An interview with William P. Hogue, Vietnam veteran (and NY State resident for many years) -- April 13, 2009, in Highland Mills NY

Were you drafted or did you enlist?

WPH-I was drafted and reported for duty on February 14, 1968

Where were you living at the time?

WPH-The small town about 45 miles north of Chicago where I grew up called Grayslake, Illinois.

Why did you join?

WPH - I was drafted because after two years of college, I could not afford to return. My "Student Deferment," or "2S" as they were called, was discontinued, and after a physical I was classified "4A" which means fit for service.

Why did you pick the service branch you joined?

WPH -When you were drafted, unless you wanted to choose to enlist, you had no choice of service. You were automatically placed in the army.

Do you recall your first days in service?

WPH -My first day of service, I took the train from Chicago to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, for eight weeks of basic training. Before we got on the train, we were hustled into a room where we would take the oath of enlistment. The wording of this oath is actually similar to the oath taken by the President of the United States. "I, William P. Hogue, do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, etc."

When we got into the room, and a burly sergeant started the oath, "Gentlemen, repeat after me…." One soldier in the back of the room said very loudly, "I ain't repeatin' after nobody." He was an African American man, and a pretty good size himself. The Sergeant said, "Son, you have to take this oath. It's the law." The soldier said, "I don't care about no law. I ain't takin' no oath."

The sergeant, who was on a small raised stage, stepped down, made his way slowly through the assembled recruits (or "new meat" as we would be known our first few weeks of basic) to the back of the room, and came up in front of the unruly soldier. He started talking to him in about the nicest, kindest voice you can imagine. "Son, I know this is scary. I know there is a war on. But you will be well taken care of by the army. So, please cooperate and take the oath." He even had his hand on this guy's shoulder while he was saying it. Finally, the guy, with his head bent down says, "Okay."

The sergeant return to his little stage, and began again, "Gentlemen…" (they always called us "gentlemen"). The instant we said the last word of the oath, the sergeant, in about the loudest, meanest voice you can imagine screamed, "You, in the back," and we knew exactly who he meant, "You're mine now. Get down on the floor and start doing push ups until I tell you to stop." The black man didn't move, and started to speak. But the sergeant was already off his stage and standing in front of the man, just staring at him, about two inches from his face. And slowly, like he was melting to the floor, the black man got down on all fours and started to do push ups. It was the one and only time I ever saw him, and as the rest of us left the room, he was still doing push ups.

In short, I knew my life was going to change.

What did it feel like?

WPH - For someone who was kind of a wise guy (me), it was a tough situation. I basically always said what I wanted. Now, I couldn't say anything I wanted. And I couldn't talk unless I was spoken to. The night before I left for basic training, my brother-in-law who was about 14 years older than I and an ex-Marine, took me alone into the kitchen of his house, grabbed me by the front of my shirt, pulled me toward him and said, "I'm just going to say one thing to you: Keep your f__king mouth shut for two years." It was the best of advice I could have gotten. And so I did.

My "epiphany," the one that helped me get through two years of the army, happened after a couple of weeks of basic training as I sat on my bunk shining my boots on a Sunday afternoon. The army had taken all of my possessions, shaved my head, "issued" me a whole new set of clothes and footwear and headgear and a gun (I'd only held and fired one once in my life), a tiny bed with linens and two blankets and one pillow and told me what to do every minute of my life. And they did things that at first seemed crazy.

During the first weeks of basic, we had a guy who never made his bed right. Every morning inspection (there was one every morning) he got in trouble because his bed wasn't made right. And the sergeant would always turn to us and say, "You men better make sure this soldier starts making his bed right." But he didn't. And one morning about 2:00 am, the lights went on in the barracks and sergeants were hollering at us to "Wake up! Wake up!"

We were all told to get out of bed and PICK UP AND CARRY OUR MATTRESSES OUTSIDE. So there we were, in the dark in our underwear, barefoot, in the Missouri winter each of holding our mattress. And the sergeant said, "Every man must do what he is told to do and do it right. If he does not, he jeopardizes the lives of the men around him." Then he paused for a half minute, and said, "Dismissed!" We all ran into the barracks, or as well as you could run carrying a mattress, reassembled our beds and got under our one sheet and two army blankets shivering.

The next morning, a half dozen soldiers were standing around that soldier's bed helping him make his bed the right way. On that Sunday, thinking about the mattress incident, I realized something. As crazy as some of the stuff they did seemed, everything they were teaching us had one purpose: To help us stay alive. Once I got that, I'm not saying I liked it the army, because I hated it every minute I was in it, but because I understood it, I could get through every day.

Tell me about your boot camp/training experience(s).

WPH - The first time we were in formation, there were a number of companies present. It was a lot of men, all in brand new green uniforms, lined up and I thought it looked a bit like a Leni Riefenstahl epic. It was just dawn, and freezing, and there was some officer standing on the steps of this building and he was blathering on about service and what a wonderful thing we were doing serving our country (like we had a choice; if you didn't report for service, you went to jail or Canada).

