

# ARMY

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# *Vietnam*

By Daniel P. Garcia  
and  
Gen. Barry R. McCaffrey, USA Ret.



# Letters

Barry McCaffrey recently received a letter from one of his platoon sergeants in Vietnam. He shared that letter and his response with me and others who had survived Vietnam. These letters are powerful descriptions of the Vietnam experience, and I told him that I thought they deserved a wider audience. Eventually, he and Dan Garcia agreed to publication of these extensive excerpts in *ARMY*. Their experiences in Vietnam clearly had a profound impact on them and shaped their lives forever afterwards. The descriptions here are a consummate distillation of close combat. The drama and candor of these intensely personal letters portray a young NCO who accepted responsibility and served his country admirably under the command of a competent and compassionate young officer.

The lessons of leadership and trust have rarely been so clearly articulated. I hope that every sergeant in the Army, and every officer as well, will read these letters not only for what they tell us about Vietnam but also—and especially—for what they tell us about the meaning of leadership.

They also serve as excellent examples of the substantial contributions many Vietnam veterans continue to make every day.

—GEN. JACK N. MERRITT, USA RET.  
President, AUSA

Dear Gen. McCaffrey,

For many years I labored under the delusion that you had been killed in Vietnam after I returned. The one letter I received to this effect was obviously exaggerated and the discovery of your survival, let alone your achievements, induced a nearly metaphysical reaction within the darkest corners of my soul. When Joe Galloway finally pieced together the fact that we had known each other and as I fully grasped that after all these years I might actually speak to you again, I suddenly realized that to do so I would need to walk amid the wreckage in my own memory to clarify my thoughts and tell you what it meant to know that you are alive and well. Upon reflection, I further realized that to effectively communicate my thoughts to you, without being overcome or distracted by the rush of excitement or reawakened pain and confusion, I would need to write to you first. This then is my meager effort to relate back to you some of what we lived through together, what it meant to me—all told to you in a way that I would never have told you as a mere enlisted man in your company.

Speak Memory.

(Thank you, Mr. Nabakov.)

I remember that the 2-7th Cavalry left I Corps at the end of October and took up residence at a base camp 300 miles south in the flat, forested area on the Cambodian border. As President Johnson stopped the bombing of Cambodia on November 1, 1968, we were there to await the anticipated movement of NVA [North Vietnamese Army] troops from their now safe havens across the border. And they did come. I remember clearly the pitched battles and firefights the first week of November. I remember your predecessor, shot through the head and hauled by us back to our base camp. On that gray day as I was returning from the hospital to rejoin the outfit, we had lost 30 men without having encountered a single enemy soldier.

It was in this state that you came to us, our new "Amber Outlaw 6." I do not remember the exact date, but I can see the place and feel the silent mixture of apprehension and resentment masked by an outward apathy borne of fear and hardship upon our first meeting with you. You told us that at the first signs of danger you would call in artillery fire or gunships and that we would proceed with caution, not with recklessness. You made a point of coordinating our movements with support fire. We heard, we listened, but along with the rest of our innocence, faith in the words and promises of another commander had long since perished. But even among those of us in whom the beasts of death and survival were most ferocious, a spark of a single human frailty called hope was rekindled by your words.

As fate would have it, within a day or two you had a chance to prove that you were true to your word. And you were. Not long after you joined us, I remember talking to one of the platoon leaders. Those of us responsible for our platoons acknowledged that you were different from our previous leaders, that you seemed genuine. After we left the border, we had a few skirmishes, or so it seems to me now, but after the intense fighting in early November we

were okay until that day in December—the 16th or so. I remember very clearly that one or two platoons were scouting on recon. My platoon was in the lead and you were not far behind. I recall one of my machine gunners saw movement and blasted away, managing to scare away two chickens! We found a bunker; no one would go in. I went down and found the rotting corpses of two NVA soldiers, whom I shot, because I caught a flicker of rat movement from the corner of my eye. My shots burst the corrupt flesh. I recall that I was sick and disgusted and that I was in such a hurry to blow the bunker up that I barely gave anyone, including myself, time to scatter as I dropped the fragmentation grenade onto the bunker floor and fled. It was as though I could seal away the memory and disgust of that putrid bunker by burying its physical evidence.

One of my squad leaders rushed up and told me in the gravest tone that I needed to go ASAP to headquarters as something was up. I scrambled back and found you on two handsets talking to battalion command and someone else. You were dead serious. My RTO was in the cluster around you and he motioned to me. Over his frequency I heard the screams of the dying in Delta Company, and I knew at once you were ordering choppers for us to fly to their relief. They came shortly thereafter. I could see in their jerky, erratic flight movements that the pilots were scared, and it told me that we were headed to a place of death.

Alpha Company had gotten there first and, as I recall, the firing was sparse, but by the time we got there most of us knew that Delta Company had ceased to exist as a unit, that many had died and most of the others were wounded. As we moved to broaden their perimeter, we passed their remains: broken, bullet-hole-riddled equipment, a smashed helmet here, body parts there. We saw where the NVA had burned the tall grass and shot the men at close range. It was very hard. Some of my own men recognized a handkerchief or some other belonging from one of their friends and knew that he was alive no more. But we did not speak a single word to one another. I remember the fighting that followed over the next five days as we tried time and again to break out of the more or less surrounded position we were in. I remember an NVA charge at Alpha Company as I and others from Bravo came to their relief. I remember the bomb strikes sailing directly over our heads, exploding in front of our perimeter. Maybe I'm dreaming, but I recall your anger at the battalion commander who had failed to coordinate the artillery prep with the air assault so that the NVA had hours to set up their .50-caliber machine guns and mow down doomed and unsuspecting Delta Company. At least that is what I thought all these years.

