

VIETNAM:



To a Vietnamese child, Steve Stone, venturing out on his first patrol, is just another American GI. Pfc. Steven C. Stone, US 56699643: "My wife worrie

A DRAFTEE IS SENT TO



more than she shows. She doesn't want me to worry about her."

FIGHT

THE REPLACEMENTS FILE SILENTLY out the airliner door in rumpled khakis, squinting at the hot sunlight. Only 22 hours ago, in California, they boarded the chartered commercial jet, and stewardesses with frozen smiles served a barbecued-chicken dinner. Long weeks of prepping for Vietnam have keyed up the newcomers, but the Ben Hoa air base looks like any sprawling military installation back in the States. They straggle in clusters across the concrete runway. Under the processing shed, combat veterans barely older wait to fill the jet's seats for a ride home. Some clutch captured Chinese rifles wrapped in Manila paper. The new and the old of the Vietnam war pass, hardly looking at each other. No one bothers to speak.

continued

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PHOTOGRAPHED BY THOMAS R. KOENIGES

DRAFTEE CONTINUED



Stone (front) marches with some of the day's 970 incoming men to another orientation. ("You gotta wash. If you're in the field and can't, fill a helmet full of water and take yourself a half-assed bath.") Processing at the 90th Replacement depot is far more efficient than GI's of other wars might recall. The replacements are admonished to save their pay, take the weekly malaria pill, not catch venereal disease, write a letter home. Only a day later, at First Division headquarters, Stone draws his field equipment. Replacements like Stone have been requested by their outfits six months before they step off the plane. Many are still civilians when they are chosen. Only an "unprogrammed loss"—heavy unit casualties—brings a late manpower requisition. Skills are classified as "hard" (combat) and "soft" (support). Steve Stone's hard skill sent him to a rifle company of the 2nd Infantry at Phuoc Vinh.



Vietnam used to be a volunteer's war, fought by marines, paratroopers and Special Forces. Now, more than 100,000 American casualties old, it feeds on the draft. Seventy percent of the U.S. Army has less than two years' service. Regulars who have earned their fast promotions call the signals; conscripts bear the brunt of combat.

Steve Stone, 24, enjoyed life back in Colton, Calif. Bright and easygoing, he jockeyed a truck during the day, went through two years of college at night. He traded in his sports car for a motorcycle. His real passion was flying. He lacked only 12 hours for a private pilot's license when he was drafted. A part-time student, he didn't rate a deferment. He married his blonde sweetheart Sharon and, nine days later, was inducted into the Army.

After basic training, Stone took the flight-aptitude exam. He scored the highest yet at Ft. Polk, La. But to be a helicopter pilot meant three years' service after flight school. Stone, who hopes to fly for a commercial airline, thought the hitch too long. He was shipped off to the First Infantry Division in Vietnam as a "grunt," or rifleman.

The First Division gives its replacements a training buffer before combat. At Phuoc Vinh, 38 miles north of Saigon, Stone began a 79-hour week at the Jungle Devil School. There, on the fringe of War Zone D, Stone learned from lean veterans with firsthand experience the tricks of staying alive: Don't cut your vision in the jungle with sunglasses. Stay off the trails. Don't pick up tempting souvenirs. The trainees were shown how to spot and avoid the booby traps that infest the jungle. The week climaxed with a live daylight patrol and night ambush. The course, which makes any Vietcong contact its "graduation exercise," has saved lives. Says an instructor: "We've had some kids finish this school one day, and get a Silver Star and Purple Heart the next."

Realistic training, good resupply and evacuation, and a 12-month limit on Vietnam duty keep confidence high. The draftees are generally older and more mature than their predecessors. Some are bitter; others, like Stone, accept their chore. But nearly all amaze their leaders by soldiering like professionals so fast. "These kids grow up overnight," a 22-year-old sergeant tells. "I saw one new guy scared to death, crying, and he was fighting like hell."



The patrol's dog handler, Sp/5 Lawrence Bartold of Granada Hills, Calif., is an old college friend.

The Vietnam war, more than a hundred



Fellow Californian Kenneth Bingaman, 22, takes a drag with Stone. Bingaman's crack: "I was the only guy at Ft. Ord who got green towels. I knew I was coming here."



Lunch in the jungle is a C-ration favorite: fruit cocktail.