We were all "at ease" which meant I wasn't "at attention" and didn't have to stand rod straight with my eyes forward and my heals together, my feet a 45-degree angle, arms straight, fingers curled, thumb straight and following the line of the seam of my trousers. So I could look around a little bit. And looking around I noticed on thing in particular: how many black men there were. They were only 10 percent of the population, but they sure were more than 10 percent of this group. Way

more. I've since checked and supposedly the black soldier population was in the low teens, but I can just tell you there were more than that.

So, now, someone who had never known a black person in his life was sleeping about a foot away from them, showering with them, training with them, firing guns with them. By the way, you were never allowed to call it a "gun," it was always your "weapon" and if you did, they made you recite a little poem: Pointing at your gun, you said, "This is my weapon," pointing at your crotch you said, "This is my gun." Pointing again at your weapon, you said, "This is for fighting," pointing again at your crotch you said, "This is for fun."

Regarding the black population, following is a message I emailed to a number of friends and relatives this past April 4 with the subject, "Forty-One Years Ago Today":

On April 4, 1968, I was finishing bivouac during basic training in Missouri with three other trainees, two black and one white. After dark, as we were sitting around a fire, talking, complaining, doing what soldiers do at the end of a day, an officer came to where our tents were pitched. As we started to rise, he said, "At ease." He stood looking at the four of us for an awkward moment, and then he said, "Gentlemen, today Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot dead." At first, we just froze. Then one of the black soldiers started sobbing and the other kept punching his knee, tears rolling down his cheeks, saying, "No, no, no...." This was a loss so inconsolable and incomprehensible that I could do nothing but remain respectfully silent and still. And then, without really thinking, I put my hand on the heaving shoulder of the young black man next to me and whispered, "I'm so sorry...."

Do you remember your instructors?

WPH -I remember two sergeants. The senior sergeant was a man in his forties, although he looked older. In 1968, he had already done two tours in Vietnam. While very strong and authoritative, he seemed a bit subdued. Then there was "Sergeant Willy." He was a real peacock of a guy. Small and handsome in a James Dean sort of way. His uniforms were all tailored to fit real tight and he always wore his Smokey the Bear hat (as we called the drill instructors head gear) at a rakish tilt down on his forehead. In short, he was a really cool guy.

During basic, you of course march everywhere, in a line, in sync, left-right, left-right. Sometimes you marched just to kill in hour in the day and of course get the exercise. Sergeant Willy knew how numbingly boring this was, and so he taught us all these cool marches, where your weave in and out and come out the other end somehow back to four abreast, so it passed the time. For us and for him, I'm guessing.

One day, when Sergeant Willy wasn't there, the senior sergeant marched us on this quad for an hour, but all he did was march us around and around and around, no weaving in and out, just around and around and around for an hour. This was our last exercise of the training day, so we got into formation at the end of the marching hour and before dismissing us, the senior sergeant asked what he asked every time, "Does anyone have any questions." Of course, no one ever did. You learned real early on, this was an empty and definitely a rhetorical question. But this day, when the senior sergeant asked, "Does anyone have any questions," I'm not sure why, I raised my hand. The sergeant started to say, "Dism…." then he saw my hand.

He stopped immediately, and said, "Well, well. Private Hogue has a question." And everybody kind of looked at me like I was nuts. "What's your question, Private?"

"Sergeant," I said, because you always started EVERY sentence with sergeant or you would be doing pushups. "Since were all going to Vietnam where I understand everyone walks on trails, single file, one after the other and certainly not in lock step, why are we wasting an hour marching four abreast in the quad?"

The sergeant paused for a second, then said, "See me after formation, Private Hogue." Then he screamed, "Dismissed!" and everyone ran but me. I knew I was in for it, and so walked slowly up to the sergeant who, when I got within a couple of feet of him, he grabbed the front of my uniform shirt, and just like my brother-in-law, pulled me within a few inches of his face and said, "We teach soldiers to march to get them from one place to another." And then he screamed so loud my ears rang afterward, "DISMISSED!"

I didn't run, though, I just walked away, and after walking a bit, I turned around and saw the sergeant still standing in the same place, his shoulders slumped down, his head down, shaking his head from side to side. And I thought, "He's thinking about all those he lost." I never asked another question again, not for two whole years.

How did you get through it?

WPH -As I said, once I learned that every thing we were made to do, now matter how seemingly crazy, was designed to teach us to survive. You just can't question a command in the military. If you're in a fire fight and your sergeant says, "Get down!" and you say, "Well, why sergeant?" you'll never finish the sentence.