I remember how on the third day or so of this engagement, the battalion commander showed up for an award ceremony in the middle of the perimeter. In fact, I think I received one—only to have it broken up by enemy rockets and mortars. It was folly and so we finally withdrew. I was the last one to leave the perimeter that last day near Christ-

mas 1968, and as I left, for the only time during my combat experience, I fired from the chopper as it left the ground a sort of signal of defiance mingled with respect for a grim, determined enemy who had taken much and given little.

During those five or six days, our casualties were comparatively light. Other units with us were not so lucky. I recall several wounded and a few men (ours or Alpha's?) lying on ponchos in a row while the snipers fired at them. I recall my rage at seeing them exposed and so I returned the fire above the heads of our own mortar crews, who were angry at me. But the sniper stopped and a chopper came.

That chopper pilot was scared out of his wits. He left so hastily he whacked a tree branch while taking off. We watched as the chopper lurched downward, but his main rotor held and he was able to limp away noisily back to base. We heard he made it and we were relieved, for nothing seemed worse to us than dying on a medevac chopper after being hit. In the main, however, as danger lurked behind every tree, every rock, you protected us. By the end of that week, those of us who had any powers of observation left believed in you.

We fled to mud and elephant country and some place I recall with the bizarre name of LZ Odessa. Somehow an R&R allocation came down for me and I left for six or seven days in Manila. But no matter what I drank or what woman I was with, the sounds of gunfire and the screams of the wounded and dying were, by now, as with all of us,



Sgt. Daniel Garcia

permanently locked inside my mind and heart.

When I came back, I remember a few slow days. Then we encountered "the complex." January 18, 1969. This day was the turning point in my life, and you played a key role in it. I have played out these events through the lens of my mind's eye many times. As I write this, I can feel the celluloid strip of memory project each image on the screen of my consciousness.

It was late morning. It was hot, and the humidity was its normal low 90s. The second platoon was on point; my third platoon was next in line. The gunfire between Delta Company (again cursed with ill fortune) and the NVA, who apparently surrounded them, rumbled somewhere in the distance, vaguely in front of us. Our advance to relieve Delta had been slowed because of the growing sounds of machine gun and automatic weapons fire. We could hear the flutter of gunships running sorties somewhere above the jungle's triple canopy.

Suddenly, machine gun fire erupted in front of me. As I was third man in my column, I could see a few flashes and soldiers scrambling for cover. The second platoon leader had pulled his men up on a crude line, and I brought my platoon up alongside. Firing was heavy. Some of my men disappeared, hiding at the first sound of contact. The 2nd platoon's men were firing weakly, as were mine. A period of perhaps 10 minutes ensued, although it seemed like hours, while both sides exchanged intense fire to little effect. I could not find all of my platoon as I tried vainly to direct fire toward several bunkers ahead of us which were pouring hundreds of rounds into our ranks.

After much arduous screaming, one grunt pointed to a bunker we had passed perhaps 25 yards behind, saying that some of my men were hiding there. I realized that without my missing soldiers, I was immobile and unable to direct any movement or fire. The 2nd platoon had three or four men shot already, and they seemed desperate as they were receiving the sharpest fire and were closely pinned down. I took a chance and stood up, running to the rear, hoping to find my troops. As I ran, I could see bullets felling vines and perforating jungle leaves immediately next to and ahead of me. One bullet passed directly under my arm, slightly ripping my loose fatigue shirt.

The ground sloped slightly from the area where the main action was taking place. I reached the bunker and could see one figure in the half shadow below. I called twice but received no answer. Finally, I went down the steps and threatened to kill anyone who didn't come out. I didn't know if I meant it, for anger, adrenaline and desperation had driven me to the brink. Either way, I must have been convincing because five of my men quickly emerged, their faces filled with shame and fear. My own deep anger and contempt raged inside of me until I saw my best friend, whom I loved as a brother, come out. When I saw him, I thought my heart would break.

Our eyes met, but only for a moment as he hung his head. As he ran back to the line I could see his tears, and the anger that had built up inside me, its own separate

force, suddenly burst. I ran back to the center of the line. Once again the firing was thick and my body was tiring. Machine gun bullets were now close on me and I threw myself behind a large anthill. I can still see the brass-colored machine gun slugs slamming into the anthill I lay behind, spinning over my head, their lead sparkling in the pockets of deep azure shining through the gaps in the layered trees. These slugs began to form a pile between my feet as I lay on my back.

Eventually, the bunker in front of me and I exchanged many rounds until I think I killed the gunner and his ammo bearer. After that, I was able to find my RTO. Thus, you, I and the others were able to communicate. At your direction, the 2nd platoon leader popped smoke on the far right of his side of the line, my men on the far left of ours. We were so close in contact we did not throw the smoke to mark our positions in front, but rather a bit behind our positions. The gunships you had called were near and they streaked in quickly. Their first burst of cannons and rockets crossed into our lines and two of my men were hit, including a private who lay next to me, his cheeks and face riddled with shrapnel. I hollered to you over the net and you helped redirect the fire almost at once, saving our lives. Some time passed and under the cover of gunships and bunker support, you rallied us to an immense old bomb crater to the left rear of our ragged line.

