

For this third part of our chapter on remembrance, photographer McNally and writer-reporter Levy gathered a number of people at the Wall, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. They had prearranged a talk with Julian Bond. The lifelong social activist and Georgia state representative and senator had been, at Morehouse College in the late 1950s and early 1960s, one of the founders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. He went on to be a 12-year chairman of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and was the first president of the Southern Poverty Law Center.

The testimony of Bond and others at the Wall follows.

JULIAN BOND: “I generally visit when friends are in town and I am showing them around. I thought it was genius to do what Maya Lin did. The Vietnam War was a divisive and unpopular thing. If you believe, as I do, that the whole thing was a terrible mistake, this is a reminder of that mistake and the cost we paid for this terrible, terrible mistake and a reminder that we ought to not ever do this again. It is probably a lesson not well learned.

“You walk down into it and you are getting into it, and you say, ‘Look at the names grow, the people who died there get bigger and bigger and bigger.’ And then they diminish as you walk out the other side. It is a great way to say we are putting this behind us. We are not forgetting the people or what they did, but we are putting the event behind us.

“I don’t know anybody who died in Vietnam. Every time I go to the Wall I think of that because almost everybody I know knows somebody who died in Vietnam. I think it odd that I am not one of them. [But] when I go there, there is always someone taking a rubbing of somebody’s name, and you think for these people: *This is a wonderful way to say, ‘I knew John or Phil or Bob, and I want to commemorate the service he gave us. I can do it in this way.’*”

CHARLES SHYAB was a senior medic in the Army Infantry; a junior in college in 1966, he dropped out and was drafted, and the Army trained him to be a medic: “I went in as a conscientious objector. I didn’t carry a weapon, but I still did my job. I feel proud.” He served in the military from June 1967 until April 1969 and in

AT THE WALL are activist Julian Bond, top, and, below, veterans at a ceremony in February 2014.

Vietnam for six months of his service. He recalls: “I was in the Valley of the Shadow of Death and I came through. Some of my buddies didn’t.” Shyab was wounded at Chu Moor Mountain in April 1968, hit with shrapnel in the arms and legs. He doesn’t remember much of being wounded, but “I remember getting on the copter. I went to a field hospital, and I remember the nurse who took care of me.” In 2012, Shyab was awarded a Bronze Star for Valor for saving the lives of other soldiers during that battle. His friend Richard Cassano, who brought Shyab to the helicopter, never made it back to his foxhole, and Shyab regularly thinks of comrades like Cassano who were lost: “They were beautiful people . . . They will be 19 and 20 years old forever. There is not a day that goes by that you can’t help but think about it.” He feels that he came back because God was watching over him. “I felt that heaven was on my side. I am thankful to the Lord for still being alive. It was the Lord’s care that [enabled me] to endure that.” He does not warmly remember his return home: “When I was in school, people never asked me about it or wanted to hear me say anything. We blended in. It was sort of something to be ashamed of, not to be brought up or discussed.” A half century later, he says, things have changed: “I have a Vietnam hat, and when people see my hat they thank me for my service. Afghanistan and Iraq vets give me acknowledgment.”

ABRAHAM FULLER was a buck sergeant in the Army, serving in the military from 1964 until 1970 and in Vietnam from 1967 to 1969; he served in the Central Highland area, looking after infantry divisions and airborne units: “It was very ugly, dirty and very dangerous at times. It wasn’t a nice job . . . If there was a firefight and there was believed to be American troops involved, we would be on our way to retrieve the estimated number of bodies that were in that area. We would get a sheet saying ‘approximately 30 bodies,’ and then we would have that many body bags. We came by helicopter or however we could get there. It was unpredictable if it was ‘hot’ or ‘safe.’ Most of the time they said it was safe, but it was never safe. Something that was supposed to be ‘cold’ could get ‘hot’ real quick.

