

SMALLWAR

MY TWENTY-SEVEN MONTHS AS
A MEDIC IN VIETNAM

LARRY KIPP

HELLGATE PRESS



ASHLAND, OR

SMALLWAR

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Dedicated to all those we couldn't save

FOREWORD

SMALLWAR BY LARRY KIPP IS A MUST-READ PUBLICATION for veterans or others interested in learning about a soldier's experiences in Vietnam. Larry's stories are brief, for the most part, and give the reader a quick insight to his personal and unique experiences pre-through post-Vietnam. For a big man, over 200 pounds, I found Larry to be one of the more intellectual and sensitive people with whom I flew combat missions in an ugly war.

Larry covers the medic's role flying unarmed medical evacuation helicopters, Dustoff. He shares, with openness, the errors he made as a new crewmember and with humbleness shares how he and his peers saved countless lives with rudimentary medical tools available to them. Hundreds of missions flown, hundreds of patient's lives saved only to be rejected by his non-combat peers when he returns to the States. After nearly 50 years, he and his son return to Vietnam to seek out the beauty he found during his combat tour from late 1967 to 1970. A mission of healing and reconnecting with the soul of a gentle man.

He searched for Love—found it and was rejected by it. In his stories you sense the pain inflicted by this rejection. A soldier in Vietnam on a 3 day in-country pass or R&R or a 7 day out of country leave or R&R have several things on their mind—sex, booze, good food and relaxation. Larry takes a belated in-country R&R and hangs out with the Nguyen's. Larry skips those four R&R "objectives" and adds a fifth one—genuine human interaction with the indigenous population. He shares those insights with the reader, and you begin to understand why this "gentle giant" is drawn to people for who they are. This intellect and gentleness may be the reason he became a biologist with an interest in Orchids.

Borneo is a destination of adventure for one of his out of country trips. Borneo is not an "approved" DoD destinations for soldier R&Rs nor one that would be

attractive to a soldier looking for a reprieve from the rigors of jungle combat. He shares how and why he went to Borneo and partied with former head-hunters. Did Larry find love in Borneo? He will explain how “botanizing” caused a temporary loss of situational awareness while still finding his way back to the combat zone.

We can all learn lessons from this book and from Larry’s insight.

Steve Vermillion
Lieutenant Colonel (Retired), US Army
Call Sign: “Dustoff 40” - 1969

“Small wars are always teetering on the brink of becoming big ones.”

-Max Lerner

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A helicopter ambulance (HA), also known as a Medevac, but known to Vets by its call sign: Dustoff. Image courtesy of The Dustoff Association (<https://www.facebook.com/TheDustoffAssociation>)

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

A COLLECTION OF MEMORIES FROM THE AUTHOR'S PERSONAL RECORDS

WELL, IT'S TIME TO WRITE DOWN WHAT I remember about Vietnam and Army life, and the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, our family arguments regarding the Nam policy, and all that, in no particular order. I'm calling this collection of stories Smallwar, in honor of a quotation by Max Lerner: "Small wars are always teetering on the brink of becoming big ones." —1978

I just want to jot some things down that will serve to jog my memory. But, before that, I just want to say that this collection of remembrances, are just tiny vignettes of the life I have lived in the military.

I am not morally superior. I am not hurt more than the average GI who went to 'Nam. I am nothing special. In less than 50 years, I'll be dust . . . like so many soldiers who went to war before me. But I hope these small remembrances may live on a bit longer.

I especially want my son to read these . . . not so much to understand anything in particular . . . but to share with him a part of me that existed long before he was born. Perhaps, if I really finish this, he may pass these "war stories" on to his children. —1987

I want to thank my son, Mastin, for urging me to take him to Vietnam and show him the "two good things I saw" over there during the war. Sadly, only one of them remains. Our three- hour visit with the Buddhist monk in Da Lat has served me well since.

It took a while, but since my return to the States, I now find myself emotionally removed from that time and place. The emotions still exist, but they have become occupants and not drivers of my thoughts.

I now know the war is over, both over there, and in here, in my head. But the memories never leave. —2017

Intellectually, I know the war is over, but while writing this I reopened old memories, almost forgotten. First a trickle, then a flood. I haven't slept well since, until I started taking CBD daily. Sleep is improved, but there is no daily cycle yet. And still, the memories keep coming. —2019



Larry Kipp (Photo by Crew Chief Tom Cash)

MILITARY ABBREVIATIONS AND DEFINITIONS

25-Hour Inspection: Choppers were required to have 25-hour, 50-hour, and 100-hour inspections. Each one was different, more intense. Upon reaching the 50th flight hour, we had to pull a 25-hour and a 50-hour inspection, and so on. (All flight hours and inspections were logged into the Crew Chief's log book.)

