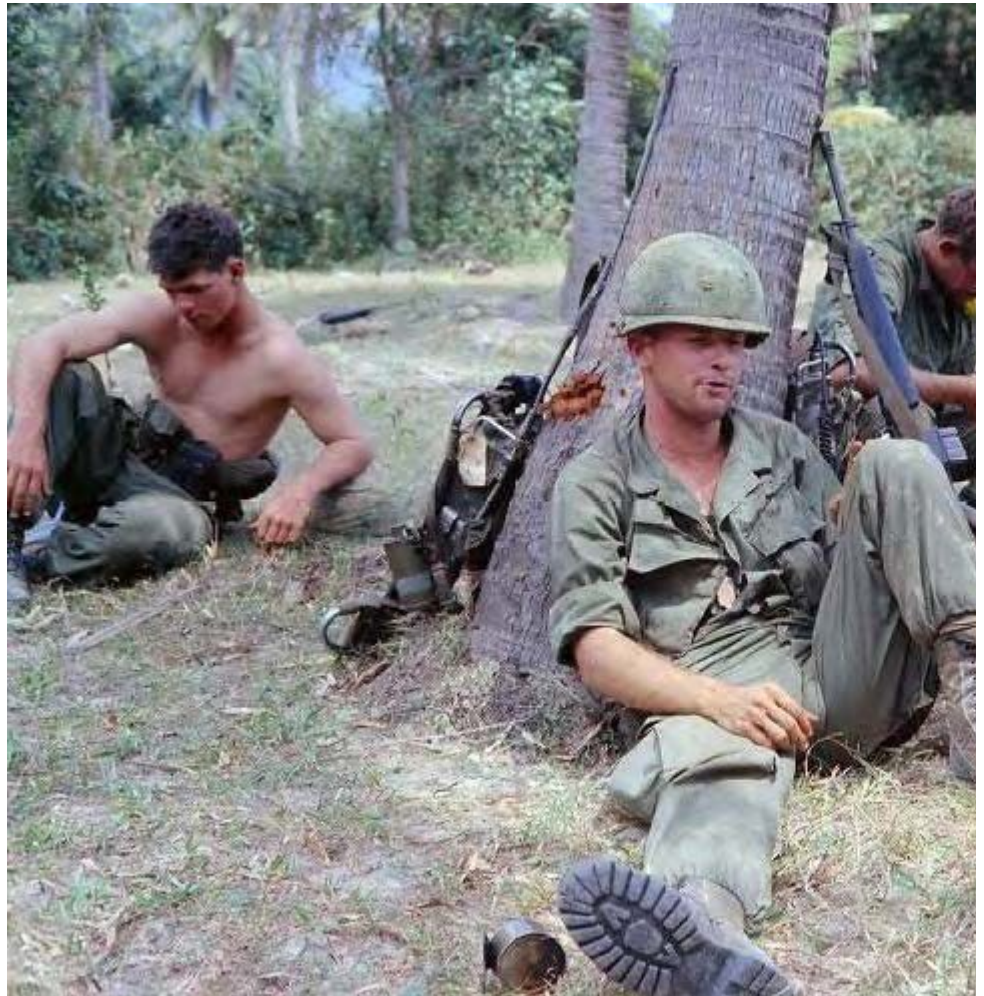


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A Veterans Day remembrance

By Andrew B. Wilson Nov 10, 2018



Lt. Harry B. Wilson

There were two Vietnam wars: one largely forgotten except for the actual combatants, the other keenly remembered by most baby boomers. The first was fought in the jungles and rice paddies of Vietnam; the second on college campuses and in living rooms across America during the turbulent 1960s. Both wars reached peak intensity in 1968.

On Jan. 31 of that year, which coincided with the Lunar New Year, or Tet, the North Vietnamese Army spearheaded a wave of simultaneous attacks against cities, towns and military targets in South Vietnam. This was the Tet Offensive.

As a 22-year old Army lieutenant, Harry B. Wilson, my older brother, was thrown into the thick of heavy and sustained fighting against the NVA and Vietcong forces.

Twice wounded, he commanded a platoon that operated in multiple modes: as traditional infantry on foot; as airmobile in helicopter assaults; or as “mounted” cavalry in four M-113 armored personal carriers. Called APCs, these were fast, lightly armored, tracked vehicles. They moved at top speeds of over 40 mph, carrying squads of eight to 12 soldiers, their gear, and three machine guns.

A total of 14,584 U.S. soldiers lost their lives in Vietnam in 1968. That was close to half of the 31,000-plus U.S. servicemen killed in Vietnam through the end of 1968 and a quarter of the 58,220 who died over the 14-year span of the war.

The Vietnam War dominated the nightly news back in the U.S. — along with coverage of mounting riots and protests by college students. The twining of those two storylines led in time to the loss of determination on the home front to pursue the overseas war to a successful conclusion. There was no more tell-tale sign of that than Lyndon B. Johnson’s decision — announced on March 31 — not to seek a second term as president in the November elections.

At Stanford University, where I was in 1968, the ROTC building was the target of repeated arson attempts by campus activists. It was completely destroyed in May 1968, just one month before my graduation.

Halfway around the world, Harry and his troops were in the field and continuously under threat of — or actively engaged in — combat from January through the middle of June. In early March, as they approached a landing zone in Huey helicopters near the central coast, Harry and his platoon came under fire. Coming down fast and hard, they scrambled out of the helicopters and formed a perimeter. As it happened, they had landed right on top of the NVA headquarters company. They were surrounded by a much larger enemy force, with no more cover than paddy dikes about 10 to 12 inches high.

Harry radioed for very close-in fire from U.S. helicopter gunships — directing the placement of 2.75-inch rockets “impacting only 10 meters away from us, and sometimes on top of us.” Between the platoon’s ground fire and the helicopters’ door gunners, they threw back the attack and the platoon lived to fight another day. For his leadership, Harry was awarded the Silver Star, the third highest military decoration for gallantry in action.

He came back to the States in December 1968. Having left in his junior year on what was jokingly called a “Vietnam fellowship,” he returned to Harvard in the spring semester of 1969. Hooray for Harry! He graduated with honors in May 1970. In late 1968 I went in for a draft physical exam and was classified as a 1-Y — exempting me from military service due to real but non-life-threatening physical ailments. I gladly accepted the exemption, though it left me with a lingering sense of guilt over the absence of any military service on my own part.

Joining Harry and his fellow vets from 1st Battalion of the 50th Infantry Regiment as a family member and an invited guest at a three-day reunion in 2011 was a deeply moving experience for me — having made none of the same sacrifices that they did in serving their country.

The cheers that soldiers now receive at airports are a welcome change from the jeering they faced during the Vietnam era.

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