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ENGL 591: Folk Narrative and Storytelling  
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Collecting Verbal Folklore Paper

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(To read paper, please scroll down)

## Background and Context

Every now and then, Dad would tell a Vietnam story. Once, when I was little, he taught my Sunday school class and told the “Footsteps in the Dark” story about when he had been on guard duty in the camp one night—and heard footsteps steadily approaching in the dark jungle.

All the kids leaned forward—especially the boys—waiting. I too listened eagerly, though I knew the ending.

Dad continued: “I grabbed up my machine gun and waited...listening...And then, the footsteps just stopped.”

[Pause]

“But what was it!?!” one boy exploded.

“I don’t know. They just stopped,” Dad answered. “I never found out what it was...maybe an enemy scout...maybe an animal...who knows...?”

It was good to have a father that could tell stories that impressed even the big boys. For another Sunday school class, he karate-chopped stacked boards set up between two drywall buckets—increasing the number of boards each time. (This got an even better reaction.)

Another Vietnam story I remember from childhood was about a helicopter evacuation. Sometimes Dad would tell me about this one and show me the Bronze Star he had been awarded in connection with the incident. He kept the medal in its box up in the top of his closet—that was where all of his really important things were, like fossils, old coins, Indian arrowheads, and the six-inch-long prehistoric shark’s tooth he had found while growing up in South Carolina.

As a twenty-six-year-old, I asked Dad to tell me the helicopter story again—this time for a tape recorder. On a Sunday afternoon this February, we went to the upstairs family room in the house my parents have owned since I was born. I sat on the old couch and set up the recorder on a round wicker table in front of me, while Dad took a spot nearby in a simple wooden chair. He leaned back, folded his hands, and focused his eyes on the carpet, which was drenched in sunlight from a large south-facing window. The light beige carpet became a valley full of elephant grass, as he became Lance Corporal Chrisinger...

## The Story

Story told by Lance Corporal Richard T. Chrisinger on Sunday, February 13, 2005.  
Story collected by Marisa Beck. No additional listeners present.

### Transcription Key

,	comma	Quick pause
—	dash	Longer pause or break in thought
Line break		Pronounced pause
<i>Italic</i>	Words in italics	Emphasized word
LCpIC:		LCpl Chrisinger speaking
MB:		Marisa speaking
'	Raised number	Footnote (see bottom of page)
(words)	Words in parentheses	Non-verbal communication (breathes, smiles, etc.)
[words]	Words in brackets	My words for explanatory purposes

LCpIC: During my tour

with *the*

United States Marines in

1968 through, 1969

ah, *one* incident, in *particular*, stands out in my mind

and it—it was in, late February ['69]

and

we were [camped] in a

jungle valley setting, and one of our smaller units was

down in the valley

and

we were up on the ridge and we became aware of—of

gun fire, and

and then became advised—I think, through communications with  
that unit—that they had been ambushed.

So, our, unit up on the ridge was dispatched *down* to *assist them*.

And, I can't remember the sizes of our units, uum, possibly thirty men

in both units. Ah, but—

*Each?*

MB:

LCpIC: Each, each. <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>A machine gun team was made up of three to four soldiers, who together manned one gun and its ammo and equipment.

And, I was at that time in charge of two machine-gun [teams]<sup>2</sup>, which would have been

six to eight people

and there were—there was a machine gun near the front of our patrol line

and one at the rear of the patrol line, of these—I-I believe, maybe thirty individuals—

and, I was traveling with the rear machine gun at, the time and, we were ambushed as we went *down*

to help, our, other unit.

And, in this *ambush*

two individuals were killed

and two were wounded.

One was one of our officers—

a, second lieutenant—he was

badly wounded: shrapnel in his leg and he was bleeding badly.<sup>3</sup>

And

the fire was coming from—we never were really able to determine, because we were in heavy elephant grass<sup>4</sup>, so, we couldn't see anybody—

ah, no one came running out of the grass toward us or anything (laughs quickly), it was just a—

a heavy stream of fire

that was, coming our way.

We called for helicopter—

ah, medivac helicopters to remove the

casualties—killed and injured—

from this

ambush site

and

so while we were waiting for, the, helicopters

we tried to tend to the people that had been injured—putting field wraps<sup>5</sup> on them and getting the bleeding stopped.

(breathes in) And,

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<sup>2</sup> LCplC was in the rear of the group at the time, but guesses that the initial blast that killed two and injured two was a booby trap, mine, or rocket-propelled grenade. One of the soldiers killed in the ambush was the radio man for the second lieutenant. The other man killed was Richard H--- (called "Rick") who had been "walking point" for the unit. The point man would walk at the front of a unit, keeping a certain distance between himself and the rest of the group. Rick did not usually take this position, but for some reason, had done so that day.