A&D: Admissions and Dispositions

AC: Aircraft Commander

AGL: above ground level

AIT: Advanced Individual Training, after Basic training

AO: Area of Operations; also Agent Orange

ARVN: Army of the Republic of Vietnam, also known as the South Vietnamese Army (SVA)

BASIC: Basic training in the military. Here you are taught how to dress, act, and march as a soldier, and how to train to be a warrior.

Bn: Battalion

Bolt holes: bunkers

Brown Water NAVY: A combination of U.S. Navy, Coast Guard, and U.S. Army armed patrol boats securing the river passages of the Mekong Delta. Navy ships that served at sea were the "Blue Water Navy."

CIB: Combat Infantryman's Badge

CO: Commanding Officer

DEROS: Date Eligible for Return from Overseas

DI: Drill Instructor

DMZ: demilitarized zone

DOD: Department of Defense

Dustoff(s): The call sign for an unarmed medevac helicopter serving in Vietnam; also known as a HA (helicopter ambulance). The term was assigned by the Navy (responsible for all call signs in Vietnam) to Major Lloyd E. Spencer, Commander of the U. S. Army 57th Medical Detachment (HA) for use as his units medevacs. Call signs were normally replaced every few months but Maj. Spencer petitioned to keep the call sign permanently for all unarmed HAs controlled by the 44th Medical Brigade in Vietnam.

EM: Enlisted Men

ER: Emergency Room

FNG: Fucking New Guy

FSB: Fire Support Base

GI: Initials used to describe soldiers of the US Army. (One theory is that initially G.I. stood for Galvanized Iron, then Government Issue or General Issue, and some soldiers began referring to themselves as GI, or GI Joe, to symbolize they were mass-produced products of the government.)

GRS: Graves Registration Service

GWS: The Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field

HA: Helicopter Ambulance; see Dustoff

Hooch: Any living quarters. Also spelled hootch.

IED: improvised explosive device, also a mine or booby trap

IG: Inspector General

KIA: Killed in Action

Klick: Also spelled click, is slang for kilometer.

LRRP: Long Range Recon Patrol, pronounced "lerps"

LST: Landing Ship Tank

LTC: Lieutenant Colonel

LZ: Landing Zone; a hot LZ is a Landing Zone taking fire

MACV: Military Assistance Command Vietnam

MIKE FORCES: Mobile Strike Forces formed of Montagnards and Cambodian irregulars and organized by the Special Forces

MOH: Medal of Honor

Montagnards: Indigenous people of the Central Highlands of Vietnam. The term “Montagnard” means “people of the mountain” in French and is a carryover from the French colonial period in Vietnam. Also called The Degar and Nung.

MOS: Military Occupational Specialty

MPC: Army money

NCOIC: Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge

NG: National Guard

NVA: North Vietnamese Army

OJT: On-the-job training

PSP: perforated steel plating, otherwise known as a Marston Mat, used in the creation of runways.

R&R: Rest and Recreation

Real World: To all U.S. soldiers serving in Vietnam, back home was the Real World.

Ringer’s Solution: A solution of several salts dissolved in water for the purpose of creating an isotonic solution relative to the body fluids of the patient.

RTO: Radio Telephone Operator

RVN: Republic of Vietnam

Sapper: VC who would sneak into the bases with explosives

SGM: Sergeant Major

Short Timers: Those with less than 100 days left In Country

SOCOM: Special Operations Command

SOP: Standard Operating Procedure

STOL: short takeoff and landing

STRAC: Strategic Army Corps meaning in tip-top shape, ready to go.

SVA: South Vietnamese Army; see ARVN

TDY: Temporary duty

TOE: Table of Operations and Equipment

Triple S'd: Shit, shower, shave

VC: Viet Cong (local rebels) or, shorter version "Charlie" since the radio phonetic of VC is Victor Charlie

WAC: Women's Army Corps

WIA: Wounded in Action

WO: Warrant Officer

xO: Executive Officer

INTRODUCTION

EARLY LIFE LESSONS

SINCE WHEN I WAS VERY YOUNG, ANYTIME I saw trouble, I wanted to help. That didn't mean I knew how to help, but that didn't matter. I tried anyway. My parents' guidance and life's lessons would eventually show me the way, but that's not in this story.

