



The Volunteer

by W. D. Ehrhart



I first began to consider joining the Marines in the late fall of 1965, soon after the battle of the Ia Drang Valley, an engagement which confirmed for the first time the presence of North Vietnamese regular army troops in South

Vietnam. As a senior in high school, I was then in the midst of applying to colleges, and within four months I would be accepted at four of them, but throughout that winter and into the spring of 1966, I kept coming back to the thought of delaying college long enough to serve my country. A few years earlier, I'd written on the cover of my school notebook John Kennedy's clarion call: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." Now I had my chance to answer that challenge.

When I was nine, the Communist Soviet Union had launched into orbit around the earth *Sputnik*, the first artificial satellite, demonstrating their potential ability also to launch atomic missiles at the United States. As a ten-year-old, I had cowered beneath my desk at school during nuclear bomb drills, waiting for the Russians to attack us. Over the next few years, the U.S.S.R. and its evil minions had built the Berlin Wall, spawned Communist insurgency in Laos, and tried to put nuclear missiles in Cuba. I had watched on television as Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev pounded his shoe on the podium at the United Nations General Assembly, shouting, "We will bury you!"

Kennedy had said we would bear any burden and pay any price to prevent that from happening. And then

Kennedy was dead, and a few days later I had stood for eight hours in freezing cold just to get a glimpse of his casket lying in state beneath the Capitol dome, and when I saw it, I had cried. A year later, during the 1964 presidential election, I rode around the streets of Perkasio, Pennsylvania, on the back of a flatbed truck singing Barry Goldwater campaign songs because I felt that Lyndon Johnson was too soft on communism. Moscow's Communist henchmen were by this time clearly escalating their drive to conquer the free people of South Vietnam, yet Johnson seemed afraid to confront them with anything more than words.

To my dismay, Johnson won the election, but I fully supported him in 1965 when he began the systematic bombing of North Vietnam, sent the Marines into South Vietnam, and finally ordered the military to switch from a defensive posture to the offensive mission of seeking out and destroying the Viet Cong. "If we do not stop the Communists in Vietnam," Johnson said, "we will one day have to fight them on the sands of Waikiki." Johnson was finally catching on, I thought, and by March 1966 my own mind was made up: college could wait. My country needed me now. I would join the Marines.

And it had to be the Marines. That was never in question. "The Marine Corps Builds Men." That was the recruiting slogan back then, and I wanted to be a man. More than that: I wanted to be a hero, and Marines were heroes almost by definition. The Halls of Montezuma. Belleau Wood. Guadalcanal. The Chosin Reservoir. And what in the world looked sharper than that U.S. Marine Corps dress blue uniform? Yes, indeed, if I was going, I was going as a Marine.

My parents were none too keen on the idea. It wasn't that they had any political or moral objections to the war, but only a question of who would want their child to go to war when he could go to college instead? But our long and sometimes heated discussions finally ended when I blurted out, "Is this the way you raised me? To let other mothers' sons fight America's wars?" And of course, that was not the way my parents had raised me, and that had ended all discussion. I left for boot camp at Parris Island, South Carolina, in June 1966, nine days after I graduated from high school. At the time, I did not even possess a draft card because, at 17, I was not yet old enough to register with Selective Service.

Seven months later I arrived in Vietnam, where

everything I thought I knew about the war in particular, and the world in general, came head-on smack up against reality. But that's another story.

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W. D. Ehrhart served three years in the Marine Corps, including thirteen months in Vietnam (1967-68) with 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, receiving the Purple Heart, two Presidential Unit Citations, and promotion to sergeant. He later became active with Vietnam Veterans Against the War. A writer, poet and lecturer, he is also currently a research fellow of the American Studies Department, University of Wales at Swansea, U.K. He lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, with his wife and daughter. His many books of prose and poetry include *Vietnam-Perkasie*, *The Distance We Travel*, and *Carrying the Darkness*.

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