

Phil Mason

Objects for Deployment

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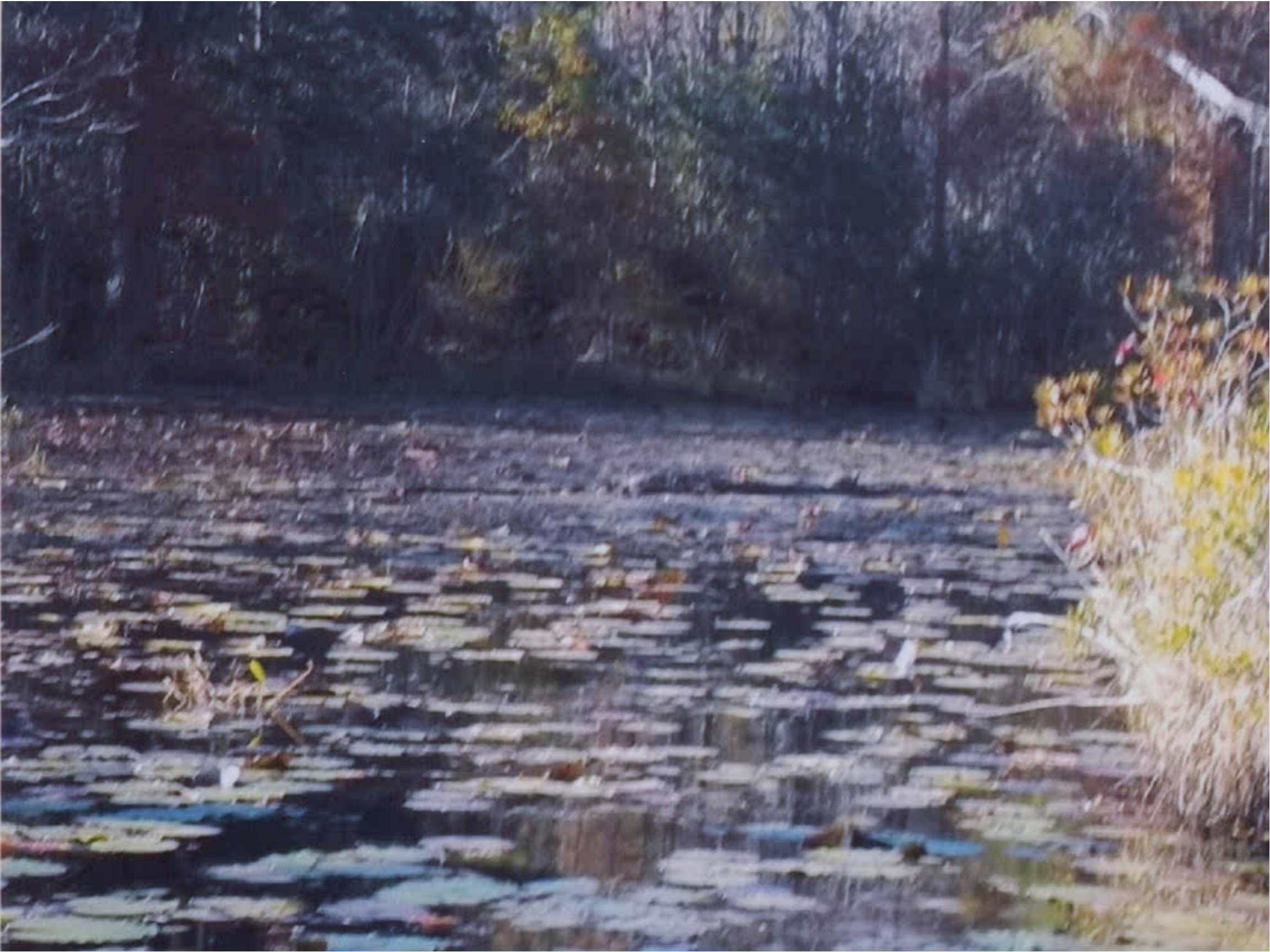
WHY I WRITE

It could have been him writing about me. But, it didn't happen that way. After all these years of struggle, of being haunted by his memory, I think I'm ready to tell other people about it.



Thinking back to my childhood, I can remember the good and the bad. But, it seemed like the good always outweighed the bad. Summers were busy with plowing fields and planting corn and tobacco, but I always knew that when the work was done, it was fishin' time.

