

Dark Sunglasses

By Tom Peters

In 1968, I met my future wife, Patricia, and eloped with her in October when it became apparent, I was going to be drafted. The draft notice instructed me to report to Fort Wayne, a Civil War era fort, near downtown Detroit in late December.

I had a scare at the induction center when we were told to line up single file and count off by fours. When the Drill Sergeant asked all the number twos to step forward, he welcomed these poor souls to the US Marine Corps. Fortunately, I was a number 3!

A few days after New Year's Day, 1969, I found myself on a bus headed to basic training at Fort Knox, Kentucky. Our fingers froze on the rifle range in the extreme cold of that winter. Getting up so early in the morning while still dark to put on all our gear and run a hilly mile before breakfast got us in shape. Returning to the mess hall to the smell of bacon and an appetite I had never experienced before was a memory that stuck with me. The competitive spirit in me, coupled with my fascination of never having fired a weapon before, resulted in me getting expert rating on the M14 rifle and the M60 machine gun. I look back in disbelief that I wouldn't put it together that by scoring so well with these weapons, I'd find myself on a fast track to Advance Infantry Training at Fort Polk, Louisiana.

The bus ride to Louisiana took us through miles and miles of swamp and dead trees, giving me the overwhelming sensation of the misery to come.

Fort Polk sat on dusty, red clay and was hot. Hot like I had never experienced before then. The huge pine trees trapped the hot air and blocked any chance of a breeze. This was excellent training grounds for future Vietnam soldiers.

Sadly, two soldiers died in barracks near us from spinal meningitis, we were all quarantine to the fort without leave for six weeks.

As you may well imagine, I got my orders to take a 30 day leave at the end of April 1969, to report to Fort Lewis, Washington. Two days processing papers, collecting combat apparel for overseas duty to South Vietnam. The flight landed me in Anchorage, Alaska; Tokyo, Japan and finally, Cam Ranh Bay, South Vietnam.

On my last morning before embarking on this yearlong odyssey, my father was in his car ready to leave for work with sunglasses on. We exchanged goodbyes through the open window, he may have said 'be careful'. I always felt I could have used a hug. The sunglasses were dark, I thought, maybe he had a tear in his eye.