

## **R. Nick Palarino remembers a friend.. Wayne Middleton**

One long weekend in April 1966 Wayne Middleton, my best friend at the time, and I decided to take a trip to Pembroke State College in North Carolina. We both had friends attending school there. Wayne was from North Babylon and a championship high school wrestler. We became good friends during our high school years and stayed in touch. Like me, Wayne had attended college after high school but the college experience did not work out for him. He was also bouncing from job to job. Since we left college, we were both eligible to be drafted into military service. While we were at Pembroke, I called home. My mother told me I had received a letter from the Selective Service System. I said, "Please open it." That was a mistake. There was a long pause and my mother became hysterical. She said, "Oh my God, oh my God, you've been drafted, you are going to go to Vietnam, you are going to die." Yes, that was how my mom reacted to some situations. But she was my mother and I loved her.

I asked mom if she could settle down long enough to read me the letter. I was curious as to when they wanted me to report for duty. The official letter stated: "Greetings: You are hereby ordered for induction into the Armed Forces of the United States, and to report at Local Board No. 2, 1265 Sunrise Highway, Second Floor, Bayshore, New York 11706, on May 17, 1966 at 6:30 a.m. for forwarding to an Armed Forces induction station."

Soon after I was asked to leave college because I hadn't passed any of my courses, my local draft board changed my draft status from II-S (student) to I-A (cannon fodder). There were a good number of young men who did not want to go into military service, including me. I remember feeling strongly that I didn't want to do anything drastic like flee to Canada. I did know that for the next two years I would not be moving from job-to-job. I told Wayne about the letter. He immediately called home and found out he also had been drafted, and his reporting date and location was the same as mine. We had about one month before we were to report so there was only one thing left for us to do; get drunk.

During most of the Vietnam war men were drafted into the military at 19 1/2 years of age if they had not already joined a military service or been deferred for such things as a medical issue or school deferment. Draftees represented about 25% of all US armed forces in Vietnam and comprised over 30% of the battle deaths. There was a possibility a draftee would not go to Vietnam; however, I sensed Wayne and I would be on our way there at some point.

The bus ride from Lindenhurst to Fort Hamilton Induction Station in Brooklyn, New York took a little over an hour. Once there, after a few tests, the Army decided I was "Acceptable for Induction." They determined I was physically, mentally and morally fit. Physically I was acceptable, even though I had flat feet. When the medical technician checked my feet he said, "You have extremely flat feet; by that I mean the bones of the arch of your feet have collapsed and are flat on the floor." I asked, "So does that mean I will not be drafted." The technician laughed and said, "No your flat feet do not disqualify you, but your feet will really hurt with all the marching and running you will be doing."

Morally qualified meant I had no arrests or convictions. And mentally acceptable meant I scored high enough on the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) which determines one is not an idiot, and is trainable. I received a 57% on the examination which meant I was classified a Category III out of eight categories. In comparison Wayne received a 93%, placing him as a Category I. Yes, I was average and Wayne was considered a bright young man.

The final step in the induction process was to take the "Oath." By law each person enlisting in one of our armed forces took a solemn promise as to how we would act during our two year commitment in the US Army: "I, R. Nicholas Palarino, do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. So help me God."

After the swearing in Wayne and I were talking when a non-commissioned officer approached and asked how we felt. We both said we were proud to be soldiers. The non-com then offered some advice:

"Well, I am glad you feel proud. Hopefully you will carry that feeling throughout your careers as soldiers. You are probably going to Fort Jackson for basic training. As soon as you get off the bus you should find the nearest drill sergeant. They are the ones with the big Smokey the Bear hats. Tell him you are proud to be soldiers and that you hear that drill sergeants try to do all they can to make it tough on new recruits. Tell him he can't make it too tough for you at basic training. That sergeant, the non-com said, "will respect you."

He then wished us luck and walked away. Wayne and I looked at each other and knew from then on, we should not listen to any more recommendations from non-coms. We were not sure what would happen next but did not have to wait long.