After an afternoon in rice-paddy mud, Stone lets his feet dry out.

thousand U.S. casualties old, has turned into a draftee's war



An explosion shakes the road, and Phuoc Vinh replacements bolt for cover. A Jungle Devil instructs

Survive the first 30 seconds of a Vietcong

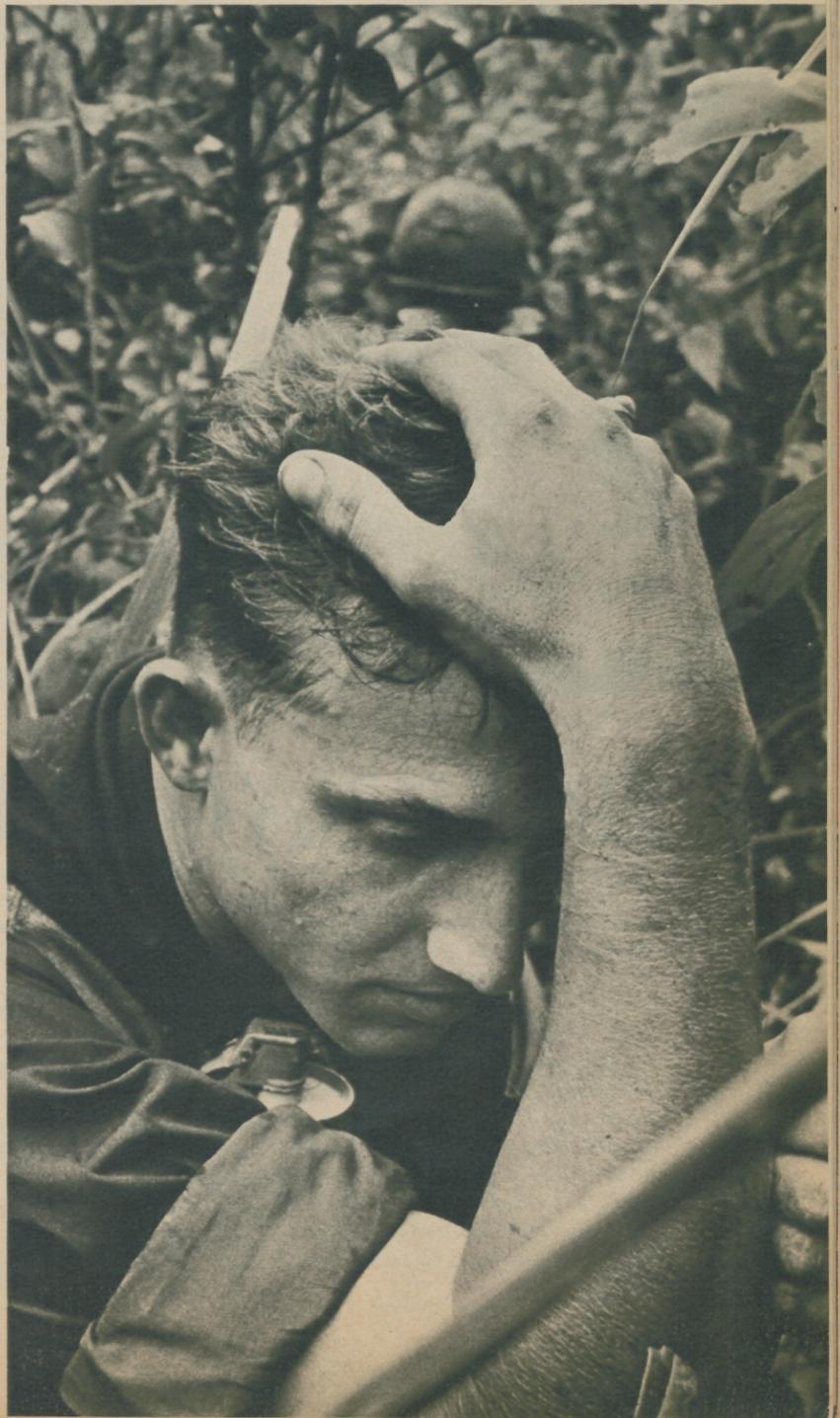
The guts of Vietcong tactics is the ambush. Survive the first 30 seconds, old-timers say, and you'll get out alive. The GI's hit back with ambushes of their own.

Steve Stone has 357 days left in Vietnam. His first night ambush patrol has set up at dusk in a rubber plantation, along a road leading to the American camp. It's raining hard. He lays out his gear so he can touch it: ammunition to the left, grenades to the right. Out in the brush ahead, he wires his claymore, a textbook-size mine that sprays thousands of steel splinters. Coming back, he trips over a vine. Did he jerk the wires off? He crawls out again to check. Still good. He gropes to his position, lies on his belly, and feels for the claymore trigger.

The rain drums. The 14 men shiver through the long hours without ponchos. Ponchos would glisten. At 1:30 a.m., an explosion lights the distant compound. Vietcong guerrillas are mortaring Phuoc Vinh. A siren wails. Defending mortars fire back. A VC recoilless rifle slams shells at the bunkers. The ambush patrol waits in hope that the attackers will retreat into its killing zone.

A helicopter sprays the jungle with burning machine-gun tracers. Artillery shells whoosh overhead. But the Vietcong never come down the sandy road. The rain, the shelling stop. A sliver of moonlight gilds the thin rubber trees. At dawn, the patrol gathers up its claymores and trudges back to base. Pfc. Steve Stone has 356 days left to go.

END



fired off a demolition charge when the patrol bunched up. Such lessons get remembered.

ambush, and you'll come out alive

The jungle feels hot and wet. "Communism has to be stopped somewhere," Stone agrees.

"But when you get out there, it's not political. You fight to save your own neck. I guess everybody wants to get home."