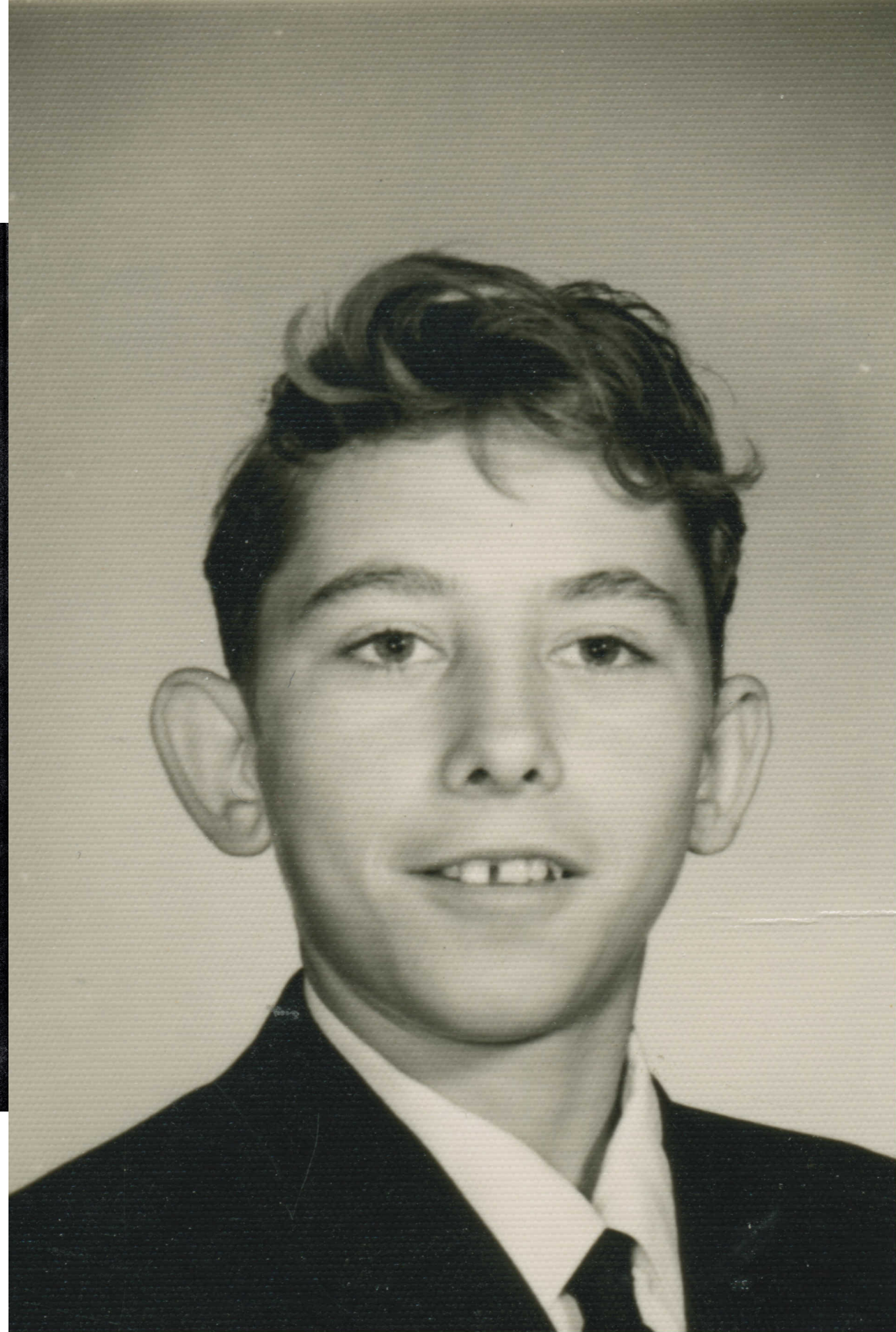
My brother-in-law would take his brothers and me to the Santee River just outside of Saint Stephen, South Carolina – next to Hell Hole Swamp – for a weekend of camping and fishing. We didn't have the luxury of tents or sleeping bags, just us boys on the sandbar with hands full of bait and poles. What a life! If we got cold at night, we dug holes in the sand and buried ourselves. What more could a country boy want? It was the greatest.



When winter rolled around, there was still a lot of work to do on the farm after school. But, the weekends brought fun in the form of squirrel hunting. We loved this probably more than fishing. I had an old, single-shot .22 caliber rifle and very few bullets. I knew every shot counted. If I missed, there'd be no squirrel. We always came home with a nice pile of them, though, depending on how many bullets we had that day.

There is nothing better than a good squirrel bog and homemade biscuits. If you don't know what squirrel bog is, it's good eating: squirrel cooked in a big pot of rice. Real country-boy eating.

Life was great back then.



In 1965, my whole life changed.