My earliest recollection of trying to help was in second grade at Oak Grove Elementary School, in Elsmere, Delaware, an old, beautiful brick building which has since been occupied by the city police department. It was 1955, I was seven years old and it was a beautiful spring day. As recess ended, we lined up to go inside. Two boys I didn't know were next to me and they got into a pushing match. Without thinking, I stepped in and pushed them away from each other. At that moment, a teacher I didn't know heard the ruckus and turned to see what was going on.

Simultaneously, one of the boys I pushed had spun and his face went into the corner of the brick building. The teacher singled me out and told me to "go to the Principal's Office."

Knowing I did nothing wrong, I went in the building and walked down the hall to the office. The office was in the center of the building with no windows, just a window above. To enter the office, you had to walk through a smaller room where they kept office supplies. As I walked into that room for the first time, I saw a cylindrical machine with a handle on it, attached to a long board. *This must be the spanking machine I had heard the third-graders talking about*, I thought.

I got scared. I didn't deserve to get spanked, especially by a machine. That wasn't right. I turned around and walked out of the building, across the now empty playground, and walked the two miles to my home in Willow Run. When I walked past a marvelous rose garden, I stopped to smell one of the first roses of spring. Years later, I would learn it was a Peace Rose, and it smelled wonderful. As I walked into the house, my mother saw me and asked what I was doing home so early.

I hadn't thought about what I was going to tell her, and I immediately lied. "They sent me home because I am sick." Mom hugged me and put me in bed, then made me some tomato soup and brought it to my room. I felt warm, cozy, and safe.

Some hours later, my dad arrived home from work and he and Mom talked. Then Dad came in and asked how I felt. I told him I was better, and he then said, "Mom told me the school called and they said you were not sick but were sent to the Principal's Office for bullying another boy."

Knowing that wasn't exactly right, I objected, but without artful articulation. My dad never yelled, or even raised his voice. He simply broke the accusation down into its single parts:

Did I push a boy?

"Yes, but after he had started it."

Did the boy I pushed hit the corner of the brick wall? "Yes."

Was I sent to the Principal's Office? "Yes," and I did go home instead? "Yes."

I told Dad about the spanking machine and how terrified I was of it and he said he would look into that, but, "Right now, you need to be punished for lying to Mom." Oh no! I did lie to Mom! It was my first lie and I felt ashamed and knew what was next. Dad removed his belt, I leaned over his knee, and he whacked me two times with the belt. Looking back on it, I realize they were not major "whacks," just enough to let me know I had done something wrong. I cried like a baby, out of humiliation, not pain.

A few days later, when we sat down for dinner, Dad told me he'd looked into the *spanking machine*. "It does look formidable, but it's really a printing press called a mimeograph machine," he said. We then discussed what a mimeograph machine was, and I realized all was forgiven.

The lessons I learned that day were several. First, never lie to Mom. Second, don't believe everything third-graders tell you. And third, don't jump to conclusions about what a machine you don't recognize does.

I also got a lesson from Dad about how to approach problems. At that age, I couldn't articulate it, but by the time I was a teen, I knew it was a good thing to break problems down into their individual parts and go from there. This was my first step in that direction.

Afterwards, that teacher still thought I was a bully, but I wasn't. I was just trying to do the right thing.

1

WHO AM I? WHO ARE YOU?

DURING LUNCH BREAK IN TWELFTH GRADE, A BRIGHT, pensive friend asked a philosophical question: “Who am I? Who are you?” It was that guy’s nature to ask that question rhetorically, usually every day.

I thought for a moment, then said, “We won’t know the answer to that until we’ve finished our lives. Only then, looking back on each choice we made, will we have defined ourselves. *That* will be ‘who we are.’” My answer had just popped out, startling even me.

My friend looked down at the floor for a moment, then turned and left without a word. I haven’t changed my mind in all the years since that day. In fact, it has served as the foundation upon which I relied when faced with tough choices, even when I ended up choosing wrongly.

But the question did give me cause to consider my teenaged existence. I concluded I had never done anything important in my life. Further, the only benefit I brought to the world was that I breathed and consumed air, thereby providing the plants with some needed CO₂. Beyond that, my impact on the world was zero. *When I die*, I thought, *the world will not have noticed me*.