By this time, I had seven casualties, none fatal. One of my squad leaders had been shot in the thigh, so I had made a corporal temporary squad leader. As we all scrambled under what was now irregular NVA gunfire, we reached the perimeter of the bomb crater. I was amazed that we all fit in one bomb crater, as if it were a company-sized foxhole. You had told us that napalm was coming soon—to be dropped on our vacated positions. When it came, we were to flank the contact area and circle around to link up with Delta Company. As I had the squad leaders report to me the presence of each of their men, we suddenly realized that two were missing.

From my vantage point I could see two men alone and 50 yards away—a machine gunner and his ammo bearer. I knew that if they stayed there, they were doomed. Time was fleeting and I wasn't sure what to do, so I resigned myself to retrieving them. I remember crossing myself as I got up to go back. One of my squad leaders saw me leaving and pulled at me, begging me not to. But I was cold inside now. In a detached way, I figured I wouldn't make it, but I was so determined not to leave two of my men abandoned that I shrugged him off and ran back to the contact area.

As I got within 10 yards of their position, I stopped, screaming for them to move out while I gave them covering fire. I stood up and began shooting at the trees and bunkers in front of us. As they began to scramble out of their frozen supine positions, I could see a flicker of enemy movement. It was an RPG crew, and we shot at each other

simultaneously. I'm certain I got them, and their rocket exploded into the soft earth almost directly between my legs. The explosion blew me straight up, twisted my rifle like a pretzel and lacerated my pistol belt with shrapnel. When I landed I knew I was hurt, but I didn't know how badly as, I suppose, I was in shock.

I reached out and begged for help from the machine gun crew as they were running right at me. But I could see they were terrified. One soldier brushed my hand aside. They both glanced at me but continued running to the rally point in the bomb crater. I was now alone with no weapon. I pulled a piece of the rocket's tail fin out of my thigh with my fingers. I remember it was still hot, but it had not penetrated deep. Forty yards or so away I could see men from my own platoon watching me. I called out for help, but no one budged. By now the NVA had seen me move, so they began to open fire on me. Because the ground sloped a little where I was, their bullets seemed high. I was afraid, and felt more alone than I had ever felt in my whole life; more alone than I would ever feel again. I began to crawl back to the bomb crater.

I could see and feel the enemy's bullets whizzing over me and chewing up earth and foliage all around me. I could hear men screaming, but I did not know what or who they were screaming at. I have no idea how long it took me to crawl back; it could have been three minutes, maybe 10. It was a dark, pitiless eternity to me.

When I was a few yards away from the crater, I could hear our own machine guns firing to cover me. Finally my medic, the same one I had evicted from his hiding place in the bunker earlier, risked his life as he ran upright and dragged me in the rest of the way. As he quickly examined me, he shoved some ammonia up my nose and told me that I had shrapnel in my legs and hip and some superficial facial wounds but nothing serious. This woke me from my stupor and I found I could walk. Within the crater you were clearly in charge, your grim determination steadied me and gave me faith. Events moved quickly. We got set to move out. I distributed the remainder of my gear to my other men. Since I was walking fine and had no equipment other than bandoleers of M16 ammo, I agreed to be a human crutch for a sergeant, whose thigh was severely wounded by a machine gun bullet.

Our exodus then started. Two lieutenants from other platoons (and maybe you, too) stood firing machine guns as we began to stream out, single file, on the far side of the crater. Small arms fire rattled everywhere. The din was incredible. As we exited the crater on our way to Delta Company, I could hear the jets overhead waiting to drop their deadly bombs. I was near the end of the column and could see and hear the "woosh-woosh" of the first napalm canisters as they began to fall toward the initial contact area. At the first explosion, we could feel the heat from the burst and the air seemed to be sucked out of us for a moment. We could see panic-stricken NVA soldiers vacate bunkers and start to parallel our movements maybe 15 to 20 feet away from us. We began a steady exchange of gunfire, but

now we seemed to have the upper hand. We shot down several NVA soldiers during this retreat.

The march seemed to take forever. After a while, the level of gunfire gradually slackened, although I don't remember it ever stopping completely. Toward dusk we found Delta's position, such as it was. They seemed pathetic, shell shocked, disorganized. Their position on the return slope had few foxholes. I remember most of them were lying under or behind felled trees in little groups. They seemed exhausted and frightened to the point of near paralysis. They clearly did not have the same disciplined organizational structure that you had ingrained in us.

Finally, as dusk was settling in, you agreed to let me come in on the last chopper with some of the other ambulatory wounded. Only one chopper could land in the tiny LZ we had hacked out of the forest and it was a near vertical descent and ascent for the choppers, making them a great target. I was unsure of whether I should leave, but I was very tired. As my chopper lifted upward, I saw another sight still seared in my mind. There, on a scarred sloping hillside littered with fallen timber, debris and a few enemy corpses, 150 or so American infantrymen had set up a perimeter awaiting the next contact. The smell of cordite and gunpowder choked the humid air, and a cloud of white and black gunpowder smoke seemed to linger over the whole area. The earth, denuded now of foliage from the intense combat, was a pocket of brown surrounded by a forest wall of green. No animal or insect noises were apparent. Every minute a tracer round or two was shot aimlessly at our perimeter by hidden NVA snipers. As the chopper I boarded moved higher, the small circle of men, their dirty faces and sweat-matted fatigues became less visible, then smaller and smaller while the impenetrable jungle and forest around them grew. The scene reminded me of something...one of Bosch's visions of hell. That picture in the An Loc forest became the embodiment of hell to me.

