



# RICHARD S. LOVEKIN

## ARMY 1969-1970

**With a documented medical disability, Richard Stephen “Rick” Lovekin could have avoided service in Vietnam altogether. He chose instead to enlist in the Army and spent a year in combat as a door gunner on a Huey helicopter and later as crew chief on a Cobra chopper. Lovekin paid a high price for his decision. Within months of returning home in 1970, his marriage failed and he nearly died from alcohol abuse and depression.**

**T**oday, Lovekin, 59, is happily remarried and dotes on his four children, seven grandchildren and Bogart, his 170-pound Landseer Newfoundland, at his suburban Wilmington, Delaware, home. Although he takes medication for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), he finds purpose in life and is proud to be a founding member of Delaware’s Chapter 83 of Vietnam Veterans of America. He is fulfilled by the talks and slide shows on Vietnam he has presented, on his own time and at his own expense, to thousands of high school and college students for nearly 25 years.

As he runs a hand through a now-graying shock of hair, he starts his story.

“Everyone knew what was going to happen to them after high school – Vietnam. So I enlisted in the Army for two years to beat the draft,” he recalls of his 1968 decision. “My main drive to enlist was that I saw everybody else in my neighborhood going into the service and I didn’t want to be the only one who stayed home. I didn’t have to enlist but I did.”

A year earlier, Lovekin had suffered a punctured right kidney playing sandlot football near his home in Ogletown, about three miles east of the University of Delaware in Newark. “On the last day of school in 1967, I went to the boy’s room and nothing but blood came out. I learned I had two small kidneys on my right side and one was removed. The doctor told me then I’d be exempt from service.”

But in August of 1968, just two months after graduating from Christiana High School, the determined 19-year old reported to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, for eight weeks of basic training.

In high school, Lovekin had been best-known for his band, Rick and the Rockets, later The Quarrymen, but the war helped drive the musicians apart. “I played rhythm guitar and was backup singer,” Lovekin explains. “Our lead singer punked out and joined the National Guard and the two other guys, brothers, went to Canada. We never heard from them again.”

He felt uncomfortable at Fort Bragg. “It was infantry training and they were turning us into killers,” he remembers. “That disturbed me. I suppose they had to do it but, to me, it was a game I tried not to take too seriously.”

His education on base extended beyond military tactics. “It was the first time I had been in contact with people from all over the country. I’d had a lot of black friends growing up. My biggest problem was with the hillbillies.”

From Fort Bragg, Lovekin was assigned to the Huey helicopter door gunner school at Fort Eustis, Virginia. Less than 24 hours after his December 20, 1968 graduation, he returned to Delaware to marry his high school sweetheart, Carol Bethard. He had orders to report to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, three days later.

“I was put in a holding company there and pulled maintenance,” Lovekin says. “We set up a Vietnamese village and trained.” He noticed war veterans on base didn’t follow orders. “They didn’t get up. ‘Look, man,’ they said, ‘I just got back from Vietnam. You want me to do this chicken shit?’ Those guys disappeared or were sent to the brig.”

On March 20, 1969, Lovekin packed his duffle for Vietnam.



Soldier Lovekin on break during the Christmas holidays in 1969 at Vung Tau, a secure air base. Today, Lovekin honors Vietnam veterans through his stirring presentations on the war.





"I saw two helicopters collide, both were U.S., and I saw a helmet bounce down the runway with the pilot's head still in it. That sight and the smell of that crash is still with me today."

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## A DIFFERENT WORLD

After flying about 20 hours on a packed commercial jet from California to Alaska to Japan to Vietnam with more than 100 servicemen he didn't know, he recalls, "we did a corkscrew landing at Tan Son Nhut Air Base because there was a chance the base might be hit. It was a big shock getting off the plane, like landing on the moon."

Acclimating to Vietnam's withering heat and humidity proved difficult, but observing the abject poverty all around him during the bus ride to Long Binh overwhelmed him. "The people lived in thatched huts and makeshift housing. And the smells were terrible," he says.

In short order, Lovekin, the oldest of six children in a blended family, toughened up emotionally. "Growing up, I was disrespectful and did things to show off. I lost my real dad when I was 13 and I was angry. When I went to Vietnam, I put away my toys and picked up a rifle and became concerned about the people next to me. That may have been the best thing that happened to me."

Conversely, one scene he witnessed in Vietnam forever scarred him. "I saw two helicopters collide, both were U.S., and I saw a helmet bounce down the runway with the pilot's head still in it. That sight and the smell of that crash is still with me today."

To cope in Vietnam, Lovekin and his fellow soldiers developed their "don't mean nothing" mantra. "When something tragic happened, we'd automatically say this to get us through the situation, no matter how bad it was. It kept us from thinking about how bad things really were," he says. "And it usually worked."