I considered most of my classmates in high school frivolous, since they never seemed to probe the mysteries of life beyond who might deign to go out with them to the hop on Saturday night. In our own way, I suppose, we all searched for true love—at least the songs on the AM radio said we did.

The year before (1963–1964), my folks had sent me to Fork Union Military Academy for my Junior year, hoping I’d raise my grades and avoid any more detentions. There, for the first time since second grade, I made the Honor Roll, since there was nothing to do at Fork Union but study. My mom was thrilled. I don’t know how my Dad felt; he never talked much about his feelings.

But one year at Fork Union was enough. Too much was happening *on the outside*.

President John F. Kennedy had been killed. Some group called the Beatles let the hair on the front of their heads hang down to their eyebrows. Plus, I'd had enough of the Spartan life.

The summer before my Senior year, I worked on the Goldwater campaign, manning a local office, on some of the afternoons. Politics, History, and Religion were the main topics at dinner each night, along with what happened that day. I'd picked up smoking at the military academy, settling on Pall Malls. I smoked a pack a day.

What I remember most about that election was:

- I got to drink my first beer at a conservative party (it was awful!);
- I learned to drive a stick shift at a farm;
- We lost the election; and
- After Goldwater lost to Lyndon Johnson, one of the big politicians went around selling gold "27" pins, because "27 million voters can't be wrong."

* * * * *

My senior year, I returned to Brandywine High School, more confident about classes, and about myself. That school year (September 1964–June 1965) was magnificent. Classes were okay. Somehow girls found me attractive, though I didn't have a clue as to why, but I liked it. I wrestled on the Varsity team that year again, and came in third in the state. (Delaware is a small state).

I fell in love twice that year. First, with a foreign-exchange student from Norway named Astrid. Oh, what a sweetie. It may have been our joint emotional illiteracy, or the language barrier, or something else, but I was head-over-heels in love. That lasted about three months.

Around Christmas, something happened. I never did figure out what, but she seemed more distant. Like a clam, I closed myself up and tried to ignore her the rest of the year, though inside I ached for her. That March, I met Kathy, who was a junior. This relationship seemed to catch on, and by the time of the Senior Prom at the Hotel du Pont in Wilmington, on a warm, moist evening, I was hopelessly in love. For a while, life was wonderful.

I had to go to summer school in Ottawa, Kansas, to prove to the admissions committee at Ottawa University that I was, indeed, worthy of admission to the

regular school year beginning in the Fall. What I mainly learned that summer was how many 15-cent schooners of 3.2 beer it took to get me really drunk. (There was no wine, no 6-percent beer, or any hard alcoholic beverages available in Kansas; too many people made money selling the 'Shine.) Since I hadn't had any alcohol since the election party the year before, it was like trying it for the first time all over again. Oh, that first beer! How awful it tasted. And, of course, it was a Budweiser.

While I was in Kansas, Kathy was back in Delaware. We wrote a lot, and those letters sustained me until I was able to return for a short while before Fall classes began. We renewed our friendship with abandon, well, almost. I fondly remember one night when I borrowed Dad's white Mercury and we saw a movie, before going parking over by Centerville. We made out passionately, for religious Christians. Without ever taking off a stitch of clothing or doing anything more than passionate kissing, we somehow were able to rehearse, emotionally, the rise, cresting, and fall of passion into a satiated state . . . when we simply hugged each other in a calm, contented way, listening to the Rock-n-Roll station, WAMS AM radio. We both fell asleep and woke much later to the tune of "Wake Up Little Susie." It was 3:45 AM, long after the 1 AM curfew, and I nearly jumped into a panic as I whisked my truelove home. Only later did I have time to smile at the irony of the music.

Soon, I was off to college and Kathy was now a senior in high school. Weekly letters sustained us both. I came home for Thanksgiving and Christmas, and all was well. Our Spring breaks didn't coincide—I was off a week earlier than her—so when I came back, she was still in classes. I wanted to surprise her by showing up in school and sneaking up behind her. Just before I did, I saw a guy come up to her and kiss her. To my surprise, she kissed him back! I went home confused and waited until school was over. Then I called and asked if it was okay to come over. "Of course!" is what I heard. So I did.

We were reacquainting ourselves inside when she went to answer a knock at the door. I am a patient fellow, sometimes. But after an hour, I went to the door and looked through the door window, and saw her sitting on the front step with that guy who kissed her at school. I waited another forty-five minutes until her older sister came to me and said how very sorry she was at how Kathy was behaving.