What happened next in this endless day, you do not know. We finally reached our base camp and went to the MASH ward, I and six others from B Company, 2-7th. We waited a long time while the doctors were feverishly operating on what looked like an NVA soldier. I became restless and felt a surge of anger that my men were being ignored. I rose to do something about it when a male nurse glided up next to me and put his hand on my arm, which I found to be holding a weapon. He must have been watching. He said something to me and I finally looked at his kind eyes. He told me, "Sarge, there are only sick and wounded human beings here and we'll get to you and your men in a few minutes." His words deflated my senseless rage and I sat down, ashamed of what I had been thinking.

Later we were treated, released and sent, all seven of us, to a tent with a wood floor and canvas cots—luxury! It was apparently next to the officers' tent. Even in my enervated state, my sleep was racked with tormented images. I could hear conspiratorial whispering somewhere in my dream. Some animal instinct shook me awake. I bellowed with all

my might for the men in my tent to get out, and pushed the last two down the steps and into the dirt outside just as the grenade exploded inside, ripping the tent apart. I found I had landed near the open urine pits and I vomited hard. It was as if by vomiting, I could purge my body and soul from the nightmare this had become.

By morning I had resolved to return to the unit even though my wounds were not healed. I figured I'd rather die fighting the NVA than stay behind and be fragged.

I came back to our company sometime that afternoon. By then our unit had discovered that the NVA had been protecting the evacuation of a huge underground hospital complex that we had inadvertently stumbled upon. The enemy had withdrawn; the crises had quietly evaporated. You and I spoke that evening. You told me that I was being put in for a Silver Star. It was then or perhaps a little later—but I think then—that you asked me to stay, offering me a battlefield commission. Could you possibly remember this conversation? I do because it created an immense conflict within me. I had long since ceased caring about my physical safety. In my own rough way I was dedicated to my men, and I was, for the first time in my life, being told by an adult male whom I admired that I was needed. Someone needed me.

**B**ut the events of the day before had taken away from me the last vestiges of strength. I feared what I would become if I stayed. I assumed I would die if I stayed. But it was not fear of anything that caused me to say no to you. Rather, it was that for the first time in months I suddenly found a will to live. The physical and emotional pain from my gunshot wounds in July 1968 no longer obscured my desire to live. And so I declined, and in doing so I did not tell you "no." I said, "I can't." You said you understood. During that conversation I remember looking at you closely and seeing your pain, your isolation, the humanity in your eyes and in the expression on your face. It was a powerful turning point in my life. I realized suddenly that our leader, a man we all respected, had simply become a human being to me, with all the strength and weaknesses of other human beings. It was there, in this moment, and through our other experiences, that great truths were revealed to me about the nature of leadership.

After this my memory becomes confused. I was wounded one more time in a small firefought and left shortly thereafter in early March 1969. Between the January 18th action and my departure, however, I remember that the other young platoon sergeants and I became increasingly worried about you. You seemed to be taking more personal risks. You were pushing yourself and, sometimes, us harder. It seemed to all of us that something had happened inside of you. We noticed because, you see, we cared very much about what happened to you.

One episode stands out—maybe it's distorted, maybe by now it's confused. About the last time I was hit, we found ourselves, once again, with 2nd platoon. We were in a dry

creek bed. A small, flat clearing lay in front of us. On its far side, up near the treeline 25 yards away or so, was an enemy bunker, a high one that was clearly visible.

The memory is jumbled now. The 2nd platoon leader is hit in the neck. We pour fire into the bunker; it falls silent. You begin to order some of us to move on the bunker. You change your mind. All of a sudden, you get up and charge the bunker holding only a pistol. We are all dumbfounded. I crawl out of the creek bed and stand ready to kill anything if you are shot. You reach the bunker. No one has fired. You throw a smoke grenade in the bunker. You go inside! Four or five others and I start running toward the bunker. We are all afraid for you. You emerge from the smoke. Your face is red. You are coughing. There is a baby in your arms. In a few seconds, an old woman also emerges. We are all silent. We have never seen a child on the battlefield.

Later a chopper comes to pick up the wounded sergeant and maybe me (why?). The sergeant has sort of gone loony. He is crying out—but for what? His neck is hurt badly, but it looks like he'll make it. The chopper lands. They put him in first on a stretcher. I hop in the other side. I have a pistol on me (why?). Someone gives the infant to the wounded sergeant. The door gunner nudges me and waves his head toward the sergeant, who is holding the child in his hands, arms outstretched. Is he mad? The medic outside the chopper is shouting something at the sergeant, and I start to panic, afraid that something terrible may occur. I reach for the pistol, realizing I may have to shoot. I pull it out of my holster. My heart is sinking. The sergeant then lowers the child to his chest, embracing it. He is crying softly. The crisis passes. We begin to rev up for takeoff. Someone plops a nine-year-old girl in my lap. I'm sitting in the doorway, as usual, my legs dangling out, and now so is she. She is scared. I can feel her tiny frame shaking. We begin to take off. She bites me, not hard, but firm. All I can think is that she is scared and believes that I'll throw her out of the chopper. Finally I stroke her and find a voice in me I've never had before, and it says, "I won't hurt you." We leave. I know not any longer if all of this happened. I think it did, at least most of it. Maybe the little girl wasn't real. Maybe she's a symbol of my guilt, our collective guilt. Either way, for years she visited my dreams. She is with me still.

This ends my story. The windup is tortured and long because these memories are so. But I tell you this in detail so that despite the differences of time and space and rank, and all of the later experiences of our lives, you will know what happened there, at least in my eyes. One of us has lived to tell you now directly, on paper, how important you were to us. You were the first company commander who cared about us. I think we would have done anything for you. It was not lost on any of us that despite the combat in these months and the awesome losses in our sister companies, our own losses were light. But more than that, we came to trust you and believe in who you were. In that way you allowed us to believe in ourselves, and in doing so you saved some part of each of us. This may have been

your greatest achievement in that theater.