“That war was hell over there. I was 22 going on 23. You did things we couldn’t think about doing today. I blacked a lot of this stuff out of my mind. I am getting the worst end of things now: I don’t sleep. I am not the same person I used to be. I used to be an entertainer and more outgoing. I have become more withdrawn. I

was different when I came home. [But] I liked the Army. We used to play 'Army' when we were kids until it got dark. Army was in my blood. I have a brother who was in Vietnam. We were in Vietnam about the same time. I am glad I served my country."

FREDERICK J. EZELL was an Army sergeant who served in Vietnam for one year beginning in July 1969: "I was pretty young. We didn't always understand why we were there, but we knew what to do. I was on the Cambodian border on the western side of Vietnam. We went into Cambodia in May and June of 1970. It was really strange. It seemed like not only a different country but a different planet. It took me four weeks to get used to 98 degrees every day. Then there were the monsoons. It would rain every day at three o'clock. A huge sheet of water would come down. When it stopped you would be dry in 10 minutes. It was a strange place.

"You had a week of nothing happening and then a week of everything happening. I remember bad things mostly. I had a friend, he got hit by mortars, and he got ripped apart. The medics took him away. I never saw him again. That does not go away. Every now and then [an incoming round] would hit close and knock me down on the ground. My memories really were of trying to stay safe and trying to stay alive. You become fatalistic. I didn't think I was going to come back to the World. We called it the World—'coming back to the World.'"

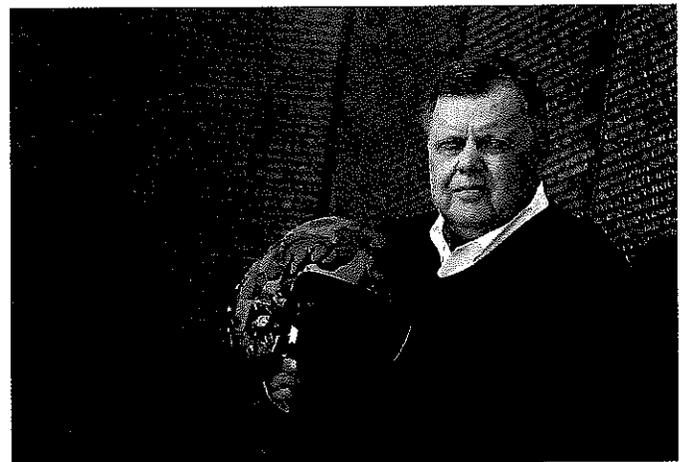
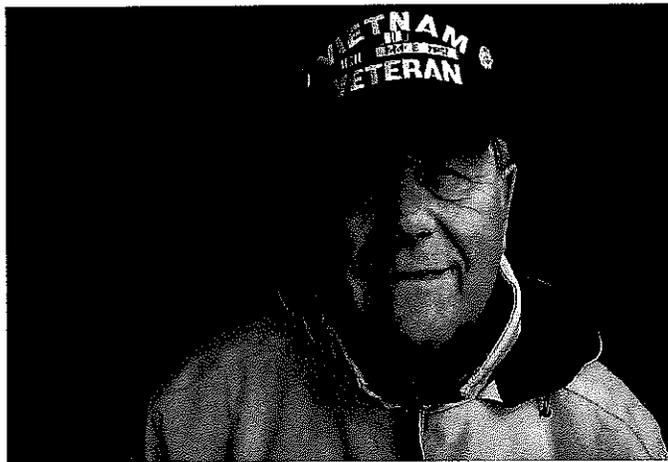
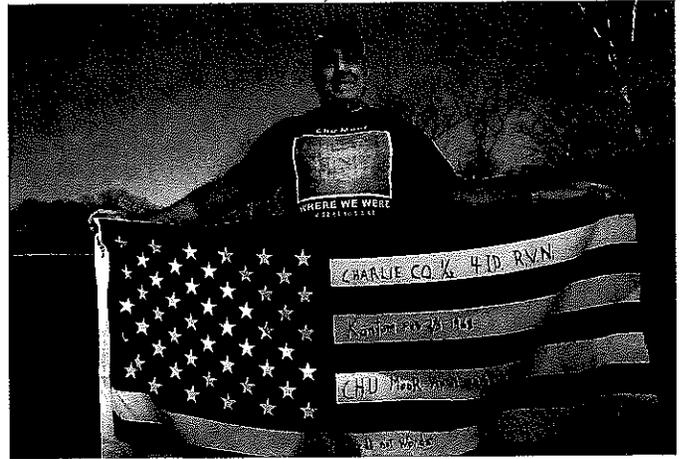
ROBERT L. HOHMAN was an Air Force B-52 bomber commander who served in the military for 23 years beginning in 1962: "I was from a blue-collar family. I felt I was very privileged to go to pilot training. It was a big step up for me. It was a privilege to serve in the military. I loved the military. The B-52 was the King of Battle, and at the time I was a very enthusiastic warrior.