It was almost dinnertime by then, but they were occupying the front step. I didn't know how to leave. I was mortified at the thought of opening the door and asking them to move so I could leave. Instead, I went out the back way and walked between the houses, then to the car. A quick glance showed her looking at him, not me.

They watched me get into my car and drive away. I was ready to die and was too embarrassed to ever say anything. Thus ended my first real relationship.

It took me a while to get over this, but I eventually learned a general lesson: better *she* dumps me now than later. What she did, not how she did it, was a favor to me, in the long run.

I went back to Ottawa and was doing absolutely horribly. I was far more interested in honing my social skills than my intellectual ones. Besides, the classes were easy. I did discover that attendance mattered more than learning.

I took a political science course at 8:20 AM, Monday, Wednesday, and Fridays. I lived in a dorm on campus and it was a five-minute walk to the classroom. One morning, I woke up at my usual 8:00 AM and showered. I was fully soaped down when the water pressure died. *Oh no!*

The city had started their water main repairs. I already had three late calls in class; one more and I would get an automatic F!

I used the water in the toilet reservoir to get most of the soap off and ran to class—too late. Professor Averill chastised me in front of the class for being late one too many times and dismissed me. I stayed anyway, which greatly annoyed the professor. I went to the small discussion classes and took the quizzes, too.

When I showed up for the final, the professor asked in a squeaky voice loud enough for everyone to hear, “Why are you taking this? You already flunked the course.” To which I replied, with very real anger, “Sir, some of us come here to learn, not just to get a grade.” My moral indignation belied the fact that most of the semester I had simply goofed off, since the material came so easily to me.

Well, I got an A on the final, giving me a B average for the semester, but I took an F on the official transcript. This proved to me that “official records” don’t always speak the truth.

2 SUMMER OF '66

THE SUMMER OF '66 WAS AMAZING. THERE WERE girls everywhere. I dated a succession of girls, all nifty and cute, but hormones ruled my courting. With all the passionate make-outs, not once that summer did anything close to friendship develop.

I got a job weeding at Phillip's Nursery in Wilmington at \$1.12 per hour. This was far superior to the 60¢ an hour I made working for the ARA cafeteria at Ottawa, cleaning trays at lunch and dinner. Then, quite suddenly, several of us were laid off because there was no more weeding to do. I necessarily hitch-hiked to and from work, and this day was a somber one. I decided I had been economically murdered.

On that day, at the corner of Shipley and Wilson Road, I was picked up by a man named Bill, in a black Ford F10 pick-up truck. As we talked, I told him my troubles as he drove toward my home. By the end of the trip, Bill hired me to work for his new steel erection company, Falcon Steel, at the unheard-of wage of \$1.50 per hour! I was in the bucks now!

Bill was a great taskmaster, a gruff appearing man, always busy with renting cranes, ensuring there were enough bolts, and looking over blueprints. One late afternoon, after work, I drove the F10 assigned to me by Bill to his home to get some orders. He invited me into his home in Green Meadow, not far from where Joe Biden lived. Our conversation ranged all over the place and finally settled on American writers; he brought out some writing he had done and read some of it to me. It was much in the spirit of Jack London. I was deeply touched by seeing this very human side of my master, the boss of fourteen burley ironworkers, as he read to me.

* * * * *

That fall, at Ottawa, I met Theresa, among others. I realized at this time that I was about to flunk out of college, and I was kind of aware that there was a war going on somewhere, though no one at school ever talked about that. As a sophomore at Ottawa, I had declared my intellectual capacity by subscribing to *Time Magazine*, and they sometimes had a picture on the cover about this military thing in Vietnam. But it was far away, remote, not a part of my life.

I stayed in Ottawa that Thanksgiving, since it would have been a 1,200-mile drive to get home. Because it was a holiday, the university cafeteria was closed on Thursday until Monday, and I had to find some meals. I was broke, except for some 12-gauge shotgun shells and a box of .22 rounds. I also had my Dad's .22 single shot rifle dated 1922, and I had hunted on and off during the Fall.

That Thanksgiving I borrowed a shotgun from my landlady, who had always cooked all my catches. I really liked the walks and views nearby, and I soon discovered squirrel is okay, but it took more to get full than I was ever to get in a day. Rabbit was the best, but you can only eat rabbit after the first hard frost. I hunted that holiday weekend and ate a lot of squirrel and one rabbit. But I got through the holiday.