When I saw you last, I had great fear because I thought I saw death in your eyes. It seemed to me that your concern for yourself had ceased, and that you would continue to take risks and that someday you would be obliged. Thus, when I left Vietnam and was later written to and led to believe that you and others had been killed, I felt a great loss and believed that I had betrayed you all by not staying.

And now the essence of my message. From you I learned that leadership, particularly in times of great crisis, is a demanding and isolating experience. I learned that understanding and compassion must be combined with technical competence and strength to lead, and that selflessness, not selfishness, is required. I learned that through one leader the lives of many can be changed, and thus every human being has the ability to influence the behavior of the world in some small way. I learned that calm in the center of a storm is crucial, and that whatever the distractions, one must focus on the big picture. You taught me all this from your example.

War had caused me to watch everything in life with discernment. You removed much of the mystery of the human experience. In many ways, you taught me more about the world than anyone, including my own father. Yet we were not close. You were Amber Outlaw 6 and I, a simple platoon sergeant, was Amber Outlaw 3-5. Nonetheless, you were, and always have been, a powerful force in my life.

My experience in the military shaped the rest of my life. Having survived, I felt a special sense of obligation to live, in effect, for many who did not return. I dedicated and drove myself and my career in a way that I hoped would make some small contribution to the world beyond my own petty existence. While my personal life has been uneven and filled with mistakes in relationships, I've certainly wandered an eventful and diverse professional trail. If I have contributed anything to this world, much of it is attributable to your influence on a hardened, watchful 21-year-old platoon sergeant who once served, proudly, under your command.

I thought long about writing you this letter for fear that it could revive memories that you'd rather not have. But I chose otherwise and, once started, it assumed its own course. I hope that someday not too distant I will see you again. Until then, I hope that you and those closest to you are safe and well.

—Dan Garcia

Once "Amber Outlaw 3-5"

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DANIEL P. GARCIA is senior vice president of real estate planning and public affairs for Warner Bros. in Burbank, Calif. He has served on the boards of directors of the Kaiser Foundation, the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce and the Rockefeller Foundation. He served with distinction in Vietnam where he earned three Purple Hearts, the Silver Star, two Bronze Stars and an Air Medal. A graduate of Loyola University, he holds an MBA from the University of Southern California and a Juris Doctorate from UCLA School of Law.

Dear Dan,

Your letter of Vietnam memories was a treasure—a capsule of time that reappeared from 29 years past. The power and clarity of your letter make it one of the most profound pieces of writing on our war I have ever read. Dan—it seems like just yesterday to me, even now. I can see your face with film clarity—such a young man of integrity, courage and leadership under such enormous pressure, responsible for the lives of other even younger soldiers who were barely beyond being boys. You and the others were my family, my brothers, and my constant burden of worry during the eight months I commanded B Company, 2-7th Cavalry.

All that you have achieved with your life is a source of great pride to me. The discipline, sheer talent and energy you showed as a 21-year-old rifle platoon sergeant in combat has followed you. You did all that was asked of you and more. You were wounded three times. You took care of your soldiers. You were an example to all of us.

Your letter awakened some terrible sleeping memories. I have shared your letter with my family and some close friends—particularly the Vietnam vets who have stayed close throughout the years. I can see your memories as an out of body experience from your stark images. My recollections capture the same pictures from different angles and with other hazy, distorted and bloody perspectives.

A handful of soldiers—and particularly you—have stayed in my thoughts and prayers throughout the decades. I really loved all of you and desperately wanted you

to live and go home intact in spirit. Our country did not treat any of you with the respect, support and compassion you deserved. It was a shameful blot on our history to send the country's young men off to this terrible conflict and then use our soldiers as objects of blame for the divisive political struggle that ripped the nation apart for a decade.

Dan, you are a superb example of a Vietnam veteran with life-long dedication to America when you returned to civilian life.

When I met you as I took command of B Company, 2-7th Cavalry, in November 1968, I was *five years older than you*. I was also on my third combat tour; had been wounded twice; had a wife, son and baby daughter whom I adored; was a West Point and Ranger School graduate; and was *an old man*. All my youthful spirit for adventure, for war, for glory was gone—ground out of me in the mud and artillery fire of the DMZ fighting as part of the Vietnamese Airborne Division.

Fresh out of West Point, I had volunteered for the 82nd Airborne Division as a new 2nd lieutenant in 1964 because I believed the division would go to Vietnam. We ended up instead in the Organization of American States intervention in the Dominican Republic. Our combat experience was minimal, but I got the shock of seeing American soldiers lying dead on canvas stretchers. Now I knew.

From the Dominican Republic, I immediately volunteered for Vietnam. After extensive language and advisor training, I ended up based in Saigon with the Vietnamese



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*War had caused me to watch everything in life with discernment. You removed much of the mystery of the human experience. In many ways, you taught me more about the world than anyone, including my own father. Yet we were not close. You were Amber Outlaw 6 and I, a simple platoon sergeant, was Amber Outlaw 3-5. Nonetheless, you were, and always have been, a powerful force in my life.*

*My experience in the military shaped the rest of my life. Having survived, I felt a special sense of obligation to live, in effect, for many who did not return. I dedicated and drove myself and my career in a way that I hoped would make some small contribution to the world beyond my own petty existence. While my personal life has been uneven and filled with mistakes in relationships, I've certainly wandered an eventful and diverse professional trail. If I have contributed anything to this world, much of it is attributable to your influence on a hardened, watchful 21-year-old platoon sergeant who once served, proudly, under your command.*

2nd Parachute Infantry Battalion. Those were the days of wine and roses: air conditioned BOQs, jeeps, nightclubs, older airborne NCOs, and the cool beauty of the surf on the beaches at Vung Tau. The other reality was midnight alerts: the roar of C-47s and C-130s lifting us from Tan Son Nhut Air Base and heading out to some savage firefight on the frontier or a besieged provincial capital. Within days of leaving city lights, milk shakes and PXs, we might be involved in a massive battle with hundreds killed or wounded. In many cases the NVA would outnumber us and have overmatching rocket, mortar and artillery firepower.

