

## **My Cousin Mike**

by Jeffrey Stokilo, Franklin K. Lane HS, Bklyn

My report is about my cousin Mike and his Vietnam experience. I am not including his last name because of some of the things that he was involved in while he was in Vietnam. As I was growing up I knew Mike was in the army, but I did not know he toured in Viet Nam'. Before this interview I had a lot of respect for him. Now it is stronger than ever. My earliest memory was when Mike and my brother woke me up late one night when I was about 11 years old. It was funny. He said to my brother, "He wakes up very quickly. He could be a good soldier."

I enlisted in the military when I was 17 years old. I was hanging out with a bad crowd at the time. Living in Brownsville, there was nothing but the crowd. I had no father to give me guidance, so I was doing pretty much what I wanted to do. Even though my average was B+ I wasn't interested in school. Cutting class was normal. At that time I was getting in trouble with the law. The judge gave me some advice. He told me to either go enlist or go to jail.

It was 1969 when I entered the Army. I figured the Army would teach me discipline and a skill that I could use later in life. I knew the military would be hard. It was very strict. I could not do everything I wanted to do. I couldn't just go to town. I needed a pass. I couldn't just leave the base to hangout.

The only thing I knew about Vietnam at that time was that it was a war that we were fighting and I felt I would be proud to fight that war. I thought that the North Vietnamese were starting trouble and that we were there to stop it. We were there to fight Communism. During and after the war my views changed. The things that impressed me about the country were it's beauty and the attitude of its people. I realized that the North Vietnamese were very hard. They were the best fighting soldiers and I respected them. You couldn't tell the Vietcong from the other Vietnamese. The same guy that would cut your hair in the afternoon would shoot you at night.

I was based in a place called the "Central Highlands". My unit was the 173 Airborne Brigade. I was in Airborne Infantry and my unit was supposed to guard the hills at night. I was a Mortar Man. I expected us to go in there and win almost every battle. I expected the Vietnamese to be afraid. It wasn't that way. It seemed that they were winning all of the battles. Once there were incoming wounded, and we were being bombarded with rockets. I was walking and a rocket exploded about 40 yards away from me. It just shook me and pushed me about 10 feet. I was so scared that I ran into a bunker and I didn't come out. I learned how to be more careful. You know just to walk around like you are on a street corner.

I feel my morals became very low during that time. I saw what American soldiers would do to villages and people just because they were so called "enemies". I never took part in beating up the Vietnamese. I felt it was wrong. I felt that the only time it was right to kill someone was when they were trying to kill you. I still believe if the person is unarmed you shouldn't intimidate the person or beat him up. I felt guilty so many times because it was Americans doing these things.

In Vietnam, racism was rough. Whites against blacks. There is one white soldier who did not like blacks. He also didn't like Puerto Ricans and I felt like I wanted to kill that guy. Once he was talking about his bravery and how his squad was better than ours. He called our squad "pussies." He once came down on me calling me this and that. I took my M-16 and pointed it at him. I was going to shoot but my friends stopped me. The white soldiers carried rebel flags and the black soldiers wore slave bracelets and used their own handshakes. The blacks called the whites rabbits.

I never talked about it, but we did kill a sergeant. I didn't do it first hand, but we all agreed on it. It was another soldier who did it. He took a grenade and threw it into his bunker. The sergeant was sending us on a lot of missions that were not very successful. We went to our Company Commander and asked him to release the sergeant from his duties. We were unsuccessful so we took action. I regret what we did and I'm still living with it. The whole experience changed me. There was a lot of stress. It was hard for me to sleep. I also went through a lot of depression. I was sent back to the United States for medical reasons. When I got home, I was treated very badly, with no respect. There were no marching bands and no cheers. When I was on a bus back to North Carolina I heard people talking about me. There were two girls and a guy. I got up and went towards them and believe me I was going to grab the guy's throat. I wanted to just yank it, but I stopped and let them talk.

