

What It Was Like to Be Drafted

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The author on duty at the 527th Personnel Service Company.

I was drafted into the Army on July 11, 1967, three weeks after my 22nd birthday. Seemingly within minutes after I'd graduated from George Washington University that May, my draft board in Hillside, N.J., changed my status from II-S (student) to I-A (cannon fodder).

During the Vietnam War every male of my generation — all 28 million of us — faced the vexing question of what to do about the draft. During my four years as a deferred college student, every guy I knew had countless conversations about it. In my case, politics had little to do with my avoid-or-submit decision. While I felt the war probably was a good thing (to stem the march of worldwide Communism), I knew that I had options to get out of taking part in the escalating fighting halfway across the world.

I remember feeling strongly, though, that I didn't want to do anything drastic that I wouldn't have done had there not been a draft — such as faking a medical condition or fleeing to Canada. So in the fall of 1966 I made two halfhearted attempts to avoid the uncertainties of the draft: applying to join the Peace Corps and Air Force Officers Candidate School. After being rejected by both, I submitted to conscription, feeling like a leaf in the wind amid the political hurricane engulfing me and my generation.

And so I became one of the more than 228,000 men drafted in 1967. Before the draft ended in 1973, a total of some 1.8 million of us had been conscripted.

On that Tuesday morning in July, 50 years ago, I packed a small bag and my mother drove me to a public bus stop in Elizabeth, where I took the short ride to the military induction center in downtown Newark. After a bunch of physical and psychological tests, I found myself in a small room with a couple of dozen other guys where we solemnly swore we'd support and defend the Constitution against all foreign and domestic enemies, obey the orders of the president and our officers, and abide by the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Then we piled into a bus in the dark and sped down the New Jersey Turnpike to Fort Dix for basic training.

First came a few days of processing: the haircut (you had to pay the civilian barber), the shots (lots of them), the uniforms ("your waist is kinda big," a snarky corporal who handed me my fatigue pants said), the aptitude tests, the offers to go to Officer Candidate School or get the enlisted school of my choice, both of which involved more time in the Army than the two-year draft commitment. I decided two years in uniform was plenty for me, even though I would have no control over what job the Army choose for me.

Then it was off to basic training, where the screaming drill instructors singled out the drafted guys for the harshest verbal abuse. More than a few times they barked: "Leepson, you better learn the spirit of the bayonet. You're going to Tigerland" — Fort Polk infantry advanced training in the

Louisiana swamps — “and then Vietnam, and the Vietcong are going to shoot you dead your first day in country.” Or words to that effect.

I distinctly remember thinking that I’d made the biggest mistake of my young life taking my chances with the draft. I survived the eight weeks of basic, shedding 25 pounds in the process. Then came the day in early September when I received orders for advanced training. I marched from our company area to some office building at Dix with a few of my basic buddies. We sat down in a classroom. A clerk handed out our personnel files. He said, “Men, do not open your 201 Files.” Every one of us immediately did, knowing we would find our fate inside the manila folder.

It was the first time I’d seen an Army order, complete with a confusing series of coded numbers and mysterious abbreviations. Then I noticed a line underlined in red pencil: my name, rank and service number and the words assigning me for training in MOS 70A-10. The only MOS (military occupational specialty) we knew was 11B, infantryman.

I signaled to the clerk. “What’s 70A-10?” I asked him. He replied with these exact words: “Same as me, clerk.”

Clerk school. Not Tigerland. I wouldn’t get killed my first day in Vietnam. A get out of jail free card. I’ve never felt anything like the shock and euphoria of that moment in the half-century that has whizzed by since that moment.

The next day the Army shipped me to Fort Leonard Wood in the Missouri Ozarks, a.k.a. “Fort Lost in the Woods” and “Little Korea.” Most of the other guys in my training company had joined in order to get clerk school. About a dozen of us had been drafted and won the clerk school lottery. Four of the guys had just graduated from Southern Illinois University and had had basic at Leonard Wood together. They welcomed me into their college-guy clique.

We laughed our way through the eight weeks of training, calling the

barracks “the dorm,” the base “the campus” and the mess hall “the cafeteria.” When clerk school ended on Nov. 14, 1967, every one of us received orders for Vietnam.

What I remember most during my 30-day leave is how awkwardly uncomfortable my college friends were when they realized I was heading for the war zone. The most common refrain was an embarrassed, “Well, at least you’ll get to see the Bob Hope Christmas show.” I didn’t.

My parents dropped me at Newark Airport when my leave was up for a commercial flight to San Francisco, where I was to report to the Oakland Army Base, the giant out-processing center for troops going to Vietnam. I have no memory of that flight or the night I spent in a hotel room in San Francisco or how I got to Oakland. I must have taken a taxi. But I vividly remember the very long day I spent out-processing.

I met up with my buddy Vito Lanza, and a couple hundred of us went through out-processing, then spent the night on cots in a giant room; it felt like a soulless airplane hangar with buzzing fluorescent lights. Early the next morning, Dec. 14, 1967, we piled into buses for the ride to nearby Travis Air Force Base, then boarded leased commercial jets (with flight attendants and airline food — but no booze) for the trip to the war zone.

First stop: Anchorage. We deplaned for a few hours. I remember it was warmer in Alaska than it had been in San Francisco. Then something like an 18-hour flight crossing the International Date Line over the Pacific Ocean to Tachikawa Air Base in Japan for a short layover. Then on to Vietnam.

After deplaning at Bien Hoa Air Base, near Saigon, we were herded onto buses for the drive to the giant 90th Replacement Battalion not far away at Long Binh, where we would be assigned to our units. My only memory of the bus ride was that it was oppressively hot and humid, and that Vietnam smelled like raw sewage.

Vito got his assignment (to Long Binh) right away, but I spent four long days at the 90th at Long Binh Post, rumored to be the largest American Army base on the planet. We were put in rudimentary barracks, then marched to a few orientation sessions. “Men, you may have heard that most of the prostitutes in Vietnam have some kind of venereal disease,” the guy giving the V.D. lecture said. “That’s not true — they *all* do.” I believe he recommended a body condom — but that may be a false memory. We also filled sandbags and did guard duty (without weapons).

Mostly, though, we had to endure three shipping formations each day held on a giant parade ground, listening for our names to be called on a muddy loudspeaker by a guy on a high wooden platform. He began with words I can still hear: “The following individuals are assigned to ...,” and then he’d call out a place name or a unit.

We lined up single file by flight. As names were called, the lines shrunk. After enduring four days of shipping formations, the line of my flight was down to me and four or five other guys. Then I heard my name over the loudspeaker. I would be going to a place I’d never heard of, Qui Nhon (we pronounced it Quin-YON), with a handful of other newbies.

We did a hurry-up-and-wait, sitting with our duffel bags alongside an Army truck at Long Binh, before the short ride back to Bien Hoa. Just as we were about to march up the back loading ramp of a C-130 Hercules, a small Army truck pulled up and drove in, along with about two dozen South Vietnamese Army troops. Then we clambered on board. All the seats (plastic webbed ones fastened to the sides of the plane) were taken, so I flew to Qui Nhon sitting on a truck fender in the belly of a C-130. It seemed perfectly normal.

Five months after being drafted, on Dec. 19, 1967, I reported for duty at the 527th Personnel Service Company. I worked in the personnel management section as a redeployment clerk. For the next 12 months I sent people home from the war.