In less than an hour we were put on busses and taken to John F. Kennedy Airport in Queens. When our plane landed in Columbia, South Carolina, another bus was waiting to pick us up and deliver us to Fort Jackson. I said to Wayne, "Wow, the Army is pretty efficient." Wayne looked at me and said, "You are a naive dumb ass."

Once at the Fort Jackson Reception Station we were fed, given haircuts (heads shaved), received our military clothing and equipment. All the recruits were told to double up and set up their pup tents on the side of a hill. Thank goodness I was with Wayne. I had no idea how to set up a tent. That night I was assigned "Fire Watch" which meant walking around the tent encampment. If I saw a tent on fire, I was to alert the occupants and sound an alarm. I asked the sergeant where is the alarm. He said, "Scream as loud as you can." I wasn't sure why I was walking around in the middle of the night, in the pouring rain, looking for a tent on fire.

Early the next morning I heard music. It sounded like a trumpet. I said to Wayne someone is playing music. Wayne said, it's called reveille (this is a signal for troops to wake up and get ready for roll call), it means we need to get up. It was still dark and I think I had a total of two hours sleep. Wayne and I thought Fort Jackson was the place we would take basic training. We were surprised when a sergeant told us to put on our khaki uniforms and pack all of our gear in duffle bags. After breakfast we were getting on a train and traveling to Fort Riley, Kansas for basic training. What they did not tell us was that we were being assigned to the 9th Infantry Division, "The Old Reliables."

At the beginning of 1966, the number of US military personnel in South Vietnam was over 185,000. By the end of 1966 that number increased to well over 350,000, with US military killed in action about 400 per month. Wayne and I did not know our new unit, "The Old Reliables" was scheduled for deployment to Vietnam. "The Old Reliable" would be part of a massive troop increase.

After a long train ride we arrived at Fort Riley in the early evening of May 24th. We had been in the Army a total of eight days and had already travelled halfway across the country. We were fed, assigned our cubicles, and told to relax; our training would begin the next day. Wayne and I again bunked together in a two-man cubicle. At precisely 5 am reveille sounded. I was not prepared for the onslaught the Army was about to bestow on new recruits.

I remember basic training being physically demanding with a great deal of yelling, calisthenics, a lot of running, with rifles and back packs, and problems getting into the mess (dining facility) hall. Before you could enter the mess hall there were monkey bar rungs each trainee had to navigate before eating. If we were not in the field training, we had to traverse these twelve monkey bar rungs three times a day before we entered the mess hall. I had a problem because many times I could not swing from ring to ring with my backpack and M-14 rifle strung over my shoulder. Sometimes the non-commissioned officer would take pity on me and let me into the mess hall to eat, but sometimes I would have to wait outside for someone from my platoon to come out with food for me. Wayne never failed to master the rungs nor ensure he had food stuffed in his pockets for me.

There were quite a few people from New York in our platoon. Some were smart ass draftees and did not want to be in the Army. These guys made it hard for all of us because the commanding officer's policy was when one person in the platoon screwed up the entire platoon would be punished. There was a draftee from Brooklyn who kept screwing up.

The Friday before we were supposed to get a four-hour Sunday pass to go to the Post Exchange, "screw up" decided to drop out of our daily run. Our drill sergeant said the platoon should have made him finish the run,

even if we had to carry him. The platoon would not be getting a Sunday pass. Wayne and I asked the platoon sergeant what we should do. That night Wayne and I, and a few others in the platoon, decided to give the screw up a "blanket party." Basically, you waited until the screw up was asleep. You then got a group of guys together, put a blanket over him and punched him until he got the message to not screw up anymore. After we finished with him he screamed at us he wasn't going to wait until we got to Vietnam to kill us, he was going to kill us all that night. Wayne and I took turns keeping watch until reveille.

The Army training program was detailed. They taught us what a healthy meal was, how to shower, shave and even the proper way to wipe your ass after you took a shit. It was a very comprehensive program and the Army felt they had to teach all new recruits these types of things because some of the new recruits were never taught basic hygiene. And of course, the Army taught us how to march, how to salute, how to look good in our uniforms and how to break down our weapons and keep them clean. With our M-14s they showed how to take proper aim and fire that weapon for maximum effect, to kill your enemy.