## **Henry Lee Burton**

by Sheila Graham, Franklin K. Lane, HS. Brooklyn

Henry Lee Burton lives in Saluda, South Carolina. He was drafted into the army. His mother was very upset, but she never said anything to him about it. While he was in Vietnam he was based in Quan Tree Province in the infantry. He was out in the field in combat around the DMZ. When he was in Vietnam he became a cold-blooded killer. He had to adjust to the circumstances. It was a mental thing. The war altered his mind and his life. It made him paranoid. He became more protective of the people that he really cared about. He never tried to avoid combat because he felt it was his duty. Henry Lee Burton is black, but he never experienced racism in Vietnam. He felt that in Vietnam "we were all brothers". It didn't make a difference what color a guy was. When he first returned home he was a hero in his parent's eyes, but other people treated him like dirt. But he still would want his children to join the army, he feels that it would teach them discipline. He got a lot from his experience in Vietnam. He is proud that he is a Vietnam veteran but there are some things that he wishes he could take back. He is proud of feeding people in Vietnam who had no food, but he knows that the war did not solve the problems of Vietnam.

### **A Personal Interview With A Veteran (My Father)**

by Yvette Lugo, Franklin K. Lane HS, Brooklyn

My name is Jaime Lugo. I enlisted in the U.S. Air Force in 1967, at the age of eighteen. Before I entered the military, I was employed by the U.S. Postal Service. I enlisted in the U.S. Air Force because I felt it was my duty to serve my country. My first intention was to enlist in the Marine Corps, but to please my parents, I joined the U.S. Air Force instead. My parents feared that the Marine Corps or the Army would be more dangerous for me than the Air Force.

I wasn't hoping to gain anything out of the military. Although I did gain satisfaction from serving my country. At the same time, I further developed my character as a person. Before I entered the military, all I knew was that the U.S. was trying to prevent Russia from overtaking Vietnam and turning it into a communist country. While I was in the military, I was based in Texas, South Carolina, Thailand, and Vietnam. In Vietnam, I was stationed at Base X (Phu Cat). It was just north of Qui Nhom. I was in the 307 Field Maintenance Squad.

In Vietnam, the environment and the standard of living in the country side was very poor. The people especially the women, had to find different ways in which to survive. The Vietnamese women were treated with a moderate amount of respect. There were three types of women. One type was the enemy who did whatever she could to destroy the American soldier. The second kind, in addition to the regular prostitutes in town, were the ones who were forced into prostitution, in order to pay the family debt. The third type were ones who tried to support her family by taking on menial jobs.

The children worked by cleaning up the barracks. They were known as Houseboys or Housegirls. I recall seeing how simple it was for the children to catch a fly and eat it. They would also catch rice bugs. They were considered a delicacy. While in the process of repairing the aircraft, the ricebugs would hit us and fall to the ground. At the end of the night, whatever we gathered, we would give to the Vietnamese people. To them it was like Thanksgiving Day.

Among the people who used to clean up the hangars, and other areas along the base, it was rumored that they were Vietcongs or Vietcong supporters. Some of the soldiers were friendly with the Vietnamese people. At times, while in conversation with the Vietnamese, they would hint that certain bombings were to occur later in the night. Sometimes it would happen and this led us to believe they were Vietcong supporters.

I was not directly involved in combat. I was an Airframe Repairman Technician. I used to repair the structural parts of the aircraft. Being part of a combat support squadron, and not being, in direct contact with the enemy, I did not expect to see war casualties face-to-face. When I faced these casualties; it was a very sad and horrible sight. I saw human beings with parts of their bodies dismembered were seen as I traveled into town. I saw it as a symbol of what could happen to anyone taking opposition.

Whether you were on the base or in the field, you were in danger. Some soldiers were under the impression that they were relatively safe on the base. I recall one of the soldiers wanting to see the damage created by the motars and rockets that hit the base. His sergeant warned him to get inside the bunker, but the soldier refused. He remained with his body partially outside the bunker and his arm was blown off. On numerous occasions I had to jump off the wings

of aircraft to seek safety in a nearby bunker. Going home was such a relief. It was good to touch U.S. soil again! I had such a feeling of relief knowing that I got home safe and in one piece.