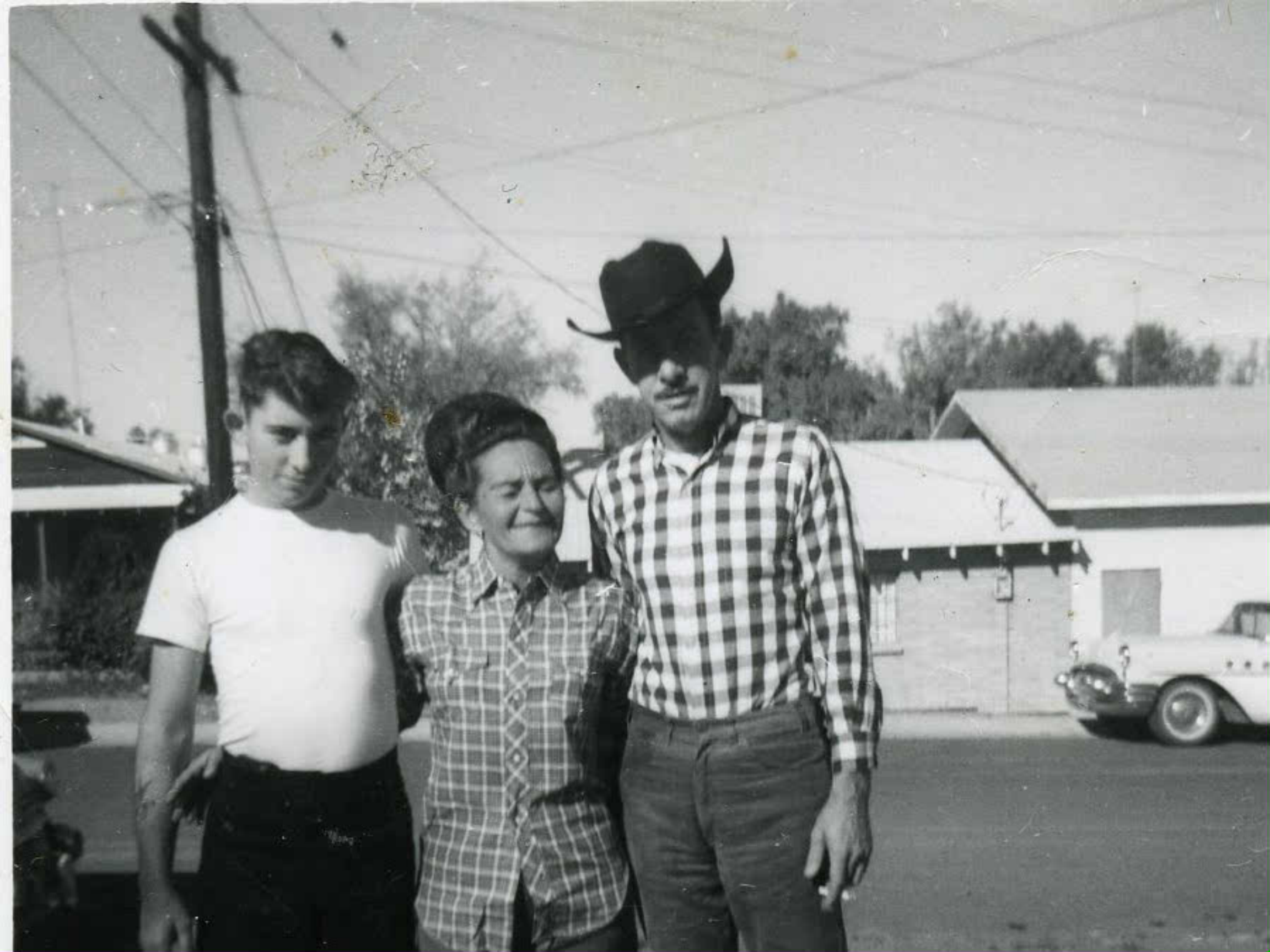
I turned seventeen and enlisted in the Navy.

Military service was a part of my family's history. My grandfather and father both served.

My father never talked about the military. But yet it still sunk in.

When I started thinking about joining it was 1964. I was young. Working on the farm and going to school, I never had time to watch the news. I knew nothing about Vietnam. The only actual news that I remember from that time was President Kennedy's assassination.

Back then, kids looked up to the military. It was a way of life; you knew when you got old enough, you should serve your country.



The kinds of things that influenced me were old magazines. I can remember seeing them in the barbershop with depictions of the military and WWII. TV showed a lot of WWII movies. John Wayne was a hero of mine. He was in the cowboy movies, and he starred in a lot of those WWII movies I saw. People didn't picture him in war movies, but he was.

Audie Murphy was a decorated soldier. He acted in films and was portrayed by others in various war movies. "Have gun, will travel." That was his trademark.

The old cowboys were like heroes to me. I watched westerns and wanted to be one. Similarly, I watched war movies and wanted to be in the military. They are one-and-the-same. We didn't get much time to watch TV when I was young, but I've never forgotten my heroes.

I hunted when I was younger. All us boys competed to see who could shoot the most squirrels. I played like I was in the military hunting someone.

Through the generations, kids seem to do similar things.

When the WWII war heroes came home they rode in convertibles down the streets.

Bands and ticker tape.

And you'd just get it in your mind that that's the way it's supposed to be. It makes you - it made ME - look at them like heroes.

Then I started growing up and it was getting close to the time that I needed to go to the military and serve the country.

It was always a draft when we were coming up. You got your draft card from the government. If your number was called, you were drafted. You were going to be called some time.

I didn't want to sit back and wait for my draft. I wanted to sign up before that. I didn't want to be in that position where I felt like I had to go.

I told my dad I was thinking about enlisting. I don't know if he knew about Vietnam or what, but he didn't want me to enlist.



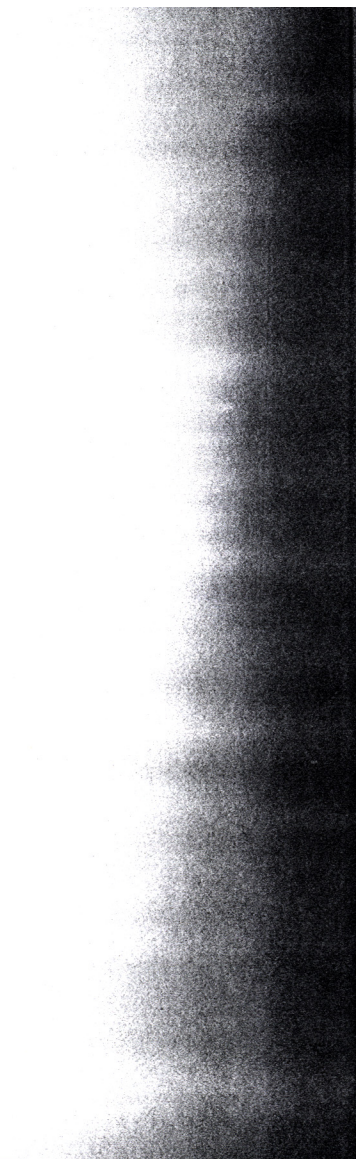
He kept brushing it off by saying, "You don't need to go into the Army... pick something else." He was pleased that I wanted to go into the service; he just didn't want me to join the Army specifically. He never really said why.