The last piece of basic training I remember was our platoon crawling through the mud at night under barbed wire with explosive simulators bursting all around us. The drill instructors were firing M-60 machine guns over heads, some say they were using real bullets. Needless to say, everyone kept their heads very low as we crawled through the mud. As the explosions went off, they lit up the night. I saw Wayne's face. He was smiling, seeming to say, "Isn't this fun?"

After graduating from basic training most soldiers were sent to advanced individual training. This preparation would qualify a soldier to be an infantryman, an artilleryman or learn some other military occupational specialty. The new recruits to the 9th Infantry Division however were special. Since the 9th was deploying to Vietnam in January 1967, most of the new soldiers assigned would not need to go through any additional training. They would have on the job training, in Vietnam. This was an experimental concept and we were one of the first units to become known as "train and retain soldiers." What that meant was that after basic training we would be assigned directly to a unit and have on the job training to become an infantryman, artilleryman, radio operators or be assigned some other specialty. Wayne and I were assigned to the same unit; Company C, 2nd Battalion, 60th Infantry, 9th Infantry Division. I was assigned to the mortar platoon and Wayne was assigned to the infantry platoon. The only weapon I was familiar with was my rifle. I didn't know what a mortar looked like. But I quickly learned that various parts of a mortar are very heavy.

One night Wayne and I were outside the club sitting on the ground; we were drinking beer most of the evening and we were very, very drunk. Wayne said to me, "We don't want to deploy to Vietnam as infantryman, your mother's statement may come true, we could die." I said, "No shit but how do we get out of this? I can't bring myself to go AWOL (absent without leave) and go to Canada." Wayne said, "Let's go to OCS." I said, "What is OCS?" Wayne explained, "It is officer candidate school, and we may still have to go to Vietnam, but at least we will be officers." Neither of us knew the life expectancy of second lieutenant in Vietnam was shorter than that of an enlisted infantryman.

The next day Wayne and I approached the company first sergeant and asked for officer candidate school applications. He smirked at us and said you two will never make it, but still gave us the applications. We filled them out and our company commander approved them and forwarded them to the appropriate headquarters. Wayne and I were told we would appear before a board of officers in the near future to determine if we were qualified to become officers.

Thanks to my performance at Suffolk County Community College, I did not have a college degree. Neither did Wayne. Because of the Vietnam build up the Army needed officers so at that time there was no requirement for officer candidate school applicants to have a college degree.

When the day came to appear before the board, I made sure I had a fresh haircut, I polished my brass to a high shine, spit shined my shoes and put on a clean, starched khaki uniform. I remember walking into a small room with four officers, all decorated Vietnam veterans. I saluted and the president of the board told me to sit down. I do not remember much about the board's questions or what I said during the interview. But I do remember the president saying, "Your company commander gave you a good recommendation, you should thank him."

The next day our company left for a field training exercise. We were training for air assault operations. It was my first helicopter ride; I was excited. I watched the ground whizzing by as I sat on the floor of the helicopter with my feet hanging out of the chopper. I had my M-14, my backpack and that fucking mortar plate strapped to my back. I remember the helicopter coming to a hover. I heard my platoon sergeant yelling above the sound of the helicopter engine saying, "Jump you assholes." As I jumped all I could see below me was tall grass; on my way down I kept asking myself, were the fuck is the ground? I must have fallen about 20 feet. My flat feet hit the ground with a thud, which probably made them flatter, and I fell backward on my ass. My platoon sergeant helped me up and said, "Get to the tree line asshole." I never figured out why that dumb shit helicopter pilot did not get us closer to the ground. I scrambled off into the trees to join the rest of the platoon. Once there we set up our mortar firing position. We were supposed to be in the field for 10 days.

