protest years (the opposite of my views at the time.) It was taken on Telegraph Avenue, a couple of blocks from where we lived.

When I got back into college, I found that the few vets on campus seemed to find each other, become friendly and hang out together. Maybe it was because so many of us were wearing our old olive green field jackets (also a hippy, anti-war uniform for some, but not all—my vet buddies wore ours because it was cold and that was pretty much the only jacket we had.) This pattern of avoiding any discussion, even mention of Vietnam, unless with another vet continues in my area essentially to this day.

My new wife JoAnne worked while I regained my traction in higher education, left years earlier to earn some money (hurray for the GI Bill!) My first job out of grad school was at Stanford Research Institute (now known as SRI International) in Menlo Park, CA. SRI had been marched on by anti-war Stanford student protestors a couple of years before I was hired. Anti-war activity was everywhere in the Bay Area at the time, even Stanford known politically then as a “center right” university (UC Berkeley across the Bay as strongly “left leaning.”) I figured that as I got grounded in my new job I would keep my Vietnam experience to myself. I don’t think I mentioned to anyone at the Institute that I was a Vietnam vet, not in the slightest because I was ashamed, more because the topic really never presented itself.

I stayed in that job for 20 years getting ahead as most do in any job. About 15 years after I joined, I found myself sitting alone on a plane with a high executive and the topic of Vietnam somehow came up. He too, was a Vietnam vet and he said he was glad to finally meet someone from the Institute who was as well. I’m not too sure how he knew but he said that the two of us were the only Vietnam vets in the entire organization, at the time of some 3,000 employees.

Berkeley has changed a lot since those protest years. Maybe folks just got burned out on all the hostility and yes, even the hate of the period. But one thing for sure, in my town there is still amnesia about my war.

I’m not sure what point I’m making here other than to say I’m very happy that most of today’s vets get the attention they deserve. We all know that Vietnam vets never got their parade. But no matter what one thinks of our country’s policies toward war, all of our vets deserve a hardy “thank you for your service!” Those are words that I never heard and I would bet that many of my fellow vets never heard on their return from Vietnam. While not deeply troubled, I’m by far not a pro-war person yet still bothered by this fact, 50 years on. On meeting today’s vets, I go on to ask them what they did in Afghanistan or Iraq and when told, I say something like “I get it.”

### **Career After Seabees**

That first job at SRI set me on a career path of economic research and consulting where I spent 45 years advising government officials and private sector leaders on strategies for economic development and job creation. After pretty much covering the U.S. states in the period up to 1989, I found myself involved in providing strategic planning assistance for former the Soviet satellite nations who were actively trying to build out their market economies. Much of this work was done for the U.S. State Department, the United Nations or the World Bank.

All of these assignments were plenty interesting to be sure but I can't say that any were as "exciting" as my time in the Seabees where I learned a life lesson I believe that I applied throughout my career, "Can Do."

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