He woke me up one morning and said there was someone waiting to talk to me; he had a Navy recruiter there that had a very convincing story.

I completed basic training in San Diego, California. Afterwards, I was given a choice of duty stations in Anchorage, Alaska or overseas. (Needless to say, that was Vietnam.)

I'm a southern boy, and couldn't imagine myself in the cold climate of Alaska, so I chose Vietnam. (Do not pass go. Do not collect \$200, if you know what I mean.)

I had no idea what I was about to walk into.





Even as we went through basic training, we weren't really told a lot about Vietnam.

Upon arriving, we all tried to find someone we could trust.

If you had a buddy who was always watching your back, you felt safe. This is where Robert came in. He was my buddy. We hooked up from the beginning, and from then on, we were inseparable. We worked side-by-side, we listened to each other, we helped each other through the battles, through the anger, through the sadness.

He was my best friend, my brother. He was there for me, no matter what, and I was there for him.

We both saw a lot of death. And dealt with a lot of bodies. A lot of our peers never made it home. This took a huge toll on our minds and souls over time. We weren't alone. It wore all of us out.

We were both dealing with depression. We could see it in each other, and we'd talk it out.

There were things that he would do that I knew were out of character, and that's how I'd know he needed to talk. He did the same for me.

We spotted the problems in each other.



I didn't write home very often. I didn't want my family and friends to know what I was going through.

At one point, a high-ranking officer came to me and demanded I send a note home after my mother contacted him. Then I wrote home.

I've kept a lot of secrets about this part of my life. I had reason to.

We had been there for three years without leave....

In the first part of 1968, Robert and I were aboard a helicopter carrier. We had pulled a long day of extra duty loading bodies into helicopters.

I was really tired and went to bed earlier than usual. It seemed like I'd just gotten to sleep when someone started shaking me.

I opened my eyes to Robert telling me he needed to talk. I was so tired and insisted we talk in the morning.

He left, I laid back down and fell asleep again. It seemed like just a few minutes passed and I was awoken by the ship's loudspeaker.

“Man overboard!”

I jumped out of bed and ran to the back of the ship with the others. The water was very dark and looked cold and rough.

A helicopter was flying around with spotlights, searching.

We were ordered to fall in rank for a head count.

While standing in formation, I noticed that Robert wasn't there. I remember feeling alone and lost for the first time since arriving to Vietnam.

An announcement came through that a glove had been recovered from the water with Robert's name in it.

I knew then that it was him.

When they announced who it was that had drowned, I wanted to jump overboard. I wanted to be the one to help him because I had always been his helper.

Even if I couldn't save him, if I jumped, at least he wouldn't have to go alone. But I couldn't do it. I wasn't man enough.

I've never been able to forgive myself for that.

That night I turned him away. I feel that because I turned him away, he gave up. I don't know if that's the case, but that's how I see it.

Something was just eating him up. He needed me and I'll never know what he intended to tell me.

It hurt me that he left because we were in this together. But, then I sit and think that maybe I'm the one who let him down. If I'd listened to him, maybe he wouldn't have left me.

Robert was from Pennsylvania. He'd been raised in a boarding school; he had no family. He always asked me to tell him about my childhood. I liked telling him about it because he enjoyed it. It kind of put him there, I guess.

Then, it would make me feel bad because I knew he never got to do anything like that. I used to think I didn't have it good growing up, but then I got over there and met him, and he made me realize how lucky I'd been. But, he was a good boy. He was. He was street-smart.

Sometimes, we'd sit and talk about what we wanted to do when we got home.

We both wanted to move back to the country and have a big farm or ranch, possibly together. There'd be plenty of cows and horses.

Robert always told me he wanted to marry a girl from California...

We had plans.

In February of 1968, I was discharged from the Navy after three years of active duty. WWII vets came home and just wanted to be happy. They were glad to be back and wanted to enjoy life. And that's what I thought I'd do when I came home: settle down, have a bunch of kids and go back to the things I loved since I was a boy – hunting and fishing. But it wasn't like the movies or the comic books.

I came back to a whole different world.

When we flew home from Vietnam, we were on a huge cargo jet. The back of it was full of caskets. I had to sit on top of them from DeNang to Hawaii. There was no other place to sit.

In Hawaii, we were transferred to a commercial flight. They had us sit in the last seats at the back of the plane. We were in uniform. Maybe that's why they wanted us out of sight.

I dealt with bodies a lot over there. Then, we flew home sitting on bodies. When I got on the civilian plane, I had to change my mood from feeling bad to feeling good.

I had to change my whole atmosphere from Hawaii to San Francisco. I had to forget. So, I started thinking about ticker tape parades and soldier homecomings. You get your mind psyched up, I guess. I had to get my mind prepared. I tried to put the last three years behind me, but I couldn't.

We landed in San Francisco. When we got off the plane, I remember feeling full of adrenaline: "We've finally made it home, here come the cheers."