"After the war and being around government I started to think, Why did we lose? For the last 30 years I have been trying to understand what we lost. I am conscious of the faults of our leadership at the time. We did some things right and we did some things wrong. We killed too many civilians. We [didn't] understand these insurgency issues well enough. The problem with Vietnam is we were dealing with an insurgency operation, and we were careful not to set off certain trip wires that would force us into a nuclear war with Russia and China. There were constraints to fighting a war without it escalating into a nuclear war."

TOM BURCH was a Green Beret lawyer; when the Tet Offensive began in early 1968 he was the judge advocate for Special Forces in the headquarters in Nah Trang: "It was not the combat experience that affected my whole life. It was the coming home experience. You felt that your family and friends would welcome you. Thirty-five percent of my Vietnam friends were spit on within 48 hours of coming home. When I came home no member of my family met with me. I got spit on. I couldn't get a job. I sent out résumés, and I put on there that I was in the military, and I didn't get any interviews. When I didn't put it on the résumé I got five interviews. I had post-traumatic stress disorder over that. You thought you would come home and it was a prestigious thing. Then I come home and go to a first-class restaurant wearing my uniform and four people started spitting on me. The girl I was with would never see me again. In 1971 I got stationed in the Pentagon. I had to do a lot of traveling, and I got written orders to no longer wear my uniform when I traveled since there were so many incidents. I was totally dismayed. I never dreamed that the public would treat us like that." Burch is convinced that there are still American POWs in Southeast Asia. "There were men left. There are still men being held in Laos, and the government is not doing anything about it. The Defense Intelligence Agency does whatever they can to keep that information from coming out."

LEN L. FUNK was an Army captain who served in the military from March 1967 until February 1971 and was an adviser in the northern section of the Mekong Delta: "I felt in the early part of the war that we were doing well. I was honored to be an adviser. I was fortunate to have learned the Vietnamese language and to be with the Vietnamese. We helped them. We passed on intelligence. We were with them on operations. We coordinated air strikes for them. We called in air support, either using the Vietnamese Air Force or the U.S. Navy." He came to feel differently about what evolved into "a God-awful guerrilla war with no defined line. When the Vietnamese were overrun it was their children who were killed. A frustrating thing was that when you came back it was so amazing how little the American people knew about the war. Americans didn't realize that the South Vietnamese lost a few hundred thousand people. Think of all the Vietnamese who died."

CHARLES HARRIS, who reached the rank of lieutenant colonel in his Army career, recalls: "I got my draft



JOE MONAGALLY FOR LIFE (4)

notice just before Thanksgiving in 1965. I did a lot of flying. I love to fly. I was at Hamburger Hill. I was getting toward the end of my year. It was a little tense. We all tracked our days to get out. Our commander wanted to be the next General Patton, and he kept having us doing foolish things. In 1971 to 1972, I was with the First Cavalry. I was an Air Mission Commander of an assault helicopter at An Loc when they were attacking Saigon. I was a platoon leader. We went to Da Nang and helped the South Vietnamese retake Quang Tri.