In 1968, I wore my hair long, almost to my shoulders. A week before I reported for basic training, I thought, "I should get this cut," and I did and I'm glad I did. One guy came to basic training with full-blown hair to his shoulders. The first formation, before we even got our uniforms or heads shaved, the sergeant said, "Hey look, Susie is in our company. Come here Susie." The guy went to the front, still for some bizarre reason acting cool. The sergeant said, "That's really beautiful hair you got there," and he started stroking it, and this idiot is taking this as a COMPLIMENT. Then the sergeant says, "In fact, you have such pretty hair, I don't think we'll cut it." And they didn't. For weeks. So while everyone else has a shaved head, this guy has to wear a hair net, and somehow get his hair inside his hat or his helmet. He was also on KP (Kitchen Police) all the time. We all watched. We all learned. Lesson: No individuality here. It can undermine the cohesiveness of the whole, and the cohesiveness of the whole is what will keep you alive.

Which war(s) did you serve in (WWI, WWII, Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf)?
WPH -Vietnam

Where exactly did you go?

WPH -Actually, I was sent to Germany right after I finished AIT (advanced individual training). People forget that during Vietnam we had an army of nearly three million, with soldiers all over the world. I was in the Signal Corps, a "Radio Teletype Operator." This machine sort of predated the internet in that by firing up my radio (It was a big as a two-door refrigerator), I could type a message on a teletype machine, it would fly through the air to another teletype machine on the same frequency and automatically type out on that machine. Then that operator would type a reply and it would fly through the air to my machine and type out automatically.

In Germany, where I gained 20 pounds drinking beer and eating bratwurst and where I wrote letters home on my radio teletype machine with its big continuous Jack Kerouac-like roll of yellow

paper, there was something called “The Levy List.” This list was not your friend. It came out every month and on it were the names of soldiers being transferred from Europe to Vietnam. Something no one wanted, of course. The first few months in Germany, I looked, with immense dread, at The Levy List the minute it came out, looking for and hoping not to see my name. After six months or so, I never even bothered to look at The Levy List. When I had nine months left in the service, I also had a German girlfriend, I was about to buy a car, I was about to be promoted to sergeant myself, I had money in the bank, I was, I thought, home free. Not so fast.

One Sunday, coming into dinner chow after spending the weekend with my German girlfriend, I came to the end of the line, and there was my sergeant. His name was Sergeant Jones. He was African American, a “lifer” who had spent his whole adult life in the military, and he was a really good guy with whom I got along with splendidly. When I came to the end of the line, I saw that Sergeant Jones was there, in uniform, so he had Sunday duty. When I came up to him and said, “Hello, Sergeant,” he gave me this weird look and turned away.

At first I’m thinking, “What the hell is wrong with him? He must be pissed because he has duty today.” So I thought, “F__k you, Not my problem.” And while we stood silently, he turned and gave me the look again. Now I’m getting really pissed, and then I look down and I see him reaching back one of his hands and in that hand is a scrap of yellow paper, like you tore off the corner of legal pad. I took the piece of paper out of his hand. There was writing on it, and I read, “Hogue, due date Vietnam, July 25, 1969.”

I just kept staring at the paper and said, “Is this some kind of joke?” And I heard Sergeant Jones say, “It’s no joke,” and when I looked up, he was looking right at me his eyes filled to the brim with tears.

So, after two weeks of training in the U.S., I was sent to Vietnam. I landed in Cameron Bay, a place with 30,000 soldiers, Chevrolet cars driving around, flush toilets, enlisted men and officers club, and where the soldiers swam in the beautiful waters of the South China Sea every afternoon. “Well, this isn’t so bad,” I thought, even though it was un-Godly hot. But I wasn’t going to be in Cameron Bay long. In fact, just a day. Then I got on a troop transport plane, where soldiers sit on the floor about 20 across in each row with ONE seat belt that your string from left to right and no windows and was flown to a place called Chu Lai.

Now Chu Lai was like a smaller version of Cameron Bay—cars, toilets, clubs, South China Sea in the afternoon, and I thought, “Well, this isn’t so bad.” But I wasn’t going to be in Chu Lai. Turns out I was going to get on a helicopter and be flown to a place called “Baldy.” During the helicopter ride, with me as the only “passenger,” I asked the door gunner above the noise of the engine, “Why do they call this place ‘Baldy’?” and he answered by pointing out the open door of the chopper. And there was “Baldy,” like a big thumb of mud sticking out of the jungle, every singly tree and foliage napalmed off it, the only living things on it the soldiers who lived there.

I moved to a couple of other hills while I was there and flew around a lot visiting other hills, some big some tiny. One hill I visited was big enough to have a bona fide Communications Center, half underground and piled up with sand bags against rocket attacks, I still had my Top Secret clearance, as did a buddy of mine, so we went inside the Comm Center. It was clean and neat and AIR CONDITIONED and as we walked through, I stopped and said to my buddy, “Hey, look, a radio teletype machine. That’s what I’m supposed to be operating.”

Did you see combat?

