

Mr. Richard Comstock

Vietnam

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#### A Soldier Returns to a Familiar Place

While most soldiers are stationed overseas in a country they have never been to before, Richard Comstock had a different experience. For him, Vietnam was a familiar place. His father, a Career Army Officer, was the U.S. Army Attaché stationed at the embassy in Saigon, Vietnam in the late 50s and early 60s. Richard attended middle school in Vietnam. He went to school with mostly American students, but became conversant in both French and Vietnamese.

Richard Comstock was born on September 20th, 1947 in Rockville Centre, Long Island. He served on active duty from 1969 to 1973 and in the NY Army National Guard from 1974 to 1990. He had two tours of Vietnam and one tour of Korea in the Army. Joining the Army was a clear choice. His father had served in various locations during WWII and his grandfather had served in Belgium and France in WWI. Growing up in an “army-family” made the adjustment from civilian to military life easier. However, Richard admits that the eight weeks of basic training were “physically, mentally, and socially demanding. He remembers the intense physicality required each day, starting at five in the morning. On basic training alone, he lost forty pounds.

In 1969, Richard was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant upon graduation from St. Lawrence University and was assigned to Fort Sill, Oklahoma for artillery training.

As a boy, Richard witnessed some of the earliest tensions of the Vietnam War. He was living in Vietnam when the first American was killed in 1959. He remembers the growing aggression of the North Vietnamese: “I gained an appreciation and understanding for what was going on.” Later, that appreciation led Richard to join the Army himself. In fact, he experienced the full scope of the Vietnam War: from his early memories as a boy to being stationed in Vietnam when the last American was killed and the last troop plane left, both in 1973.

When he returned to Saigon in 1971 with the Army, Richard found it to be an easier adjustment since he had lived there before: “Some of the angst about leaving for Vietnam was lessened ...I went to visit my old dentist and a good friend of my mother (in Vietnam). It made the transition a lot easier.” But he also had to come to terms with change. He went to visit one of his mother’s good friends and found out that her husband had been shot and killed in a suspected murder. Her husband had been a colonel in the South Vietnamese Army. The changes were hard to deal with: “It was emotionally draining for me because I had known them all when I was young.”

Due to his proficiency in two languages, he was assigned as an Advisor to the South Vietnamese Army as part of the Military Assistance Command in Vietnam. His mission was to advise Field Artillery, Infantry Battalions and local militia forces in South Vietnam. During his first tour of Vietnam, Richard was stationed on the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) with a South Vietnamese Field Artillery Battalion. On his second tour, he was stationed in South Vietnam as

an Advisor to a local infantry force. As part of his advisory duties, he spent part of his second tour flying helicopters at night.

While stationed in Vietnam, Richard was able to speak to his parents twice. Between tours, he spent only two weeks home. He felt a responsibility towards the service: "I felt that I needed to do something. We stood the chance of losing ground in the war."

While stationed on the Demilitarized Zone as an advisor to a Vietnamese Artillery Battalion during his first tour, Richard recalls a frightening situation where the North Vietnamese Army crossed the DMZ in March of 1972, which was the beginning of the Easter Offensive of 1972. He and his battalion were part of a force that held the North Vietnamese Army at bay for over a month.

Richard's second tour of duty in Vietnam lasted six months due to the negotiation of a ceasefire agreement in late January 1973. Therefore, his responsibilities changed. He functioned as an advisor through the end of hostilities and was then assigned to a post-ceasefire position. By February, active fighting had concluded under the terms of a ceasefire agreement and as part of the agreement, a Four-Power Joint Military commission was formed. As part of the commission, Richard worked to monitor the ceasefire. For instance, when a situation would occur, such as an ambush, the commission investigated what happened and would write up a report. For three months, Richard worked on this task: "The commission wasn't terribly effective, but it was important that we tried."

There were moments of Richard's service that continue to resonate with him. For instance, he recalls the experiences he had on his second tour with two older Vietnamese men who would periodically travel the canals by boat to visit him. The word had gotten around that he spoke French and they wanted someone to speak French with them. It was ironic that these men would come to see him to relive a time when French was spoken as almost the primary language, especially since the Vietnamese had been so vigorous at throwing the French out after World War II: "They were proud of the fact they spoke French. "I thought that was so significant. In the midst of all this chaos that was going down there, they still really wanted that connection."

Richard also served a year in the Republic of Korea with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 31<sup>st</sup> Field Artillery.

After Richard returned to the United States, he decided to leave the regular Army. Less than a year later, he joined the NY Army National Guard and served in the 1st Battalion, 209th Field Artillery in Rochester, NY. Eventually, he was transferred to the 1st Battalion, 258th Artillery in New York City where he eventually was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and became the Battalion Commander. He served in command for four years. The battalion was made up of six hundred soldiers and its home was at the Kingsbridge Road Armory in the Bronx. Richard recalls his experience there as one of the most fulfilling of his whole military career. The members of the unit had various levels of education and deportment, yet they were motivated to succeed as a unit: "I think the fact that we were able to take a field test as a unit and pass was a

testament to them and their innate professionalism. They did what needed to be done.” Richard credits his experiences to reminding him of the importance of being a good leader by knowing your job and by treating everyone equally and fairly. He retired from the National Guard in 1990 after 20 years of military service.

For his service in Vietnam, he received a variety of different awards including the Bronze Star, the Combat Infantryman’s Badge (CIB), the Vietnamese Silver Star, and the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry, and the Air Medal. For his service in Korea and the National Guard, he received the Army Commendation Medal and the Meritorious Service Medal.

After leaving active duty in 1973, he returned to graduate school in 1974 and 1976, he received an MBA from Cornell University.

He Field Artillery was all about mathematics and this was helpful in the transition to his civilian career. He continued to work with numbers at the public accounting firms of Arthur Andersen and Deloitte where he was made a tax partner.

When he returned from the service in Vietnam, Richard explains that some people treated him differently because the war had been so controversial. “I sensed that there was apprehension for the returning veterans,” he says.

Now, he appreciates the service of the military personnel serving in the Middle East and is happy that their sacrifices are being recognized. He does, however, feel deeply for the veterans of Vietnam who were drafted, served and returned home with little or no recognition. He considers himself to be very lucky to have gotten a college education and been supported by his family and friends. “Many young men of the Vietnam War did not receive any recognition,” he says, “(They) were drafted, went overseas and were basically thrown back into the fish tank.” The service still plays an important role in Richard’s life as he remains in contact with some of the veterans with whom he served.