Getting to know the 60 men in his unit, the 147th Helicopter Company based in Bien Hoa and Vung Tau, was a positive experience. "I was in aviation and that's where I wanted to be. I got into Cobras because they needed crew chiefs. I saw so many different people and learned how to deal with them – that has stayed with me to this day. I met some wonderful people."

## 'YOUR MAN IN NAM'

Lovekin was a frequent writer to the Vietnam Mailbag and always signed his letters, "Your man in Nam, Rick." In his January 3, 1970 correspondence, he defended Lt. William L. Calley Jr., charged in the My Lai massacre. "Lt. Calley is only guilty of doing his duty to his country." On February 24, he added, "It's not easy being over here. The pressures we go up against are immense and never-ending." In the same letter, he also decried the violence and protests in America. "The situation at home is almost as bad as it is over here though. There are countless lunatics running around with guns and knives just killing at random."



He shared a vignette of after-hours life in Vung Tau. "Half the people in town didn't care about you and half would try to take money from you. Most towns had what we called cowboys. One night, we got on the wrong side of town and a group of cowboys approached us. One of my buddies just clocked one of them and we started to walk away. They picked up stones and bottles and threw them at us. We ran for our lives. This was going on in a war zone."

Lovekin was attuned to the shift in the war's rhythm in his two years of service, especially during his 12 months in country. "It changed from when we thought we really could win to 'let's get our butts home alive.' With that change, Vietnam became not a 12-year war but 12 one-year wars. New guys coming in asked, 'Hey, man, where's the dope?' not 'Where are the guns?' or 'Where's the bunker? Have you been hit lately?'"

Days before he left Vietnam in March 1970, an appreciative Lovekin wrote, "It's really good to be able to voice my feelings and opinions and let people know how I feel.... This will probably be my last letter to you as I am coming home very soon.... I'm so short I can count my days to go on my two hands. Be home less than a week after this letter. WOW!!"





With more firepower than a tank, the Cobra helicopter was Lovekin's aircraft of choice. During a 1985 visit to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (opposite), he reflected on those lost in the war. The total is now 58,260 names listed on the Memorial. Approximately 1,200 of these are listed as missing (MIAs, POWs, and others).

## THE AFTEREFFECT

Within a few months of his shaky return to civilian life, he knew he and Carol were headed for divorce. "When I was at war, we were trained to kill and destroy. When I came home, my family wanted to treat me like I'd been away to summer camp. I know they didn't want to bring up bad memories but everything built up inside me," Lovekin remembers. "Anger was still a big problem for me. I used to snap over nothing. I know it affected the divorce."

From there, Lovekin spiraled downward. His PTSD symptoms, which he still deals with, included insomnia, nightmares, road rage and a need to be treated fairly. "I couldn't sleep. I

drank too much. I hung around biker bars. I felt safe around them, they were outcasts and so was I. I didn't want to commit suicide but I didn't care what happened to me."

Then he met his future wife, Karen Tomlinson. "I was in Ohio. It sounds corny but I was a milkman and Karen was on my route. Her husband had been killed in a motorcycle accident and she was raising two young boys by herself. We like to say we saved each other." They married in August 1971.

Despite his happiness with Karen and their life together, his anger eventually strained his relationship with her, her sons and their children, especially Stephanie, their older daughter. "As a little girl," she recalls, "I was frightened of my dad. I didn't understand why he freaked out sometimes and why he never talked to me. It was always scolding that I heard from him. Of course, as a kid, I internalized it. I thought if there wasn't anything I could do to make my father smile or stop being mad, I must be a bad person."

"I know what I put everyone through and it bothers me to this day," Lovekin says. "I never hurt anybody but I'd punch walls and really scream and holler over little things. No one was allowed to run around the house because the noise reminded me of the war. Everybody in the house was walking on eggshells because of me."

Over time, Stephanie remembers, her interaction with her father improved. "He started coming to my high school softball games. Although he was physically there and said he was proud of me, I still never felt an emotional connection to him. It wasn't until one day, when I was about 25, he handed me a folder of newspaper clippings from every softball and volleyball game where my name was mentioned and pictures from my games and varsity letters I'd thought I'd lost that it finally clicked he truly cared and was proud of me."

## THE RETURN STATESIDE

Throughout his tour in Vietnam, Lovekin says he was "never scared, just excited and nervous." His return home precipitated a lot of readjustment problems, starting with takeoff from Tan Son Nhut Air Base. "I left Vietnam at 7:30 a.m. on Friday and, because of the International Date Line, arrived in Oakland, California, at 7:30 a.m. Friday, the exact day and time I'd taken off." That was just the beginning.

After two days of debriefing at the Army base in Oakland, mostly standing in lines, Lovekin finally was ready to fly to Philadelphia, his final destination. Still in uniform, he arrived at San Francisco International Airport at 6 a.m. for his flight home. He couldn't help but notice "two guys dressed in black with microphones in their sleeves, like the CIA." They were, he learned, a security detail for Col. Harland David Sanders, founder of the Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant franchise. Lovekin recalls Sanders, dressed in his trademark all-white suit, shook his hand and said, "Son, thank you for serving. While you're here, my men will protect you."