WPH -Never ask a soldier this question. There is a rule, “Those that saw the most, talk the least about it.” And for the most part that is true. I did some research for a book I was writing and found out that in World War II, for every “grunt” combat soldier, there were two or three back up soldiers in artillery, and supply and communications, etc. In Korea, that number jumped to 4 to 5, and

during Vietnam, that number jumped again to 6 or 7. Remember my description of Cameron Bay? The guys there didn't even wear helmets. And their weapons were locked up in their barracks. I never let my weapon go except when I went to the bathroom, and barely then. One kind of funny story on this subject:

A friend from my home town actually ended up in Cameron Bay working in a warehouse. Back then, there was a very popular television show called simply, "Combat." When my friend got back from Vietnam and everybody kept asking, "Did you see any combat?" he would always answer, "You bet. Every Monday night."

Were there many casualties in your unit?

WPH -Injuries, no American casualties. Thank God.

Tell me about a couple of your most memorable experiences.

WPH -The Viet Cong were every where, living in the villages right near the hills I was on during the day, and at night attacking and trying every way possible to get on the hill and do damage. One hill I was on, we had these "kids" as we called them because they were kids from the nearby village, come on the hill and do work, like putting sandbags back together after a rocket attack, etc. One of these kids, a boy, was very quiet and very solemn and clearly did not like doing work for us.

One day, outside the tent where we slept, I went to a "piss tube" (these were hollow tubes just stuck in the ground with a screen on them and you went to them and urinated into them) and I went to the bathroom. This solemn boy was sitting on a rock by himself smoking a cigarette, an American cigarette he had earned, and I just knew he was watching me. After I urinated, I walked past him and nodded as I passed. He did not nod back and as I walked back to the tent I felt his eyes on my back the way you can, and before I went into the tent, I turned and looked at him. He had the most devastating look of hate I have ever seen before or since. I turned and went into the tent and as I did, I thought, "If I were him, I'd hate me, too."

Another young person who worked on another hill was a girl of maybe 16. We called her, Suzie (what else? For Suzie Wong). She was what was called a "good girl" because ALL she did was clean and wash clothes and that was it. She spoke very broken G.I. English and I got to know her a bit. In the parlance of the Vietnamese, when something was very good, it was "Number One," when something was very bad, it was "Number Ten" and sometimes with the addition of "motherf__ker." One day I asked Suzie:

"Suzie, are G.I.s Number One or Number Ten?"
She answered, "G.I. Number One, but if G.I. go home, no more war."

And, of course, she was right.

Were you awarded any medals or citations?

WPH -Just the normal ribbons for soldiers who were in a war overseas.

How did you get them?

WPH -By being a good soldier.

How did you stay in touch with your family?

WPH -Almost exclusively by mail. My mother and I had been active correspondents from the time I went to college and that continued when I went to Germany and to Vietnam. My mom was one of the best read people I have ever known. She had a curious and astute intellect and I loved writing her but most of all receiving her letters. Our letters were conversations through the mail. She would write about the books she was reading or a marvelous interview on The Dick Cavett Show with a well known author like John Cheever.

One of my two sergeants on one hill I was on was a kindred spirit in his passion for reading and the written word. My mom, God bless her, got me a subscription to the Chicago Daily News (now defunct). Wherever I was, the papers would arrive, like seven at a time, and I would devour them because they were like messages from The Real World, a coinage from that time referring to any place that WASN'T Vietnam. I always shared the papers with this one sergeant and he was most grateful. I had also shared some of my mom's letters with him. And one day, after mail call, he saw that I had received a letter from my mom, and he said, "Do you think, or would you mind, after you read your mom's letter, I could take a look?" Yes, they were that good. And they kept me sane.

What was the food like?

WPH -Some hills were big enough to have a "chow hall" which was a tent with like picnic tables in it. The cooks really had to improvise using kerosene heaters and stoves and food was dreadful. So bad in fact, that most of the time we just ate the K rations that came in green cans of varying sizes. We had a P-38 to open them. To this day, I still call the P-38 one of the smartest simplest most efficient designs I have ever encountered. It's about the size of a half dollar. It's two pieces of metal hinged together, one rectangular, one with a sharp hook on it, and it opens a can as fast as anything with an electric motor.

The food actually wasn't that bad. Some was awful, but how to you put scrambled eggs in a can and make them taste good? There was canned meats, and crackers and even these flat little tins, with peanut butter and jelly in them. One day in late November, a bunch of us were sitting around opening K rations with our P-38s and one soldier said holding up an open can, "Of course it's Thanksgiving (and it was). I'm eating boned turkey."

Did you have plenty of supplies?

WPH -We did. That's one thing about the war. We were well supplied. I never heard of anyone ever running out of anything. We used to get these boxes, like survival kits, with first aid stuff in them, and back then of course, cigarettes (two varieties, one with filters and one without), and these candy bars we called "John Wayne bars." They were almost inedible, and so the few times I was on Highway One (the one paved road that ran the length of South Vietnam) and drove through villages, we would toss the John Wayne Bars out of the truck to the little kids standing watching us pass. They would scramble like crazy to get one, and sad to say, they often had to fight the adults for them, and usually lost.

Did you feel pressure or stress?