But, the second we walked off the plane, there were protestors screaming, "Baby-killers!" And, "You should have died over there!"

I think these people waited to meet soldiers coming home.

They weren't old people protesting. They were young. They didn't fully understand the situation. I didn't either, and I had just spent three years there.

Those words really stuck to me. I already felt bad about everything that went on in Vietnam, anyway. I was lost. Confused. I felt ashamed.

I went from low, to high, to even lower and stayed there a long time.

The protestors got me thinking about a lot of confusing questions. Why did I go to Vietnam?

Why was I there?

I know I went to serve my country, but I didn't know why.

After receiving my discharge, I went to live with my parents and just couldn't deal with problems that seemed to come home with me.

If somebody asked me what I did after graduating high school, I'd just tell them I worked on the farm.

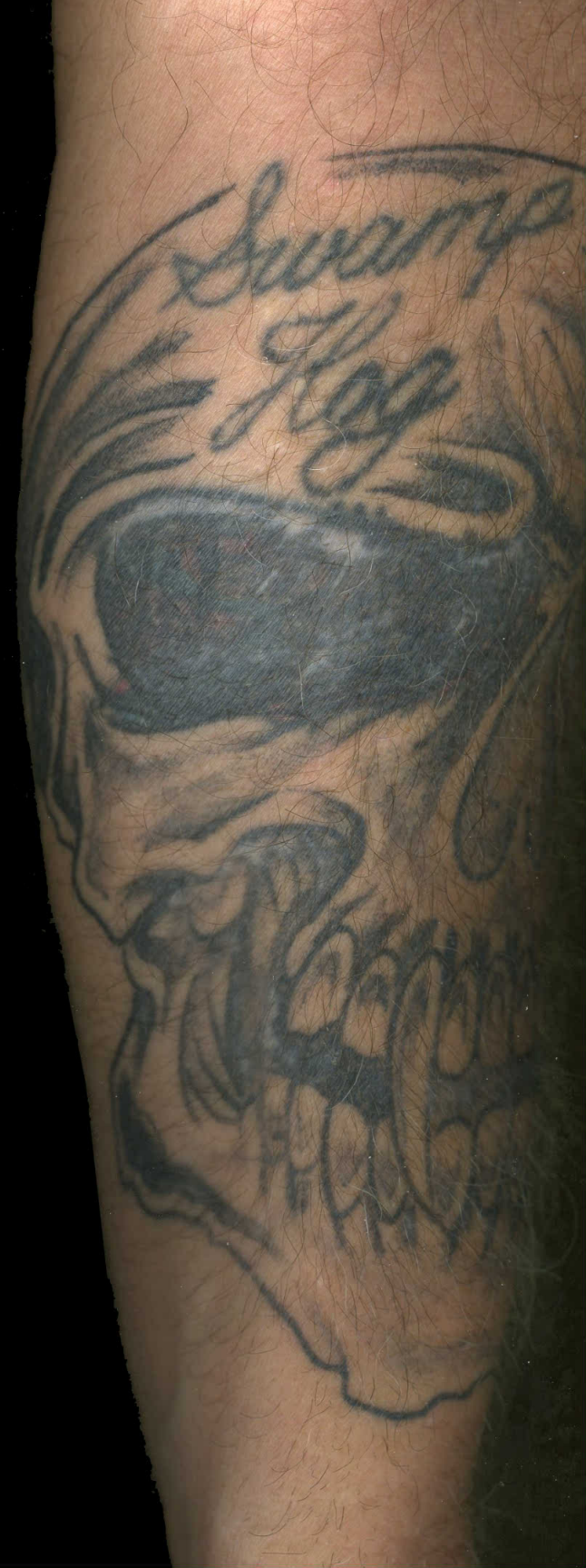
I wouldn't even tell them I'd been to Vietnam.

You learn quickly to adapt to what you're in. It's kind of like an animal instinct; you do what you have to do to survive. You learn what it means to survive. You find your buddy to be there with you and dig in your heels.

But then you come home. You're not in the jungle anymore; you're not dodging bullets or shooting at anybody. You find out it's much harder to survive here than it was over there.

Here, you have to hide who you are and where you've been. You have to deal with this lost feeling. You come back home thinking it's going to be the same as it was when you left.

But, things have changed. You've changed. You're not a carefree country boy anymore; you're a Vietnam vet.



It was just a rough time. It made me want to go back to Vietnam. At least there you knew you were supported and protected by those around you.

When I was growing up, I was used to seeing the news clippings about WWII soldiers coming home to parades, eager families, adoring girlfriends and wives.

I thought my homecoming would be the same way; I'd shake everyone's hand and they'd tell me they were glad to have me back.

I felt like I had to hide that I had even been to Vietnam.

They were mixed feelings - guilty, and not knowing why I even went.

In Vietnam, you try to keep that stuff a secret. And then after I got here, I had to keep it a secret. For so many years, I felt I have had to keep a secret.

I couldn't get my mind straight from Vietnam before I jumped into being home again. When I was coming home, I thought everything would be great. Everyone would be happy. But, then I walked into a brick wall.



A couple years later, I went several times to a hospital asking for help but was turned away, the people telling me I just needed to grow up. So, eventually, I just gave up.

All I knew is that I couldn't tell anybody that I'd been to Vietnam.

