

# A soldier's experience in Vietnam: John Luckey

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY L. MAREN WOOD

Interview by Sharon Raynor.

## As you read...

John Luckey was drafted into the United States Army in 1969. After finishing basic training, Luckey was trained to be an army photographer. In this interview, Luckey discusses the relationship between white and black soldiers in Vietnam.

While in Vietnam, Luckey witnessed a terrible helicopter crash. Like so many returning soldiers, Luckey struggled to adjust to everyday life following the traumatic events he witnessed while serving in Vietnam.

This interview is part of a larger project by Sharon Raynor, entitled *Breaking the Silence: The Unspoken Brotherhood of Vietnam Veterans*.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What type of training did Luckey receive before going to Vietnam? Did he feel prepared? Why or why not?
2. What types of activities did Luckey film?
3. What type of discrimination did African American men face in the army?
4. What impact did the Vietnam War have on Luckey's life? What personal problems did he experience later in life that he believed were a result of his time in Vietnam?

## What were your duties or your MOS<sup>1</sup>?

I was an 84 Charlie 20, which was a motion picture photographer. I was assigned to a unit, and we worked in four-men photo teams. We traveled all over Vietnam, attaching ourselves to units; hopefully, to film combat operations for Department of the Army Archives.

## What types of things did you film or photograph or see during these times?

With one project we worked on we spent about a month with a medivac<sup>2</sup> helicopter unit, photographing their operations. That film was later edited down to a twenty minute movie. And the commanding general of the medical command took that

movie to major metropolitan areas around the U.S., selling them on the virtues of helicopter air ambulances. So now we have life-like things like that. I photographed soldiers on patrol, artillery units, armor units, just about any branch of the army.

**Do you think you were well-prepared for what you saw while in Vietnam?**

No. No, I had very little weapon familiarization. I spent like two to three days holding an M16 in basic training, and I was away from it for several months while I was at school. Then I was given a two-day familiarization course before I was sent back to Vietnam. So, I had a total of five days with an M16 in my hand before I went over. So I wasn't very well prepared for that.

**Earlier, before I turned the tape on, we were talking a little bit about race relations. How do you describe the race relations in Vietnam while you were there?**

Tense. We're talking late 1970, '71. The black soldiers felt like they were given a more hazardous duty than their white counterparts, which in many cases were true. A statistic which has come to my attention is that of all the soldiers serving in Vietnam, 8 percent were black, but yet they counted as 23 percent of the casualties<sup>3</sup>. As we were discussing earlier, I think that was a function of their economic and educational level when they were drafted and very few inner city or rural blacks had the economic wherewithal to get into college and avoid the draft. Therefore, they were drafted without the education, and they were assigned to do more dangerous tasks. The army saw that lack of education as meaning they could be infantry. Or they could be armor or artillery, as opposed to a company clerk or someone of that nature that had more of a white collar job.

**What did those scenes bring back to you?**

Well, there's one scene<sup>4</sup>. It's called Blanket Party, and we have a video that plays in the background that shows dead bodies. And then the actors come on stage and their job is to pick up these body parts and put them on the blanket and haul them off. And that reminded me of a helicopter crash that I filmed, witnessed, when the GI's went down in a helicopter and then we had to pull out the burned bodies out of the helicopter. One of the bodies happened to be one of our photographers who was on the helicopter, one of my good buddies. I felt helpless because he was in helicopter crash going down, and all I could do was pull my movie camera up and take the movie out of it. That was my job. I escorted him back and handed the flag to his mother at his funeral, and I was back from Vietnam probably five or six years before I told my parents what had happened, that I had been back in the states for five days from burying my best friend. It's been some work in group therapy sessions trying to deal with that grief. By leaving the bush and coming back to the states to bury a friend and going to Vietnam and back into the bush, I really didn't have any time to work through the grieving process. And that grief lay buried for many years. It would resurface in very inappropriate ways. I would battle depression, have relationship problems with people at work, have relationship problems with my wife. This is my fourth marriage now, and I'd like to think that after several years of counseling I've finally gotten my act together. It was a long time before I could even talk about my depression and what it did to me. I was on Prozac for a couple of years. I've finally weaned myself off of

that. My career is going a lot better. I'm much more conscious of my relationship with fellow workers, relationship with my spouse. It's the best relationship I've ever been in and I intend to keep it that way. I'm constantly on guard for the signs that depression is creeping back into my life and constantly working with counselors to make sure I don't lose the edge, don't lose my stability. I turned 50 this past May and some of my friends asked me, 'What are you having, a mid-life crisis?' And I said, 'Hell no. My whole life has been crisis. I'm going to have some mid-life stability.' So, I'm in a good place in my life now. This past year has been 28 years since I've been home, and I can remember the day coming home as clear as if it was yesterday. Some of that is a function of my memory and some of that is retelling the story over and over again. You know, it keeps it fresh in my mind.

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## Notes

1. MOS stands for Military Occupational Specialty. It is a soldiers area of training and specialization, such as infantry, languages, or photography.
2. *Medivac* stands for medical evacuation.
3. In 1966, African Americans accounted for 13 percent of the population of the United States. In 1966, about 10 percent of men in combat were African Americans, but 1 in 5 (20 percent) combat deaths was an African American soldier. After 1968, the Army actively worked to lower the percentage of African American casualties. By the end of the war in 1973, African American casualties reflected the percentage of blacks in combat — about 10 percent.
4. Luckey is referring to a play he helped produce about the Vietnam war. One scene from the play reminded him of a terrible helicopter crash he witnessed while in combat.

## About the author

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