Words of Hope and Horror
Memorable lines from those who served—and sometimes died—in Nam
From Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam, edited by Bernard Edelman

Clutching pencil stubs, using packing cases as desks and foxholes as offices, they put the Viet Nam experience into words—millions of them. Now the New York Vietnam Veterans Memorial Commission, searching for an appropriate inscription, has collected 3,000 letters, poems and other materials written from the field. Under the group’s auspices, 208 of the pieces, by 135 individuals, are being published in the forthcoming book Dar America: Letters Home from Vietnam.

Only the Crickets
Are bold enough to speak
Suddenly they stop
The rapid respiration
Of frightened en’s remains,
You think of home and wait
Mostly you just wait,
The mortar lands nearby
Ringing in your ears
Leaves you deaf
For the rest of your life
But just how long
Will that be?

---Sp4 George T. Coleman
Assistant hotel manager, Princeton, N.J.

I killed my first “gooks” last night—about 20 of them. I spotted them about 800 meters in front of our position by using a starlight scope, and called in artillery on them. I only had to make one adjustment, and then they were blown away...it didn’t bother me at all, because self-preservation is the name of the game over there.

---Marine Lieut. Desmond T. Barry Jr.
Attorney, New York City

I am now filled with both respect and hate for the V.C. and the Vietnamese. Respect because the enemy knows that he can’t stand up to us in a fire fight due to our superior training, equipment and our vast arsenal of weapons. Yet he is able. Via his mines and booby traps, he can whittle our ranks down piecemeal until we cannot muster an effective fighting force. In the month that I have been with the company, we have lost four killed and about 30 wounded. We have not seen a single verified dink the whole time.

Died of peritonitis and pneumonia after being wounded by a mine.

We lit out 800 meters to a [landing zone] with one Victoria Charlie and her three-month-old baby as POWs. We’d just made her a window, and with all the steel flying in that hollow she was lucky to have escaped unscathed. But I will say that there wasn’t a man among us who wasn’t glad the child wasn’t hit as nobody’d seen either of them during the fight. We’d shoot a female out there without blinking an eye as a woman with a rifle can kill you just as dead as any slant-eyed Hector or Ulysses. But a baby was nobody’s enemy.

---Sp4 George T. Olsen
Killed in Action

Those dead Cong didn’t seem like people [as] we dragged them into piles and cut their equipment off them. They felt like a pile of rages or something, can’t really explain it. We shot all their wounded [the] next day. The official body count was 79...Some of the Charlie were just kids, 14 or 15 years old. They must be crazy or something.

---Pfc Louis E. Willett
Received mortal wounds covering a squad retreat; posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor

I’m sick both physically and mentally. I smoke too much, am constantly coughing, never eat, always sit around in a daze. All of us are in this general condition. We are all afraid to die, and all we can do is count the days till we go home. We’re all in desperate need of love. When we go to Saigon, we spend all our money on women and beer. Some nights I don’t sleep. I can’t stand being alone at night. The guns don’t bother me—I can’t hear them anymore. I want to hold my head between my hand and run screaming away from here. I cry too, not much, just when I touch the sore spots. I’m hollow, Mrs. Perko. I’m a shell, and when I’m scared I rattle. I’m no one to tell you about your son. I can’t, I’m sorry.

---Marine Cpl. John Houghton
Writing to the mother of a slain comrade.

Tugboat deckhand living in Camden, N.J.

I know that at one point, my feet about to crack open, my stomach knotted by hunger and diarrhea, my back feeling like a mirror made of nerves shattered in a million pieces by my flak jacket, pack, and extra mortars and machine-gun ammo, my hands a mass of hamburger from torn cuts and my face a mass of welts from mosquitoes. I desired greatly to throw down everything, slump into the water of the paddy and sob.

---Marine Lieut. Victor David Westphall III
Killed during an ambush

You asked about Vietnam, so I’ll tell you. I LOVE IT! I really am happy over here. The work is hard and all the time, but it keeps me on my toes. The men are grossly wonderful and fully appreciate a “round eye” in their midst... Several times a week we visit the hospitals and either chat with the troops or program them, depending on their condition. This is one of the most disheartening and yet moral-boosting jobs for me.

---Jeanne Bokina Christie
A Red Cross “Doughnut Dolly.”
Part-time adult-education teacher.
Milford, Conn.

After seeing the patients around me, I consider myself lucky. There are many who have lost legs, arms, eyes and other parts of their bodies, Which leaves them in worse shape than I am. I’m really very anxious to know how you feel about me losing my arm because naturally I don’t know how you will react when you see me. I’ll be able to act like I normally did, which was always a little crazy. I haven’t been depressed or anything like that, so [I] don’t want you to feel bad either. I just paid the price that many soldiers pay defending our country, and I’ve accepted the fact that I can get along as well with an artificial arm as I did before.