When I put in an application for a job, I didn't feel I could put down that I'd been in the military, because if I did, they wouldn't hire me. You could get jobs in construction or manufacturing. But as for real good jobs, they wouldn't hire you.

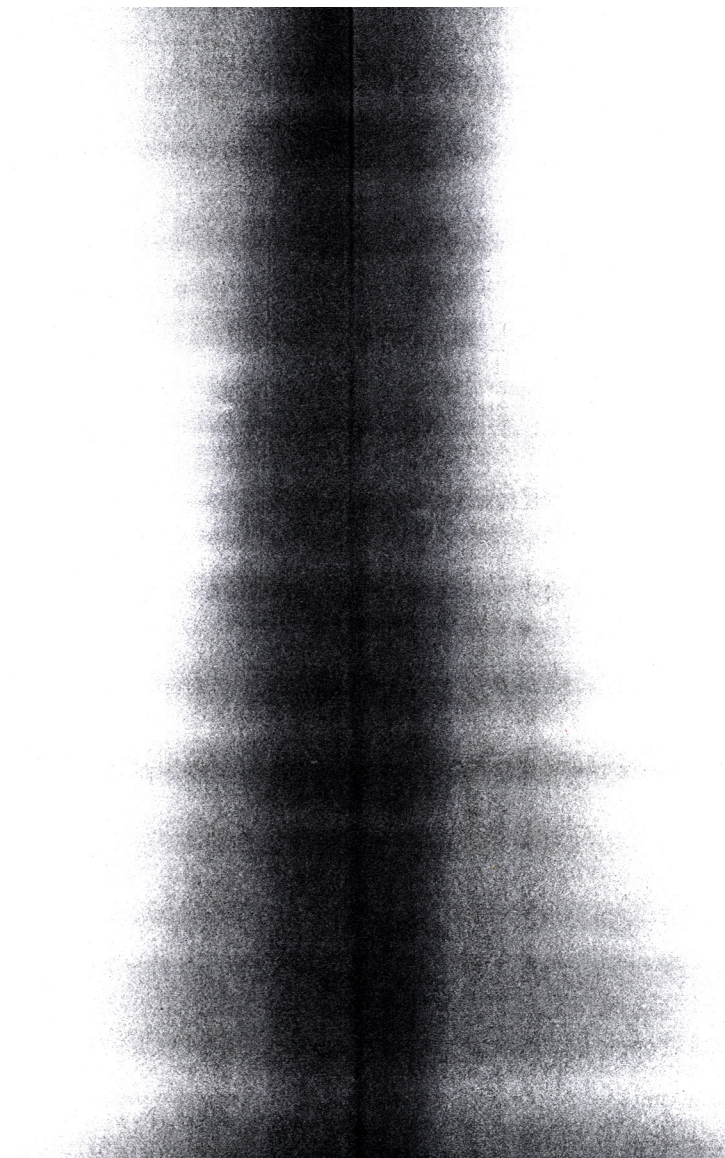
If you told them you were in the military, then they wanted to know if you'd been to Vietnam. You didn't tell people you were in Vietnam. You tried to stay away from your friends because they knew. When I first came home, I spent a lot of time in the woods by myself because I felt secure there.

It was becoming impossible to keep a job due to either the confinement or the workers crowded around me, which constantly made me feel that everything and everybody was closing in around me.

Over time, I married and we had children. I went to work in construction and was finally able to keep a job and support my family.

I have never been able to get rid of the tormenting nightmares.

When people asked me what I did, I would
tell them I did what I had to in order to
survive.



I joined motorcycle clubs. Got tattoos. I've always gone with skulls because I've always thought about death. I dealt with a lot of bodies in Vietnam.

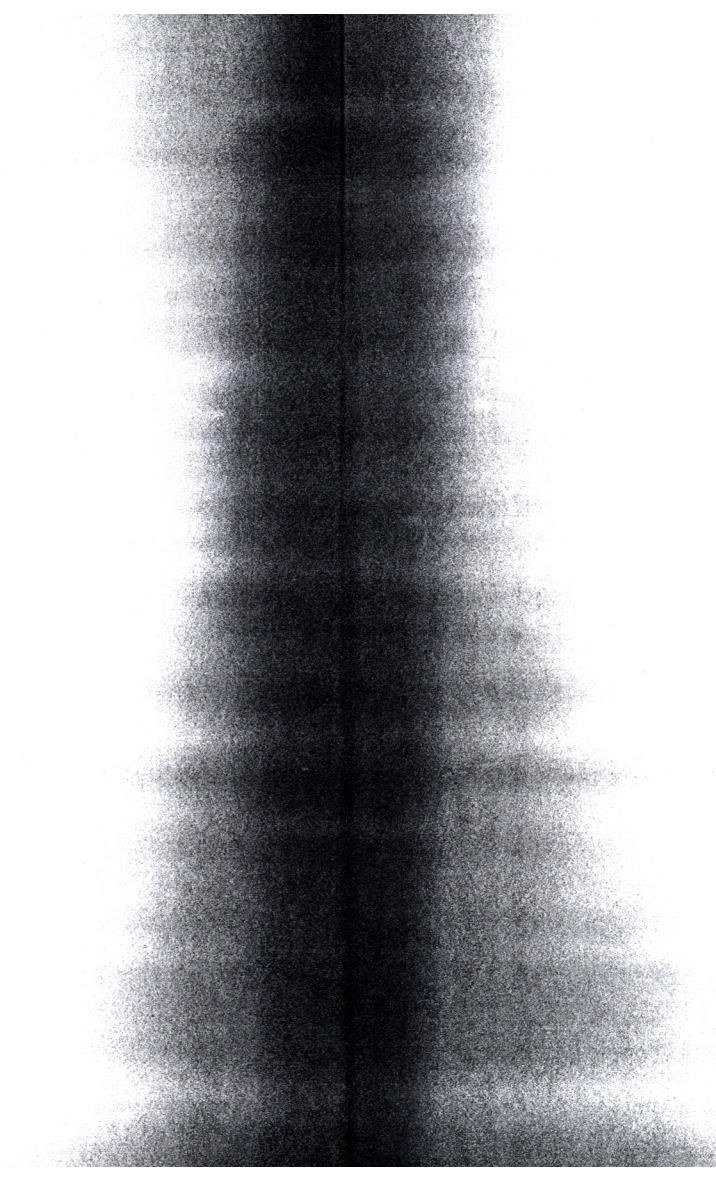
Many times, I felt like dying would be better than the life I had lived and the life still to come. I never liked thinking about the future because I felt mine would never be any different than my past.