"The military was great for me. I got my undergraduate and graduate degrees. I got to see and do a lot of stuff. I am proud of it.

"Every five years we read the names on the Wall. I am not into that stuff, but my flight school roommate was killed in 1968, and in 1972 a good friend was killed. I read their names."

"I had hoped that we had learned something from the Vietnam thing. For their deaths to have been worth it, I thought as a nation we learned when to commit forces and when not to. Iraq blew that away. Each generation has to learn these things for themselves. That is very disheartening. In the modern wars we have held the soldier in high esteem. We did learn that from Vietnam and that

A GATHERING of those paying their respects on this particular day in early 2014 includes, top left, second from left, Albert Jenkins. Next to him is Wilbur Fletcher. Abraham Fuller is kneeling. Luther Johnson, Melvin Hayes, Harold Hammond, Frederick Ezell and others are also shown. Top right: Charles Shyab. Above: Tom Stryer (left) and Robert Hohman.

has stuck. The lesson I wish we learned was a prudent use of American military—to really know what we were fighting for and what they are fighting for. We didn't seem to learn, and that is very disappointing.

"I believe I owe a huge debt of gratitude to those who raised their voices to get us out of Vietnam. They don't get the recognition they deserve—the people who stood up for those things. There are no statues or medals [for them]. I feel I owe those people a huge debt of gratitude."

WILBUR FLETCHER JR. was a private first class in the Army during his Vietnam service: "I was Graves Registration. We picked up the remains. It was a job. It wasn't something that I wanted to do. But they trained me for that and then they shipped me out. It was grim work. We handled the bodies. They came to us in the

green bags. We had to do paperwork on that person. If they had watches, rings, we then had to process that and put it in an envelope. If we have a dog tag, we know who they are. If we didn't he was a John Doe. They were real unknowns, just like the Unknown Soldier. We processed whoever, we didn't care if was an enemy or the friend. The remains, the personal effects, we processed those. The processing for the American soldiers was down in Saigon. Our enemies went to another air base. We did Thai, Cambodian, Vietnamese, Vietcong, we did the whole deal.

"When I got in country, I had heart and I had feelings. But when it went along, I didn't have any feelings. If you go out into a war zone you are not going to be the same person as when you come back. I am still dealing with the PTSD. I have sessions every week where I go in and we have a roundtable. We talk about life. We try to stay away from Vietnam. Vietnam can dredge up some mean things in your mind. I found that it is something that you will never, ever lose.

"That was a war to me that we shouldn't have even been in. We shouldn't have been there. It was a waste of time, money and lives."

ALBERT JENKINS was an Army Infantry specialist in Vietnam in 1967 and '68: "I was in supplies. We had to take supplies to the troops in the field. You would go out, stay two nights and come back. Wherever they moved, you had to bring supplies to them. There were maybe 20 trucks. We had minesweepers go ahead of us. The camp we were at was always hit at night. I was scared as hell when I went on convoy; you always thought about coming back alive. I recall the truck behind us got mortared. It was maybe five to 10 yards behind us. You heard a big bang, and you knew it was behind you and you turned around. It was so frightening.

"When we were leaving Vietnam there were two planes on the field. We took the first plane. When we got to Okinawa they told us that the other plane on the runway got hit. I think I could have been on the second plane, and I think about the people on the second plane. At nights you think about those who got hurt. Even if you didn't know them you felt like they were family.

"The veterans, when we got back, were called baby killers, and people acted as if we did something bad. But we did what we were called to do and asked to do. I was proud to do what I was called on to do as an American. I want people to know that we fought like hell for this country and we were welcomed home poorly."

MELVIN HAYES was an Army specialist with Field Artillery in the Mekong Delta in 1969: "We shot mortars where our troops needed them. We gave them support. Sometimes we had to shoot mortars on top of our troops because they were in a deep firefight. I was in a couple of firefights. We could see the bullets coming at us.