It was a long, lonely weekend; it gave me pause to realize how lonely I was, how much of a failure I was in school, and how I had let down everyone who loved me, especially my Dad who had (so Mom told me) borrowed money for my tuition. Just like I had been let down by the one I loved. The blues flooded me and I sought solace from "Chewy," the nickname I had given to Theresa, in honor of the song "Chewy, Chewy," by Ohio Express, which had come out in the late 1960s.

Christmas came and went. The semester was to end at the end of January, and for once I had time to think about what I would do next. All my life I had been told what to do. Choosing had never been part of my experience, and something I had never considered, until now. I had a premonition that I would get drafted, go to Vietnam, and die. Here I was, eighteen years old, and I had never made love and felt as insignificant as if I had never been born. I didn't have a clue what sex was like, but I couldn't die without knowing.

One late January day, after mailing a bunch of letters to small newspapers, asking to be their war correspondent in Vietnam, and after applying for a passport, I took Chewy out to the woods, with a picnic lunch of hot dogs, buns, mustard, and sodas.

We ate, and we made love; we both wanted to. In the end, it was *coitus interruptus*, as I didn't want to make her pregnant.

Finally, my Bible reading had paid off. Someone in the Old Testament did that, and didn't get into too much trouble with God. But afterward, I was so embarrassed I took a walk to give Chewy time to clean up. I loved her, or thought I did, but I was aloof too, and I didn't know why. We both knew her dad, who was a pastor, would have never permitted us to date long-term, much less get married.

During this time, my brother Les and I became close. He was going to Drake University, doing a double major in History and Political Science. Boy, was I impressed. Earlier that summer, he had given me a great piece of advice: "It's okay to go to the limit, but do not exceed it." Then a discussion ensued focusing on how to know what your limit is. I have pondered that, on and off, ever since, with no satisfactory answer except to listen to your intuition, especially when you are in new territory. My conclusion thus far is: Success is what happens to you if you survive, and learn, from all your mistakes.

That cold weekend in January, I hitchhiked the 247 miles to Des Moines to see my brother. We went to a very confusing party; everyone was seemingly very friendly, but just as a conversation was getting interesting, whoever I was talking to left to go "discuss" something really important with someone else in the bathroom, the closet, the porch, or the attic. Only later did I realize they went off to smoke pot, which, at that point, I didn't know much about.

That night I slept on a couch in a two-room suite. I dreamt of Chewy, and making love to her, and I awoke in climax, only to realize that somehow I was still feeling as if I were still inside her. There was another person there with me. I froze to assess any danger I might be in. Then, the presence left me and moved to my friend's room. I heard whispering. "John! John! Wanna blow job?"

John replied, "By whom?"

Once he realized it was a guy, John walked him out of the house. I had been raped in my sleep.

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Not long after that weekend, my parents contacted me. They had received several letters in the mail from newspapers denying me *Combat Reporter* status, and my passport had arrived from the State Department.

“What’s going on?” my Dad asked.

I told him I wanted to be a combat war reporter, but later that same day, I received notice that I was officially flunked out of college, so I went home immediately to face the concern and embarrassment from my parents, and waited for my draft notice.

It came in late March 1967. *So, I’m going to be a soldier*, I thought. Hmmm.

I got all kinds of advice from my Dad and his WWII friends. Dad had been a gunnery officer in the Navy on a Minesweeper in the Atlantic. He’d only ever told me one story from his service, about how once when his captain thought it was time to test a depth charge, they all had fresh fish for dinner.

One of Dad’s friends suggested that if I enlisted, I could pick my job, rather than just being an infantryman. On one thing they all agreed: never volunteer for anything, especially in Boot Camp.

“Picking my job” sounded interesting, so I went and interviewed each services Recruiter (Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, Marines and Army). Though I really liked the Navy nuclear program, the enrollment was for six years minimum. That was too long. The Marine recruiter was cool, but his eyes were too close together and decided I couldn’t take orders from someone who looked like that. I decided that being a medic in the Army would work.

The Recruiter told me that after medics school, I could apply for their dental program, and spend my days at the Army dental clinic at Fitzsimons Army Hospital in Colorado, and go skiing every weekend. This sounded like a plan. So, I enlisted for three years in the U.S. Army as a medic with brand-new plans to become a dental technician and skier.

Back then, not many drafted people were going to Vietnam. Experienced units went and new recruits replaced those units from Germany and Korea, among others, at that time.

Later someone told me, “If you wanna make God laugh, tell Him your plans.”