In April 2010, I was seriously injured in a motorcycle accident in South Carolina. Due to my head injury, I was eventually sent to the VA Polytrauma Rehabilitation Program in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

While I was recovering, the hospital staff noticed my ongoing problems with PTSD and asked if I would be willing to meet with a psychologist. I eagerly agreed.

To my surprise, therapy has been incredibly transformative.

For the first time in over forty years, I'm processing things that have been bottled up and suppressed.



It's like my head just busted open and all these words came out. Well, my head did bust open. I have my motorcycle accident to thank for that. Strangely, it took a near-fatal event to get me to address the real struggles of my life.

I would have loved to be able to say these things in 1968. Having them in my head for so long was like living with a constant migraine.

I've never talked about him until now. He's always been on my mind. He's my secret. I can't get away from the thought that I could have changed the outcome.

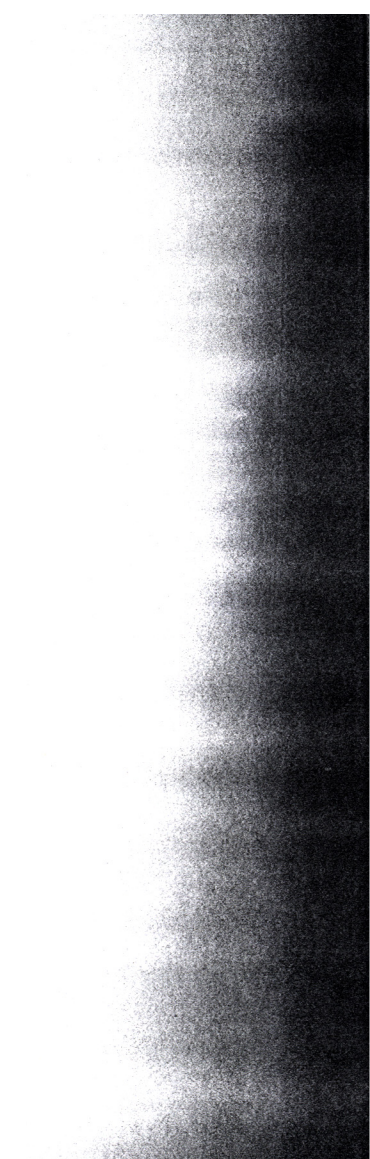
I wish he would have had family that I could have talked to. I don't know if I would have told them what happened; I don't even know if I would have told them who I was, but I would have liked to see them.

I guess I would have liked to see if they were like him at all. It would have been a way to get to Robert again.

Even though I have nightmares of that night, I don't want to stop having them because I'm afraid if I do, I might forget him.

And I don't ever want to forget him.

So, if it takes me having nightmares for the rest of my life, then I'll have them because I can't forget him. Whatever it takes.



All they were doing at the South Carolina VA was pumpin' me full of medication. If I hadn't come to the Minneapolis VA, I would have continued living how I'd been living for the past 30-some years.

It's hard to put into words what the Minneapolis VA has done for me. After they got me stable from my head trauma, they went right to work on my other issues.