WPH -To describe how I felt most of the time in Vietnam and I ask people to imagine that feeling when you're driving down a highway and you see somebody up ahead on a side street who starts to pull out, but sees you and stops, and you think they are not going to pull out, and then all of sudden, they do pull out and you nearly hit them. That feeling you have when that car pulls out? That's how I felt the whole time I was there.

Was there something special you did for "good luck"?

WPH -Not really. I was off religion completely while I was in Vietnam. They always say, there are no atheists in a fox hole, and for the most part they are right. You clutch to whatever you think will get you home safe. I made a lot of promises to whom I'm not sure. So, I guess that was God. The promises usually went, "Just get me through this alive and I promise I will never/always…." Since people don't never or always, like I said, I broke most of the promises. Although occasionally when something in life really bothers me and I start to complain, I remember those promises and sometimes it shuts me down and I am grateful again just to be around TO complain.

Before I left for Vietnam, I returned home from Germany for two weeks. It was awful. I said when I heard I had to go home first, "It will be like attending my own wake," and it was. I know now how and why very sick people try to strengthen those around them by acting like it's no big deal even though the big deal is killing them. Going to a war you've got a 50/50 chance. You'll come back, or you won't. There are other options, of course, like coming back with your head on backwards psychologically, or coming back with only part of your head and one arm, or one leg, or none of those.

When I was in Germany, my mother bought me a ring for my birthday and sent it to me. I didn't like it very much and never wore it. When I returned home for the leave, she asked where the ring was. I told her in the nicest way possible it wasn't really my style. She asked what kind of ring I would like and we could exchange that ring for what I would prefer. For some reason that to this day I can't explain, I said, "I want a plain gold band that I can wear on the small finger of my left hand." So we went to the jewelry store, exchanged the other ring for a gold band and I wear that ring to this day. It reminds me always of my mom, of course, and what part luck plays in life, both in and out of combat.

How did people entertain themselves?

WPH -It's no secret there were plenty of drugs in Vietnam. My sick line is, "The only drug you couldn't get was aspirin." And while you couldn't get aspirin, you could get anything else, too. Anything else. And, of course, the Viet Cong were the biggest proponents of drug use among G.I.s. Simply put, drugs hampered their ability to fight efficiently. They clouded their thinking, and rather than make it easier to deal with the stress, in many cases made them even more paranoid.

Occasionally we got some beer, awful and usually warm. No hard liquor that I can remember. There was this one product called "Obesatol" with the underline "For Weight Loss." It came in a big wine-looking bottle and was sort of honey color and very sweet and it was flat out speed. Guys would mix it with water or coffee and sometimes they would take enough to stay awake for about a week. On the hills nearly everything happened at night and some guys were afraid to go to sleep. I was usually up all night on duty, so I that wasn't an issue. Obesatol helped these guys for awhile, but then they would crash for a day or two and be useless.

Some guys got battery-operated tape players from home and we could listen to music from those. Sometimes we would have a fairly crude guitar made in Vietnam and those who could play, including me, would play and sing and the other soldiers would join in. Of course, there were cards and some guys played cards. In terms of "entertainment" of the time and we had a rather tenuous though passionate connection to incredible music being made by future "legends of rock 'n' roll." One day, on this one hill I was on, I'll never forget this guy who was a communications guy running up to where a bunch of us were sitting and saying, "Something huge is going on in New York. It's on some guy's farm. It's a huge concert and f_ _king Hendrix is there and Joplin." Of course, that was Woodstock.

One other

Were there entertainers?

WPH -They used to send around these really bad all-Vietnamese "rock 'n' roll" bands who played on trailers and were truly awful. I saw one somewhere. Not sure where. I just remember how bad they were and how mean the G.I.s were about it. It was like an insult somehow. Yet another wrong-headed move.

Did you travel?
WPH -Although while stationed in Germany, I did travel to Paris for one weekend after I found out I was being sent to Vietnam. It was not a particularly jolly trip and I took it with a guy who was a buddy and was also "levied" to Vietnam.

I had planned a lot of travel, however. When I got to Germany, I had 49 days leave coming (you get 30 days a year). My plan was, the last seven months I was in Germany, I was going to take the first week of each month and go to Greece, and Italy, and England, and yes, France. However, as John Belushi would say, "But, nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo."

While in Vietnam, since I had less than eight months left when I got there, I didn't really see any reason to go on R&R to Thailand to risk getting some disease for which there was no cure. Or, at least that was the mythology. This elaborate story included hospital ships that just anchored off shore with G.I.s rotting away from venereal diseases that had no cure. This was way pre-AIDS, of course. But urban legend or not, it scared me enough to stay away from the "not nice" girls we encountered on hills in the country-side.

Do you recall any particularly humorous or unusual event?