After coming home, I went directly from Vietnam to Panama to be a general's aide. My poor West Point Spanish got me a wonderful year-long interlude of peace. My beautiful young wife and children shut the door on Vietnam. I worked for a wonderful old general who was a Bataan death march survivor. He treated me like his son. He wanted me to follow in his footsteps as an instructor in political science at West Point. I was to go to graduate school at Harvard and then join the faculty. In your letter you

mentioned your feelings of abandonment as you left your friends upon departing Vietnam after your *third* Purple Heart. It is a common feeling among American soldiers who have survived combat.

In my case, I was still in Panama when the Tet Offensive started on Christmas 1968. The graphic news media coverage was on our Armed Forces Network television each night—ferocious scenes of combat. Our soldiers, *our soldiers*, were dying in great numbers. I was one of three infantry captains with a Combat Infantryman Badge serving among the 15,000 troops in Panama. My sense of guilt at seeing our Army fighting for its life while I prepared to head off to graduate school broke me within a few days. Without telling the general, I called the infantry assignment officer in Washington and volunteered for immediate return. I told my wife Jill, who understood. She was scared, but she always understood. The general was scared, sad and regretful. He wanted me to be a general; he wanted my friendship. He let go reluctantly.

When I left Jill with her parents in Corona Del Mar, Calif., I had a powerful sense of letting go. This was what I was supposed to do. My friends were dying and being maimed in massive numbers. There was simply no option but duty.

When you saw me take command of B Company at LZ Billie on the Cambodian border in III Corps, I had been the 2-7th Cavalry assistant battalion operations officer (S-3) for two months. The 1st Cavalry Division conducted an emergency deployment from I Corps to Quan Loi in III Corps in response to intelligence of a planned 100,000-soldier NVA offensive. The enemy's intention was to sweep out of Cambodia down the Surrugg Jungle Highway to capture the huge American logistics complex at Long Binh. Long Binh was the biggest military installation in the world—destruction of its millions of tons of supplies, ammunition and fuel was to be a war-winning knockout blow. The garrison of 40,000 REMFs would be easy pickings. The emergency mission of our 1st Cavalry Division was to put a reconnaissance-in-force on the Cambodian border and then fall back in a fighting covering force to bring about the attrition of the enemy offensive. In the largest sense we succeeded admirably—Tet '69 was eventually stillborn. Only *one* NVA battalion ultimately survived the 100-kilometer meat grinder campaign offensive and stumbled out of the jungle a few kilometers from Long Binh. This one NVA battalion

was then killed almost to the last man by the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment.

We had done our job. But what a trail of tears the 1st Cavalry Division left behind during our bloody full-court press with the attacking NVA divisions and logistics troops. So many *Garry Owen* soldiers in green bags, so much suffering, so much blood, confusion, despair, courage, sacrifice and love. So many memories brought back by your powerful letter: Dan Garcia—handsome, poised, serious, intelligent. Your fellow platoon leader—one of the most gifted natural leaders I have ever met. The lieutenant who loved his soldiers and controlled his fear with enormous combat courage. The endless memories of the faces of teenage soldiers with their energy, respect, affection for each other and enduring courage. Our 1st sergeant was a rock to me. He helped shoulder the moral burden. He was also on his third combat tour and would earn his third Purple Heart with B Company. He had first served in 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry, in the Korean War and had been badly wounded as a young private. For most of my command tenure, the 1st sergeant was the only other soldier in our company who was both Regular Army and more than 25 years old.

**O**ur company ranged in strength from 73 to 125 men. We were essentially all draftees, ages 18 to 22—the officers, the NCOs, the soldiers. The 1st sergeant and I absolutely loved and respected all of you young men. We knew in our hearts that many of you would be wounded or killed while serving in the company. We also believed that if we could do our job properly—coordinate air and artillery; maintain tactical coordination with other battalion elements; ruthlessly enforce security, digging-in, helmets, noise/light discipline and use helicopter reconnaissance—most of you would go home alive. That was our abiding passion and purpose month after month.

I took command of B Company from a captain who was killed in action on LZ Billie after the company had been badly chewed up in our first III Corps firefight. One of the rifle platoon leaders had gotten aggressive, stupid and lost. (He survived to die of a tragic self-inflicted accidental gunshot wound 18 months later.) All of our brigade fire bases came under heavy NVA attack. An ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] firebase off to our east was overrun. Delta Company from our battalion attacked out from the firebase toward the frontier to try to push back the 107-mm rocket, 122-mm artillery and mortars that were pounding us. They promptly got stuck in close combat. The company commander (an old friend) and the company head medic were both killed and their bodies left. Alpha Company, which was commanded by another friend, then attacked out to link up with D Company and was also promptly caught in a buzz saw. Charlie Company was then in turn committed to the attack and barely got into the jungle line before the NVA machine guns opened up. Their company commander was also killed.