I remember one night while sitting in a foxhole on guard duty. It must have been about 3 am. At night the Kansas sky is beautiful with the stars shining brightly. I was thinking about Pat, home and how I missed being a civilian. The next thing I knew the first sergeant jumped into my foxhole. He said, "Didn't you hear me coming, why didn't you challenge me with the password?" I said no sergeant. He said, "Get your head out of your ass, if we had been in Vietnam and I was the Viet Cong you would be dead, along with a lot of your buddies. Get your shit together."

On one of those days in the field I was sitting by my tent eating a delicious C-ration meal. A C-ration is an individual canned, pre-cooked ration. It was intended to be used when fresh food (A-ration) or packaged unprepared food (B-ration) were not available. I think what I was eating beans and franks, at least that was what was written on the can. The company first sergeant came up to me and said, "Palarino, get your shit together, you are going back to company headquarters." I asked, "Why?" The first sergeant looked at me like I should never ask why but said, "You are going to OCS." I did not have time to find Wayne, or say goodbye to anyone.

A jeep was waiting to take me back to the company. Once there I received orders which allowed me a few days leave, then required to report to the US Army Training Center, Fort McClellan, Alabama for advanced individual training (AIT). My orders' "Special Instructions" stated, "Enlisted man has been selected for Officer Candidate School and must be given Advanced Individual Training in Military Occupational Specialty 11B10 (Light Weapons Infantryman)." Although the Army determined we did not need to go to AIT before going to Vietnam, an officer needed to go to AIT before becoming an officer. Army logic sometimes confused me.

I telephoned Pat and told her I had a few days leave but could not come home because I did not have enough money. The Army would pay for an airline ticket from Kansas to Alabama, but not to New York and then Alabama. As a Private I was making \$68 per month. Pat wired me the money for a plane ticket from Kansas to New York and then onto Alabama. I got to visit mom and Harry and it was great to see Pat. My mother was very happy I was not going to Vietnam. I did not tell her there was still a possibility I still would end up there.

Sometime during the week of April 18, 1967, I was inspecting my platoon. One of my friends, Kenny Pasquale, who was an upper classman in another OCS class came in. He had been drafted with Wayne and I, and was also from Lindenhurst. We stepped outside and Kenny told me Wayne had been killed in Vietnam. Wayne had been in country only four months. He, and 10 others in his company were killed on April 15th in an ambush about 40 miles South of Saigon. I was devastated. The last contact I had with Wayne was by phone before he deployed. We didn't stay on the phone long, and I remember telling him, "I will probably see you there before you are ready to rotate back to the States." I still owed him \$10.

Many years later I found the following on the Internet about Wayne's last day on earth. The following was written by Jeffrey Williams, who was with Wayne right before he went on patrol.

"I chowed with Wayne the afternoon he was killed and it is one of those special memories that remains with me and will until the end of my time. Wayne was excited the afternoon we ate together. Our Battalion had been moved out of Tan Tru [Vietnam] to a forward position and Wayne's Company, A Company, was providing perimeter security. My Company, B Company, was air-lifted in and we were replacing A Company. They were heading out to a place we called the bowling alley. Wayne was in a great mood and excited because his girlfriend sent him a tape of the Beach Boys' album, "Pet Sounds."

Wayne had a small tape player in his pack and he asked me if I had heard the album before, which I hadn't. He said to me, "You've got to listen to this one song, "Wouldn't It Be Nice." And when you listen to it, listen to the lyrics. They make me think of my girlfriend. I want to marry her as soon as I get home, I love her so." Wayne flew away that day, around three, four o'clock in the afternoon.

I've been listening to that song and that album ever since, literally. I have it on my CD in the car. Wayne goes everywhere with me, he's always with me. When I get depressed, Wayne's spirit lifts me up. When time permits, listen to the lyrics. That was the spirit in Wayne's heart and soul when we were last together. Rest in peace and may God Bless You dear buddy. "Jeffrey Williams

\*\*\*Wayne's name is on the Vietnam Memorial Wall, Panel 18E, Line 30. When I worked in Washington, I visited him often. I would bring people to the "Wall" and introduce them to Wayne. "Wouldn't It Be Nice" is one of my favorite songs. I believe Wayne saved my ass by recommending we go to Officer Candidate School. Rest in peace my friend.