---Lieut. Frederick Downs Jr.
Director of the Veterans Administration
Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Center.
Washington D.C.
Really, the physical and human damage done over the last few years is much greater than I realized—especially the human damage... Not just the dead, but the GI's who can't talk in coherent sentences anymore, or the ones who have found they love to kill, or the Vietnamese, who must have been a very gentle, graceful people before the war turned them into thieves, black marketers and prostitutes... I feel like I'm at the bottom of a great sewer.

--Sp5 Thomas P. Pellaton

**Singer and maître d' in a NYC hotel.**

The sole hope of this nation lies in its youth. The elders, the parents, are tired. They've lived with war, and the hardships involved, for too long. They no longer believe another kind of life is possible. The children do, though. They want to learn. They want to do things the way we do, have things like we have. They have hope for their future.

--CWO Bruce L. McInnes

**Tree doctor, New York City.**

[President] Johnson is trying to fight this war the way he fights his domestic wars—he chooses an almost unattainable goal with a scope so large it is virtually indefinable, and he attacks this goal with poorly [allocated] funds, minimum manpower, limited time and few new ideas... Johnson is trying to take 5,000 villages living on a rice economy with a 2,000-year-old Asian tradition of chieftain rule warped by 100 years of ugly colonialism and build a nation with an industrial base and a democratic tradition in the dist of a 20-year-old war.

--Marine Capt. Rodney R. Chastant

**Killed a month after he extended his combat tour.**

[My platoon leader died] fighting for a people who have no concern for the war, people he did not understand, [who] knew where the enemy were, where the booby traps were hidden, yet gave no support. People that he would give portions of his food to yet would try to sell him a Coke for $1. People who cared not who the winner was—yet they will say he died for this country, keeping it free. Negative. This country is no gain that I can see. Dad. We’re fighting, dying, for people who resent our being over here. The only firm reason I can find is paying with Commie lives for U.S. lives.

--Sgt. Phillip L. Woodall

**Insurance firm manager, Pineville, N.C.**

[Vietnam] is a country of thorns and cuts, of guns and marauding, of little hope and of great failure. Yet in the midst of it all, a beautiful thought, gesture and even person can arise among it waving bravely at the death that pours down upon it.

--Marine Lieut. Marion Lee Kempner

**Killed in a mine explosion.**

This place is sort of getting to me. I've been seeing too many guys getting messed up, and I still can't understand it. It's not that I can't understand this war. It's just that I can't understand war, period. If you do not get to go to that big peace demonstration October 15th I hope you do protest against war or sing for peace—I would.

--Sgt. Joseph A. Morrissey

**Carpenter, Parkesburg, Pa.**

It hurts so much sometimes to see the paper full of demonstrators, especially people burning the flag. Fight fire with fire, we ask here. Display the flag. Mom and Dad, please, every day. And tell your friends to do the same. It means so much to us to know we're supported, to know not everyone feels we're making a mistake being here.

--Army Nurse Lynda Van Devanter

**Writer, teacher and counselor living near Washington D.C.**

When all had quieted and the flares had gone out, the whole area calmed and hushed, and we could just hear one of the fire bases start singing Silent Night. The it was picked up by the other positions around us and by everyone. It echoed through the valley for a long time and died out slowly. I’m positive it has seldom been sung with more gut feeling and pure homesick emotion—a strange and beautiful thing in this terribly death-ridden land.

--Sp5 Peter C. Elliott

**Construction-company owner, Dallas.**

I have about a million questions to ask you. I really want to know how it was to have a baby. What were the thoughts going through your head while she was coming out? Were you sad because I couldn’t be there? Did you get to see her right after she was born? I’ve always heard that newborns aren’t very pretty. Six pounds, five ounces sounds kind of small. I’ll bet that she’s a real tiny little thing.

--Sp4 Ronald L. Buehrer

**Data Processor, Vallejo, Calif.**

Take what they have left
And what they have taught you
With their dying
And keep it with your own,
And in that time
When mend decide and feel safe
To call the war insane,
Take one moment to embrace
Those gentle heroes
You left behind.

--Maj. Michael O'Donnell

**Killed in Action piloting a rescue helicopter; awarded four decorations posthumously, including the Distinguished Flying Cross.**

I can envision a small cottage someplace, with a lot of writing paper, and a dog, and a fireplace and maybe enough money to give myself some Irish coffee now and then and entertain my two friends... I don’t think it will be too terribly long before we are together again. I wish you peace, and I have a great deal of faith that the future has to be ours. Adios, my friend.

--Air Force Lieut. Richard Van De Geer

**Died when his helicopter was shot down May 15, 1975, while ferrying Marines during the Mayaguez incident. Officially the last American to die in the war.**