"[Post-traumatic stress disorder] has dampened my life. I could have accomplished more than I did. The V.A. Hospital has helped me to cope with the flashbacks. A lot of the kids: We train them to kill, and we then put them back in civilian life. They should be retrained to come back to civilian life.

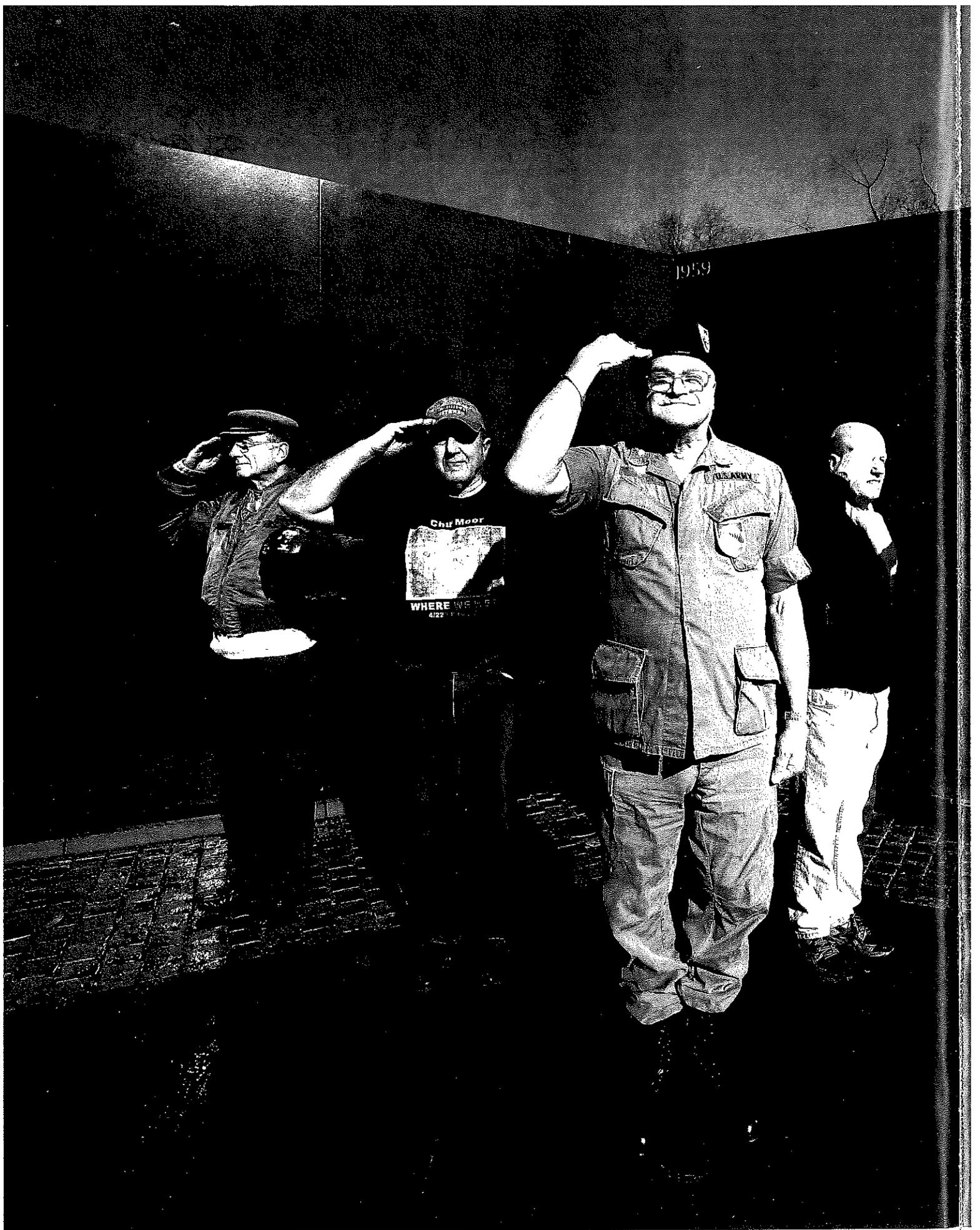
"It took a long time, but people now say, 'Thank you for being in the war.' But the younger people don't know what went on during the Vietnam War. I would like them to know so they could understand what we went through and how we are trying to adjust."