WPH -I earned the nickname "Dog Man" when I was in Vietnam. On one hill where I spend a lot of time, there were these scraggly mutts that looked like a combination of everything. However, they had one father and HIS nickname was, of course, "Stud." We were not allowed to have dogs on the hill, but everyone loved having them and so a "blind eye" was turned to them. That said, a bunch of these dogs took a real fancy to me and started following me everywhere. One of these was a new puppy fathered by Stud which I adopted as my own. One night when we got hit, my puppy was outside wandering around and got hit with some shrapnel and was bleeding pretty bad. I grabbed her up and holding her against my bare stomach and chest carried her to a dog unit attached to our company. I burst into their tent holding the dog and when I put her down all the G.I.s saw was blood all over my stomach and chest and they jumped up ran over to me, "You're hit, man! You're hit!" and they started screaming for a medic. And before I could say anything one of the soldiers said, "It's not him, man, it's the dog."

Do you have photographs?

WPH -Yes.

Who are the people in the photographs?

WPH -Me, of course, and some of my buddies and the hills I was on and I have a picture of Suzie.

What did you think of officers or fellow soldiers?

WPH -There was a clear dichotomy based on age. The older enlisted officers (sergeants) and officers (say captain and above) were literally from another generation, the generation that was kidnapping us from our homes and forcing us, with the threat of jail, to join in a war that most of us thought at the very least was wrong-headed and stupid, and at worst wrong, and maybe even immoral. One has to remember soldiers were dying not a few here and there or a dozen in a

week, and I don't mean by that to underplay the incredible sadness of the losses in Iraq, but in 1969, American solders were dying BY THE HUNDREDS EACH WEEK.

And so, in the war, you had older EMs and Officers who thought the war was just and necessary and you had younger EMs and officers (not all, of course, but a great many) who were unashamedly against the war. Clearly, being 22 years old myself, I empathized with and commiserated with the younger generation of soldiers. I remember one lieutenant with whom I became friendly saying to me after a radio man in an infantry unit got killed, "Hey, Hogue, you can operate a radio. Want to replace that radio man that got offed?" And I replied, because I knew him, "Sir, if that is a question, the answer is no. If that is an order, I'll need to think about it."

Did you keep a personal diary?

WPH -Interestingly, even though I fancied myself a bit of writer even back then, I did not keep a diary or journal. And still don't. But I do have a very, very good memory.

WHAT WAS THE MEDIA LIKE COVERING THE WAR WHILE YOU WERE THERE, DID YOU INTERACT WITH THE MEDIA? PARTAKE IN ANY JOURNALISTIC AFFAIRS WHILE IN THE WAR? DID YOU RESENT/PRAISE THE MEDIA?

WPH -Of course, every newspaper, magazine and broadcasting company had/has a political viewpoint. People were fairly clear about which were "conservative," "moderate" or "liberal." And that was reflected in the reporting. Early in the war, the press and the public were nearly universally in favor of the war. However, as the troop build-up continued culminating at 500,000 troops, and the casualties mounted, and there seemed to be little success in terms of securing the south against the north, and the protests grew larger and in particular were populated more and more not just by "hippies" but regular clean cut adults, with the liberal media leading the way, the press became more critical of the war.

One must also remember, this was what has been called the first "living room war," that is people seated with their dinner watching the evening news saw wounded American soldiers, up close, bleeding, dying, being zipped into body bags, and the press was relentless in showing the carnage.

I personally did not interact with the media or partake of any journalistic affairs while in the war. What I did have, though, that most soldiers did not have was a daily newspaper written and printed in the United States. It was a conservative paper, and as the anti-war sentiment grew, because it was conservative, it actually ended up being more moderate when it became so apparent the country was in a "quagmire."

Few soldiers I would guess resented the media while they were in the war. Again, anyplace I was during the war did not have television. We couldn't listen to American radio. So, we didn't really have a good fix on the press coverage of the war we were fighting. In addition, because by 1969 the sentiment at least in the young draft element of the military was itself blatantly anti-war, any entity that was anti-war we considered an ally, including the press. In a way, even though declaring the war wrong made it tougher to fight and justify the fighting in your own head, we also looked at the war protesters, most of whom were our age, to be our allies as well. And the generous coverage given by the press to their activities seemed to aid the cause to end the war.

Any resentment toward the press came after I returned from the war. The continuing hammering about how wrong the war was turned into an attack on the soldiers fighting it. Like we were witless pawns in this conspiracy and ought to be shunned and ridiculed if for no other reason than we were complicit in this enterprise. Yes, I was actually called a "baby killer" more than once after telling people I was a Vietnam veteran. Who planted that idea in that person's head, or at least propagated it? It was the press. But I bear them no resentment. They were doing their job.

And you always have to remember, it was a very, very confusing and contentious as well as a gloriously intellectual time in our history. The press just tried to record it.

As the war wound down and the weekly casualties got fewer and fewer, I'll never forget a Life magazine cover. It was a full page photo of a young soldier in uniform and the headline was: This Week's Casualty. Only one solidier had died that week.

Do you recall the day your service ended?
WPH -Yes, how could I not? January 10, 1970.

Where were you?

WPH -In Vietnam.

What did you do in the days and weeks afterward?

