

Letters Home

EDITED BY BERNARD EDELMAN

There is no better way to understand what the war was like for U.S. soldiers than to read their letters. Sent to loved ones and family members, these letters describe the way soldiers felt and what they thought they were doing far better than any historian could hope to. William Broyles wrote in the foreword to the collection Dear America, "As I read the letters in this book I could see the men I served with in Vietnam fifteen years ago, their faces dirty and sweaty and plastered with big grins that hid the fear. And I could hear the true voices of Vietnam again—not filtered by the media, not smoothed out in recollection, but direct, raw, personal: the way it was." The letters in the following selection are from Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam (1985), compiled by Bernard Edelman from a collection made by the New York Vietnam Veterans Memorial Commission. Each letter is followed by a brief biographical sketch of the author.

Dec. 23, 1966

Dear Mom and Dad,

Everything is just fine—in fact it's better than I thought it would be. They have us in a big base camp.

We're going to be staying here for a month. This area is perfectly safe. While we're in base camp, we aren't allowed to carry ammo or even keep it in our tents. . . .

Besides the platoon leader, I'm the next most important man in the platoon. All the talk I hear from the guys who have been here awhile make it sound pretty easy over here. We eat three hot meals a day. I heard when we go to the field, they fly hot meals to us in the morning and night, and for lunch you eat C-rations, and you're allowed two canteens of water a day. When you're in home base you drink all you want, plus while you're in the field you get a beer and soda free every other day.

Last night I had a little trouble falling asleep because of the artillery rounds going off. It's a 175 [mm gun], and it has a range of miles, but when it goes off it sounds like a firecracker going off in your ear. All in all things look pretty good. They have PX's where you can buy whatever you want or need, which is doing me no good because I'm broke. Don't send me money because it's no good here. We use scrip for money which looks like a Sweepstakes ticket, and besides I'll be getting paid in a few days. You should be receiving a \$150 in about a week. If you need it, you can use it, but if you don't, then put it in a bank, OK?

The people live like pigs. They don't know how to use soap. When they have to go to the bathroom, they go wherever they're standing, they don't care who is looking. Kids not even six [years old] run up to you and ask for a cig. The houses they live in are like rundown shacks. You can see everything—they have no doors, curtains. I'm real glad I have what I have. It seems poor to you maybe, and you want new things because you think our house doesn't look good, but after seeing the way these people live, there's no comparison. We are more than millionaires to these people—they have nothing. I can't see how people can live like this. It

seems funny, in one of your letters you write about the TV going on the blink. At the same time, I almost had to laugh. These people don't even have the slightest idea what a TV is even.

Right now our big guns are going off and it sounds good knowing it's yours and they don't have any. . . .

It takes me a day to write one letter, and every chance I have I'd rather write to you than anyone else. Tell Susan I'm sorry, but I just don't have the time to write as much as I would like to. . . . Mom, the least of my problems now are girls. That's one of the things I don't have time to worry about.

One thing I don't do is worry—it doesn't pay. If I worried about everything over here that there is to worry about, I'd have a nervous breakdown. I'm very fortunate, because I have a cool head. Things that make other guys scared or shaky don't seem to bother me. Also I'm fortunate because my platoon leader, Lt. Sanderson, also keeps a cool head. This man is really sharp when it comes to this stuff. I have already learned a lot about human nature from this man. He's only 23 years old, but his knowledge is really something. A person can't go wrong following his example.

Well, it's about time. I thought you would never send those onions. I can't wait for them to arrive. . . .

For sure, now, I'm going to close this short novel.

With all my love,
Your grateful son,
Johnny

On 2 February 1967, less than two months after he arrived in country, PFC John Dabonka was killed in action near the Mekong Delta town of My Tho. He was 20 years old.