TOM STRYER spent 20 years in the Navy beginning in 1965, rising to the rank of lieutenant commander, and served in Vietnam for a year beginning in April 1967: "I just turned 23 before I got into the country. I was the third oldest guy in my organization. These were young kids. They did their duty in good spirits. My best gunner was a cook. He was from Tennessee and grew up with a rifle across his knees. Put him on a 50 and he could write his name at about a mile away.

"We were using the same kind of boats that they were using during D-Day in World War II. We did special ops. We did assaults a few times a week. We patrolled constantly. One of my duties was the water-side security for the base. We patrolled 12 miles up and down the river there. I had a piece of river that belonged to me. It was on the My Tho branch of the Mekong River. At the base we got mortared about four nights a week. At first it was very scary, then you got used to it. The typical attack was four to five rounds. It was done more to piss us off.

"I went out with a Navy corpsman and an Army doctor and gave medical treatment to villages four times a week. The idea was 'to know Americans, you have to love us.' We treated everyone who came in, from bullet and shrapnel wounds to dysentery to typhoid.

"Tet: We were firing rounds as fast as they could be loaded. We were relatively secure: There were a lot of mines that they had to get through, and they weren't very successful. None of the bad guys got as far as the



fence. They opened up at about quarter to 11 and kept on coming in till five in the morning. By that time it was a mortar round every minute or two. Five thousand of them tried to get access to our base. The base was very defensible. We didn't find a single body, but we found a hell of a lot of body parts.

"A couple of days later we got to some of the villages that we typically visited, and there were folks there who were friendly to us. The villages were completely deserted. I think they were killed. These folks wanted nothing more than to be left alone by everybody."

HUBERT JORDAN was a private first class during his time in Vietnam in 1968 and 1969: "I come from a family of citizen soldiers. My ancestors fought in every war that America has fought in except for the Spanish-American War.

"My job in Vietnam was to calculate the data used by the artillery to fire on targets. The Fire Direction Center was the center of battery operations. We were the nerve center of the battery. This was a very intense job. I became a section chief responsible for supervising the operation of the FDC. If we made a mistake we could end up killing our own troops. There were those moments of sheer terror punctuated by relative calm. My position was overrun three times by the NVA [North Vietnamese Army]. We had to do hand-to-hand combat. The first time the NVA attacked and wiped out our perimeter defenses. We had the bunker phones in the FDC. We were getting calls from people begging for help. One guy was severely wounded. I had to charge across the compound and dropped down and returned fire. We kept the NVA away from the bunker. By early morning they had retreated. Several months later we were under siege for two weeks by an NVA battalion. We fought two ground battles—had to do hand-to-hand combat to kick them off the hill.

"The [U.S.] servicemen coming back became an object of hatred for the antiwar people. It was difficult. Some of my former college friends didn't want to have anything to do with me.

"You came home. You put your uniform in the closet and you tried to forget. But you can never forget what you went through. It will stay with you, and at times it will come back to haunt you."

SALUTING THEIR FALLEN COMRADES are, from left, Harris, Shyab, Burch, Funk, Jordan and Stryer.

JOE MONAGLY FOR LIFE

JUST ONE MORE



A MEMORIAL to a dead American soldier in the scarred landscape of Mutter Ridge in Nui Cay Tri is left behind after the brutal fighting there in the fall of 1966. It was said that only luck might decide who would die and who would survive at Mutter Ridge. People who hadn't asked the questions before, now did: What was this war? Where was the way out?

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