Prior to leaving Vietnam, Lovekin says he had prepared himself for all manner of negative stateside reaction to his uniform and knew "to be aware of people looking to abuse veterans returning home."

What he had not prepared for was the reaction he received from World War II veterans. Soon after he arrived home, his stepfather, David Lovekin, who had served in the National Guard during the Korean War, took him to a veterans' gathering. He was taken aback after his stepdad proudly introduced him. "The room was quiet, like everyone was thinking 'so what?' Then their comments were, 'What are you doing home? The war's still going on,' and 'What kind of drugs are you doing, buddy?'"

## THE HEALING PROCESS

Today, their relationship is even better, says Stephanie, 36, a married mother of two young sons who is a project manager at JPMorgan Chase & Co. in Wilmington. "I have come to learn that the Vietnam War changed my dad, that it was almost impossible for him to make a deep emotional connection to anyone after returning from the war. I know my dad really does love me and the connection has always been there, I just can't touch it. And that's OK because now I understand that it's how the Vietnam War shaped him. I want him to know that he didn't let any of his kids down in any way. He was always there for us, no matter what. And," she adds, "I want to make sure he knows how proud I am of him."

Lovekin, 59, is more spontaneous with his feelings today. "I love my family. Nothing else means as much." To spend more time with his family, he prefers a flexible schedule and works as a flooring salesman, the fifteenth job he's held since Vietnam. "I've never been fired, I've always walked away. It's still hard for me to put up with crap."

Since 1984, he has packaged his Vietnam experience in a compelling talk and slide show set to 1960s music for high school and college students in a multi-state area. He estimates he has given more than 1,300 presentations to more than 30,000 young people.

"It's a free program and lasts one to two hours," says Lovekin. "We tailor it for different age groups but we want people to remember what happened to Vietnam veterans and how we were treated when we came home.. There are people who confuse veterans with the war. We say, 'don't confuse the war with the warriors.'"

The highlight of his speaking engagements was an invitation from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point for him and nine others from the Delaware Chapter of the Vietnam Veterans of America to talk on campus. "We were treated like kings. They put us up for about a week. We had a wonderful time because of the camaraderie."

In addition to speaking to West Point cadets for two days, his group also shared their experiences with hundreds of area high school students, bused in by the academy.

Lovekin says he gives his presentations on behalf of all Vietnam veterans "because I want people to have a correct perception of who we are. This has channeled my anger. It's therapy. Do you know Vietnam vets are still considered a minority group? We were designated that in the 1970s with blacks and Hispanics," he says, referring to the Vietnam-Era Veterans Readjustment Assistance Act of 1974, which prohibits job discrimination.

When he's not speaking to groups about the war, Lovekin is active in Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 83, which he helped found in 1983. The chapter is responsible for erecting in Wilmington a memorial, dedicated on Veterans Day, November 11, 1983, to Delaware servicemen killed in Vietnam. The chapter also promotes the memory of fallen veterans in its Delaware Hometown Heroes program and honors the state's Gold Star Families.

"We also give \$1,000 U.S. Savings Bonds each year to one male and one female student at the Delaware Military Academy who exemplifies service to others," says Lovekin. "You don't read about us much but we have a lot of support from big companies. We're a real quiet little organization that does tons of stuff."

Lovekin, who was not wounded in Vietnam, lost a cousin, Army Sgt. Timothy Joseph Noden of Linwood, Pennsylvania, and Christiana High School schoolmates, Army Pfc. Alan G. Geissinger and Navy Constructionman Jon J. Hayden, both of Newark. He harbors no bitterness about the war today and says he would serve again if he had it to do over. "First, I'm an American and back then it was all about baseball and apple pie. You didn't question your government."

He does, however, lament the parallels of Vietnam with Iraq, another undeclared war nearly as far away. "We got into Vietnam in the beginning with the full support of the people, like Iraq. By the time LBJ [President Lyndon Baines Johnson] was in office, we had all these troops in Vietnam and could have ended the war but politics got in the way, like today."

America could have achieved victory in Vietnam, Lovekin believes. "We never lost a major battle. When we pulled our combat troops out of Vietnam, we had a treaty with North Vietnam. Two years later, they attacked and took over South Vietnam." He pauses. "We like to say we lost the peace, not the war."

Lovekin is proud to have served his country in Vietnam and shrugs off any plaudits. "I just did my job." And he eagerly shares that job through his programs for young audiences today. "One of our ground rules is we don't discuss politics. We're not going to debate history. We feel that gets us away from what happened to us. My drive," he says, "is to make sure this generation of veterans is not treated like we were."