All day, as your brand-new B Company commander, I listened with growing dread on the radio to the sounds of D Company disintegrating and the mounting tragedy of casualties in A and C Companies. The battalion commander was a wonderful and brave man (later to be replaced by an honorable but incompetent lieutenant colonel who did indeed play a role in the later destruction of the same D Company during the Christmas fighting). In the very late afternoon, I heard the battalion commander give the orders to launch our B Company at dusk by helicopter to land directly on the remnants of Delta. When I received the order, the 18 helicopters were already inbound and were to land within 45 minutes. *Dan—I did not know any of you.* I assembled the B Company command group and platoon leaders and gave a simple five paragraph combat order. My hands were shaking but my head was clear. I then explained the attack order in Vietnamese to the "Kit Carson" NVA scout (turncoat) and the two Viet interpreters who served with us. (All three promptly deserted on an outgoing medevac chopper.)

The company XO was a shaken young man. He listened in anguish to my attack order and then said quite clearly to the entire command group, "Captain, these soldiers aren't going to go. They're scared and won't get on the choppers." I told him to get out of the company and report to the battalion headquarters. We also left behind one more of the platoon leaders—a young, frightened, stupid officer who should not have survived OCS. Finally, I told the 1st sergeant, "I'll go out on the first aircraft. You come in on the last helicopter and give me a closing report." Looking around the circle of officers and NCOs, I laid it on the line, "Our friends are dying—we need to help."

There was an immense choking swirl of dry season dirt from 18 landing helicopters. I jumped aboard the lead "Huey" with my CP element (whose names I barely knew). My RTO was holding on to my web gear as I hung out the side of the Huey, desperately trying to visualize the terrain as we roared across the jungle treetops. The sun plunged below the horizon as the choppers turned short on final approach. Heavy enemy gunfire erupted from the ground. A gigantic blow hit our Huey as a round tore through the floor behind the RTO; his eyes widened and he laughed and gave me a thumbs up. Then the LZ came into sight. Thirty or so D Company survivors lay flattened as enemy mortar rounds smacked into the ground. They were wraiths in the gathering dusk as they clawed their way onto our departing choppers and left. (They had been told to stay with us, but were leaderless, disorganized and scared.)

My CP group and I headed in the 12 o'clock direction on the LZ and set up our CP on a large recognizable mound in the deepening darkness. (It turned out to be an occupied NVA bunker.) The last of our B Company helicopters could be heard as they lifted off in a burst of suppressive gunfire. Then the 1st sergeant emerged from the darkness. "Captain," he said, "they all came. We have 123 soldiers on the ground." Dan, I had spent all of my 25 years getting

*Capt. Barry R. McCaffrey was twice awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for extraordinary heroism in Vietnam combat action. Here, Gen. William C. Westmoreland congratulates him.*



ready for that night. I had buried my brother-in-law, who had been killed in action in August of 1964. I knew my dad, an Army lieutenant general, would honor me in death. I dearly wanted to live to see my wife and children. But, Dan, that night three kilometers north of LZ Billie—with automatic weapons gunfire whip-cracking across the LZ, with the ferocious roar of bamboo burning and exploding from the artillery strikes, with the stench and fear of death around us—I said a prayer that I could live up to the demands of commanding a

company of brave young soldiers like you—soldiers who would fly into a savage night firefight because other unknown teenage soldiers from 2-7th Cavalry were dying and needed help. That night I was home in B Company.

The following months of combat are distorted now. I was so very proud to command such a group of soldiers. The memories of unending vigilance; ripped hands from constant digging; the shock of making contact as firing built up quickly in a crescendo; the acrid smell of grenades, cordite, C4 explosives, trip flares; the incredible stench of filthy soldiers, the sight of torn uniforms, the constant pain from bites, destroyed feet, pulled muscles from carrying 80 pounds of water, ammunition, weapons, packs; and the agony of seeing screaming, wounded soldiers and dragging the dead to helicopters. Thank God for our extremely low B Company casualties. Much of it was due to the incredible diligence of young NCOs like you. Much of it was due to the experience and cunning that the 1st sergeant and I had gained from surviving many years of combat between us. Some of it was luck and the hand of God.

I can remember all the images drawn so vividly in your letter. The terrible battle at Christmas which went on for a week and nearly destroyed D Company, A Company and C Company in sequence. We were fortunate to have no one killed despite our many wounded. I recall shooting two NVA soldiers at close range with a .45-caliber pistol and throwing dozens of grenades. I also remember calling in thousands of rounds of artillery and mortars—and bringing in dozens of armed choppers and tactical air strikes. The superb division commanding general—Maj. Gen. George Forsythe, who was a courageous and experienced World War II Normandy invasion vet—finally pulled us. He understood we were being ground up piecemeal by larger NVA forces.

I do remember offering to nominate you for a combat

field direct commission. You were such a superb leader. I did understand that you could not do it. You were way beyond the limit and had to go. Death was waiting to harvest you.

Your other memories are also a common reel of film in my mind: The B Company fight in the complex—the huge bomb crater; your single-handed attack to recover your soldiers; my CP group and me pinned down behind a NVA bunker while two heavy machine guns chopped down bamboo inches over our heads; the shock when we first made contact, walking into a surprised group of 30 or more NVA soldiers; our brave point man with a stutter and a .38-caliber pistol yelling “dung-lai” (surrender) as the rest of us opened up on automatic fire.