WPH -Just a little over a week after I got back to the United States, I returned to college. It was about the best thing I could have done. I was using my mind, I was busy, I was accomplishing something and seeing the results almost immediately. Back at school, I was on a mission. My last two years of college, I got nearly a four-point average.

Was your education supported by the G.I. Bill?

WPH -Well, to some extent. They said it would be completely covered, but they promised a lot of things back then and never delivered. The amount I received, and I went to a modest school, did not even cover my tuition.

Did you continue any of those relationships?

WPH -The friend from Germany and I were stationed in different parts of Vietnam and wrote to each other while there (which now that I think about it is sort of interesting). One buddy of mine from Vietnam and I corresponded a bit and did Christmas cards but that trailed off after a few years. My buddy from Germany and I lost touch. I tried to track him down, but never did.

For how long?

WPH -As I said, maybe a few years after the war with the one friend.

Did you join a veterans' organization?

WPH -No. Was never interested in sharing stories and experiences. Also, these organizations were populated by that older generation of soldiers with whom I HAD NOTHING IN COMMON. Most vets shunned these organizations early on, although they seem to be part of them now.

What did you go on to do as a career after the war?

WPH -I moved to New York with $150 and one suit and moved into the basement of house in a really bad part of Queens. I did have a job lined up from someone I'd met working in New York the summer before. I was a file clerk at the Plaza Hotel making $90 a week. It wasn't much, but it was a toehold.

As luck would have it, I arrived in New York in the midst of a recession. Back then, the best source of job opportunities was The New York Times. Their Help Wanted was so big it was sometimes two sections (the demise of which is underplayed as a huge contributing factor in the financial difficulties and demise of newspapers today). So, I circled jobs, sent letters and resumes, every single week. Got an interview here and there and every time I got one I realized how little a person with a journalism degree actually knows about getting into journalism. Particularly a small-town boy from the Midwest.

After three months of literally pounding the pavement, I got a job at a business-to-business publication. I remember when I was in college after the service, other j-school students and I would look at the B2B listing of publications like Waste Water Management Monthly and Toy & Hobby World and laugh out loud. Well my first job in the business was as an assistant editor AND production manager at a magazine called…Modern Floor Coverings.

But I thrived in the trades, and less than two years later I was the editor of Modern Floor Coverings and editorial director of three other magazines, including yes, Toy & Hobby World. After four years of doing this, I decided I wanted to write The Great American Novel. So, I quit my full-time job, moved to Cape Cod after a year, succeeded in writing The Awful American Novel. But I did learn how to write a novel and wrote a second one.

The second novel was based loosely on my experiences in the service. The short stories I was writing at the time (a la Hemingway) were also about young men facing war. The second novel got good reactions from publishers, and Harper & Row nearly published it until a VP of marketing said, “He’ll probably get great reviews and sell 4,000 copies.” So, I kept taking it around, but kept getting rejected, and it seemed usually for the same reason: “You’re a terrific writer, but this isn’t a very good book.”

All during this six-year period, I freelance wrote, primarily for the trade press, news stories, feature stories, and also promotion materials for advertising sales, and advertisements for clients who wanted to advertise but did not have ads (“Bill will write you and ad.”). Then, a big change. I got married. And then we had our first baby and the bills were piling up and I went back to work full time. This time as the Editor/Associate Publisher of…American Building Supplies magazine.

After a year there, where I was very unhappy, a friend told me that Glamour magazine (yes, that Glamour magazine) was looking for a promotion/marketing director. I met with the publisher who was looking for, and I say this with all due respect to women, a buddy since nearly everyone who worked for him was a woman. He was also looking for someone who could write. At the interview, he gave me a bunch of selling materials he was not happy with and said, “Tell me what you would do.”

What I did was take them all home, rewrite them and sent him the rewrites. He hired me the day he got the rewrites. So, I went from being the Editor/Associate Publisher of American Building Supplies to the Promotion Marketing Director of Glamour magazine in one fell swoop. The first day of work at Glamour, at lunch time I left the building and went to a pay phone so no one could hear me (there were no cell phones yet). I called my wife, and she said, “So how is it going?” and I answered, “I’m not really sure what the job is, but I’m a quick learner.”

Since then I have been a Corporate Marketing Direction at G+J which published Parents magazine among others, I’ve been a VP marketing at Magazine Publishers of America, the association for the magazine business, and I’ve also been a VP marketing at U.S. News & World Report. But, through all of that I never stopped writing, including essays published in consumer magazines. And to this day, writing is my “core” talent no matter what the assignment, whether it is a script for an awards show, or a speech for a CEO, or a section in a magazine like Robb Report or ad campaign for a company like Bentley Motor Cars.

And now, I have a children's book which I wrote under consideration at Little, Brown. So keep your fingers crossed.

Did your military experience influence your thinking about war or about the military in general?