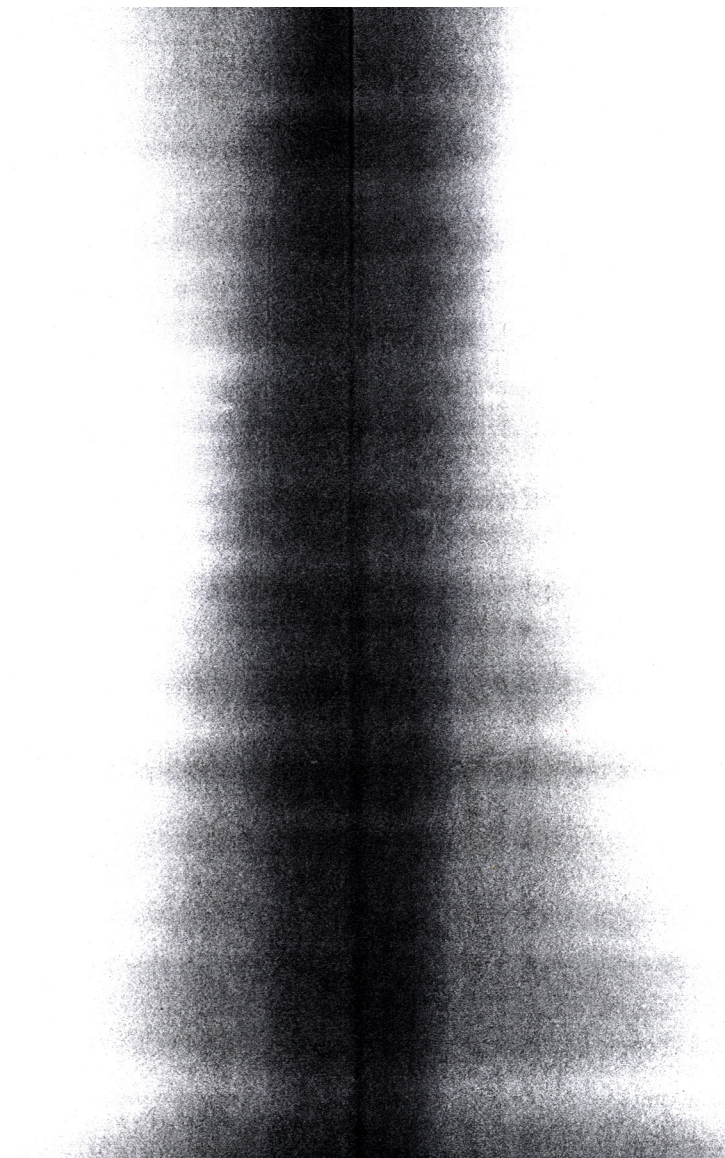
Every time I come in here, it's like I'm a kid in a candy store. There's something good in here for me.

I may never know why this has been put upon me, but I do believe that for every bad thing that may come your way, there is something good that can come of it, if you just believe.

But now, it's opening up and giving me relief so that I can enjoy things in the world now.

There were so many things I couldn't do before I came here. I would not go to a theater. There was no way I was going to go in the dark with people around me.

I have never been able to go to a restaurant
and sit at a table without my back to the wall.
Now, I can sit anywhere.

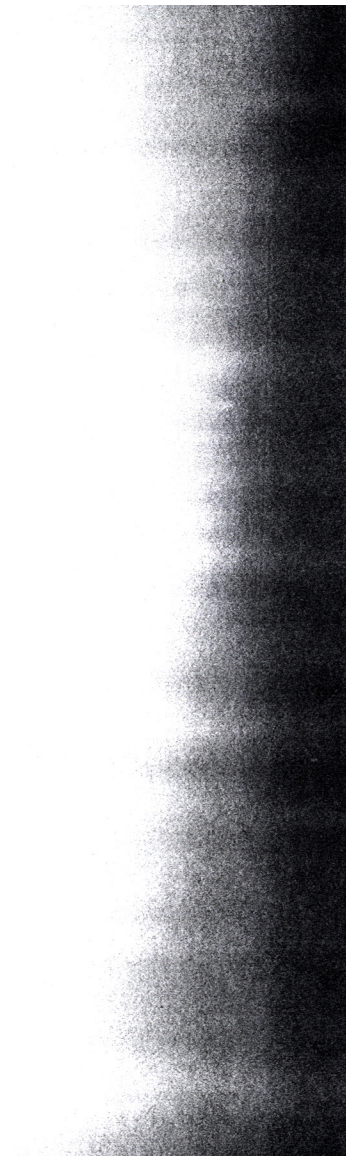


Ball game? No. I couldn't take the crowd. I felt
like they were closing in on me. It's a big
accomplishment. I love it. It feels very good. It's
kind of like getting out of prison, now I can do
things and enjoy things.

For so many years, I felt like it was me, and I have to deal with it. I caused the problem, so I have to solve the problem. But, I couldn't solve it.

Through therapy, I'm starting to learn that I don't have to fight it alone.

Hopefully, one day, I'll be able to accept my situation in a different way.



I wish my parents hadn't gone to their graves
without knowing what I'd done in Vietnam.
They didn't understand why I went to
drinking, why I stayed away from them.

For all I know, they thought, "Well, he came
home. All he wants to do is drink." But, I drank
because I was hurt. I drank to forget what had
happened to me and Robert and the others.

I wish it hadn't been that way.

Before the accident and coming to this hospital, I wouldn't talk about Vietnam or Robert. Now, I'm sitting here talking to you about both.

It makes me wonder.

Someone might be struggling the same way I did. Mostly, I want them to know that they can get through it. That's something I'm firm about now.

For many years, I doubted I could get through this. I thought about taking my own life. But, I always hung on.

Now I see.

The things you think will kill you can sometimes save your life.

COLOPHON

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We made this book for listening. Please accept our invitation. We made this book for deployment. Please pass it along and invite someone else to listen.

Thank you,
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Phil Mason served in the Navy from 1965 – 1968. He spent three years in Vietnam. Upon returning home, he moved to Iowa with his parents, and then back home to South Carolina where he stayed until his motorcycle accident in April 2010. Because of his head injury, he was sent to the VA Medical Hospital Head Trauma Unit in Minneapolis, MN. While being treated for a brain injury there, he began treatment for the post-traumatic stress he had been experiencing for the past forty years. Phil has made an amazing recovery from his accident, and is currently living near his son in Minnesota. He fills his days with two new hobbies: painting and photography.