After you were medevac’d from that fight, the battalion commander ordered us to attack at dusk to get an enemy body count to justify the enormous number of friendly air strikes. I argued with him to no avail. We had heavy leader casualties and little ammunition. Night was falling, and we were outnumbered and trying to get organized. New replacements and boxes of unopened ammunition were scattered throughout the company. The adjoining D Company commander reported an attack his company never made. In our B Company, my brave RTO, our huge company medic who was known for his courage, and one volunteer platoon leader and his RTO moved out with me, crawling forward into the enemy contact zone. I reported over the radio that B Company minus was across the line in an attack. We moved about 150 meters into the contact zone and then encountered bunches of moving NVA trying to withdraw. We froze—then the medic shot an M79 40-mm round at an NVA soldier on top of a bunker 20 feet away. The 40-mm didn’t detonate, but it did kill him. The place then came alive with enemy fire. We were able to back out throwing hand grenades to cover our withdrawal. The battalion commander, miles away, could then report that his

battalion had continued the attack but had been repulsed.

I also remember the day both you and another one of our platoon leaders were wounded in an attack on what turned out to be an armed field support complex. That was a disgusting day. I shot an NVA soldier dead in the face while clearing a bunker. I also remember the company saving the children and their mother in the bunker, and our enormous relief that they had not been killed. I remember giving the children cartons of field ration milk when we put them on the chopper that medevac'd you and the other wounded platoon leader. The children were so terrified their faces were numb with fear. I cried—thinking of my own children and also because I was terrified that the other platoon leader might die from his throat wound.

**A**fter you "DEROS'd" home, B Company kept fighting nearly nonstop as the 1st Cavalry Division fell back on the final defensive rocket belt 12 kilometers out from the Long Binh Field Logistics Base—a series of violent skirmishes and meeting engagements—a constant drain of casualties. The lieutenants and sergeants were going out faster as casualties in other companies than in B Company because of our ferocious concentration on security, camouflage and digging. I was starting to feel the pressure. I desperately didn't want our soldiers to die. You are correct that I did become more uncompromising and demanding and started to take greater personal risks. My face had a giant twitch under the left eye. I was having combat nightmares that required my CP group to cover my mouth and slap me awake during sleeping breaks.

It couldn't go on—too much fighting, too many exposures. On my last day in B Company, we encountered a huge NVA assembly area and bunker complex. Our three platoons fanned out in a cloverleaf. The third platoon immediately made heavy contact with the enemy and was pinned down. The 1st sergeant, as usual, was with them and was reported wounded and in unknown condition. My heart was again frozen with fear for our soldiers. We got two rifle platoons on line and attacked under heavy fire through moderately open jungle and successfully linked up with the isolated third platoon. Then things turned nasty with heavy enemy fire. We managed to knock out all the NVA bunkers in close proximity. I called in a 105-mm artillery battery 6x6 shoot. The rounds shrieked in to smash the complex. Our one B Company mortar opened up. The armed choppers rolled in and then we attacked. Our company bugler blew the attack. (I still have the bugle.) One bunker in particular held us up. I snapped, and assaulted it twice with grenades and finally got it. Dan, to this day I can't understand how I lived through the attack. There was an enormous amount of fire directed at me during the two assaults. The NVA kept throwing their potato masher grenades. We'd scramble and roll in terror a yard or so away and then be blown sideways with splinters in our exposed skin.

Finally, we had the upper hand, I thought—heavy friendly

fire outgoing, sporadic NVA fire incoming. The B Company assault line lurched forward screaming, firing M16s on automatic and throwing grenades. Then it happened. An enemy RPD machine gun opened up on our right flank almost under the feet of our assault line and knocked us down like bowling pins. One of our men went down as if a sledgehammer had hit his helmet. I had my pistol shot out of my hand and my canteen off my hip. My face kept grinding in the dirt—couldn't sort it out—sat up with the enemy machine gun hammering by my ears and saw two broken bones sticking out past my elbow—no apparent arm and my blood pumping a foot out with the frantic beating of my heart. A brave young sergeant charged forward to get the machine gun and was cut down dead. One of our platoon leaders finally stopped the slaughter by jumping on the enemy bunker and shooting the NVA machine gunner in the face with his shotgun. The incredibly brave and unarmed company medic then jerked me into defilade. The rest is a haze of me trying to organize and extract B Company while swimming through the shock waves of increasing pain.

The wounded 1st sergeant and wounded lieutenant finally got us out. I was medevac'd out on a helicopter jungle penetrator with our other 15 wounded and 3 killed in action. I left in physical agony but with an even more terrible pain in my heart that I was going to the safety of an Army MASH hospital. I would have gladly died there that day if I could have protected B Company from harm.

So, Dan Garcia, here we sit after all these years—alive with our memories and grateful that we both survived to write these letters on Vietnam. We have bridged this chasm of time and opened a door on the courage and pain we shared in combat. I'm proud of your enormous accomplishments: the law degree, the partnership in a famous firm, the high corporate office in an international company and your splendid record of public service in city government.

Mostly, though, I'm proud of the vivid image I have of the courage in ferocious combat of a 21-year-old rifle platoon sergeant in B Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry. You were a superb soldier. You took care of your men. You led by example. I'm glad my prayers have been answered, with one more *Garry Owen* soldier home at last.

—Barry McCaffrey

Captain, Infantry, 1968–69  
Once "Outlaw 6"

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GEN. BARRY R. McCAFFREY, USA Ret., served as commander in chief, U.S. Southern Command, before being appointed by President Clinton in 1996 as director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy. In addition to his combat tours in the Dominican Republic and Vietnam, he commanded the 24th Infantry Division (Mechanized) in Iraq during Operation Desert Storm. He now serves on the National Security Council and the President's Drug Policy Council. A graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, he holds a master's degree from American University.