WPH -I don't want to take a lot of time or space on this. The short answer is certainly, "Yes." When you witness a war first hand you learn that the only way a soldier can live with killing other people is if that homicide is considered just and right and necessary. Because if it is anything less, if there is ANY doubt as to its being absolutely justified, it will mess that man, or woman, up for the rest of their lives. Even veterans of the "Good War," that is, World War II had their share of post-war problems and they were fighting the most evil government in the history of the world.

The founders of our nation always considered the military a necessary evil and I agree with them completely. Our current president said that our country should not be respected for the power of its military but for the power of its example.

I must confess that whenever I encounter a young person contemplating joining the military, I always say, "Talk to me first." In short, I think every time they show one of those inspiring commercials for the army and the marines, they should end it with a comment from a veteran who has lost a leg or an arm or whose head in misshapen from a roadside bomb. Show the whole picture. Anything less is not just dishonest, it is reprehensible.

I have always said about the Iraq war that I never thought I would witness my nation make the same mistake in my lifetime. The other point is that while Vietnam was a draftee war, Iraq is an all volunteer war. No one is being forced to learn how to kill and then being forced to go kill. While I mourn deeply ever single life lost in Iraq, and every memorial day I go to our local cemetery and read each and every name of the fallen even though with over 4,000 dead it now takes me hours to do so, in spite of that, each of those individuals volunteered, like a police officer or firefighter with the full knowledge that they might be put in harm's way. Start pulling sons and daughters out of their homes and forcing citizens to be soldiers and fight a questionable war, as was done to me and all other draftees during Vietnam, and I predict the mall in Washington will again be filled with protesters.

How did your service and experiences affect your life?

WPH-The short answer: It made me appreciate life more than I ever had. Just like the terminally ill person who says he or she notices and appreciates just being alive, that they "notice more," war has the same affect on a person.

Is there anything you would like to add that we have not covered in this interview?

WPH -To add to the point in the previous question, let me end on a somewhat lighter note, but to illustrate a life long effect that war can have on a person. Being from the Midwest, I drank a lot of milk growing up and have always gotten great enjoyment from an ice cold glass of milk. In Vietnam we didn't really have milk very often and when we did it was warm and nearly spoiled. Some nights I would think, "God, what I wouldn't give for an ice cold glass of milk." To this day, if I'm up late, or wake up in the night and go to the refrigerator and pour myself an ice cold glass of milk it still tastes better than just about anything in the world.

I have known Mr. Hogue for a long time, in fact, since kindergarten. I have been friends with his son Quinton since then and I remain close friends with him as a fellow SUNY Albany student. If you meet Bill Hogue today, he is a short, pudgy man with thick, black-rimmed bifocals; he looks nothing like a soldier. I never knew he was a veteran until a few years ago at a party, Mr. Hogue mentioned his service in passing. I never really delved into his service because I assumed it was a sensitive subject. My friends and I were talking about the current war when Bill interjected with a statement like "I hope to God you kids don't get drafted like I was." From then on, I knew Bill was a veteran but he did not seem like the veterans you hear about with PTSD and are so weird that you can barely be in the same room as them. The only other Vietnam veteran that I am close with is my step-grandfather. He is considerably older than Mr. Hogue and is probably part of the generation gap the Mr. Hogue talks about in the interview. My step-grandfather William Macguigan is extremely quiet, sometimes grumpy, and doesn't strike me as the type to willingly share war stories from the past. I am glad that I interviewed Mr. Hogue who has the polar opposite personality of my step-grandfather. He is a happy man, wealthy, has a beautiful family, drinks with us, tells funny jokes, and rocks out to the Beatles and Rolling Stones alongside kids 40 years younger than him. As all my friends would say, Bill was "the man." After doing this interview, I realized one thing: Bill Hogue really is "the man."

I figured the interview would take an hour at most but it ended up turning into several hours. I thought that he would have reservations regarding the subject but as he said "it's a subject that gets me going." He was glad to talk about it and it seemed to me that nobody really took the time to ask him some of those questions. He provided me with some of the most interesting insight to war that I have ever heard or read. I would never be able to get these anecdotes from a text book or a historical novel. This was REAL. There were times when he got very serious, like talking about the current war or the military itself and you can see from his responses how he feels about those matters. He was also quite hysterical at times while talking about Suzie in his fake Vietnamese accent or about the music and the terrible Vietnamese rock bands. I felt sorry for him when he spoke about being drafted and being "Levied" to Vietnam. Those were two instances where he was simply yanked from the life he was building at that time.

One thing this interview did for me is it gave me a whole new respect for veterans, especially those who were drafted. It makes me think of draft talks for this war. I could not imagine today being yanked from school and sent to Iraq for a war that no one is completely sure of. I don't think I would be able to handle the stress of leaving my friends and family and my home. Mr. Hogue was drafted at my age, been to one of the most horrific wars of our time, and has still led a successful life. For this, I have a great respect for Mr. Hogue and all others like him who were forced to give up their youth for the United States of America. I am eager to share some of these stories with the class as I hope they will feel the same type of respect and gain some of the same insights that I have gained.