<sup>4</sup> Elephant grass was common. LCplC remembers that it grew maybe 8-feet tall and had sharp blades that cut their arms as they pushed through it. He says the cuts were always getting infected because they couldn't treat them properly.

<sup>5</sup> Heavy bandages with long strings for winding.

*You were doing that personally?*

**MB:**

**LCplC:** I was, I was actually working on the second lieutenant.<sup>6</sup>

Because I had come from the back, of the unit, worked my way up toward the front

because one of my other machine gun teams was up at the front, and there was a call for assistance

so I had worked my way, up to the front of the unit and, ah, that seemed like the immediate concern, was to

take care of the, lieutenant, and there was one other

of our soldiers that was injured, and

someone, was tending to him, and we had two that were

were *killed*.

So we had four casualties right there at the front of the

unit, and—so, while we were bandaging and trying to take care of these guys, we were returning fire at—

again, we couldn't see anybody—but just shooting into the—

toward where it seemed like the firing was coming from, and so—ah

the helicopters finally came

and, I believe there were several—one, they would come in one-at-a-time and, had to *hover* over this elephant grass

while they were being *shot* at, again, we, from, who-knows

where or how many were firing

But—ah because they couldn't *land*, in the terrain, they had to lower a *hoist*

from the bottom of the helicopter with a—

like a life ring *on* it

that we could, ah, put the individuals *in*

and then, lift them *up* into the helicopter.

So we were able to

get one of the

the wounded soldiers *out* that way and one of the dead—

soldiers—But in one of the extractions

the life-ring hoist—

the downdraft from the helicopter was pretty intense—and the,

the life ring kept getting whipped back up in the air, and

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<sup>6</sup> LCplC later commented that he had thought it somewhat ironic when he found himself tending to the wounded second lieutenant. He remembered not really liking him much—he was a “young, know-it-all officer.” He says that a lot of new guys would come out thinking they had all the answers, when the rest of group had months of experience in the field.

the  
and all the time that the helicopter was hovering trying to resolve this  
situation, it was being  
fired at, so, it was—ah  
it was critical that we get this  
ring *down*, and, I—I was *there* and kinda had to make a decision that—  
it—it ran through my mind that if I  
*get up*<sup>7</sup> and grab that ring and pull it down  
um, I could be a target, but, it—it's just one of those things that  
because of the circumstances you, (breathes in)  
do what you have to do, and  
I jumped up and grabbed the ring and was able to get it down and we were  
able to extract  
(breathes in),  
the helicopters were able to extract that last  
*sol-dier*.  
And so once the helicopters left  
we um—  
and, I understand  
from later reports that one of the  
at least one of the helicopters, ah  
ah it didn't make it back to the base  
that it had come from.  
It had to land at a closer base because of  
*damage* from being fired at, but it—it didn't crash or anything, so (breathes  
in)  
so that was, good.  
*One* of the, one of the dead soldiers we were not able to  
*get out*  
on the helicopters, and that individual  
had to be  
carried back  
with our unit.  
We weren't—  
we were able to get out of there, without  
sustaining, any further casualties. So, this—this individual—  
we had a guy that, was a pretty big guy, pretty strong, that was able to

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<sup>7</sup> They had been crouched close to the ground while helping the wounded and returning fire into the grass. Grabbing the life ring required him to stand at full height and jump vertically.

carry this [man who had been killed]—  
he was actually a radio man  
I believe for the officer that was wounded—that was  
and, he was carried back up the, up the hill with our unit  
and, ah  
and *that* was, that was pretty much  
the incident, but, the part I think, that, *most*  
that is  
most encouraging to me was that  
the two wounded individuals—  
the officer and one of the enlisted men—were  
*both survived* their injuries because we were able to  
at least get them out of there so I was always  
*happy* about that outcome that we were able to  
do that.  
And  
so—so that incident—  
And another reason it sticks in my mind, one of my best friends [from the war]  
who I'm actually still friends with *today*—  
who lives out in Utah—  
he was *away*  
back at the rear<sup>8</sup>, taking care of some—  
I—don't—know—dental work, or something that he had to have done, but he  
was not with us when this  
incident happened, and when he came back out to the field, he just said  
“Well, we had all heard back at the rear that all you guys were dead.”  
And, so it was just, interesting to  
know that with  
war-time communications, things are said and that—ah, that I'm hearing from  
him that I w—they were—that I was dead  
and I was very much alive hearing that report, so it was  
it was good—

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<sup>8</sup> Back at a main base with medical facilities.

## Personal Narrative vs. Historical Record

If you were asked to quickly answer the question, “Which is more accurate—a personal recollection of an event, or historical documentation?” you would likely choose the latter. But the story presented here provides an interesting consideration of that question. Dad was awarded the Bronze Star Medal for heroic achievement in connection with the event he describes. After returning home, he received the medal in its box, along with a written citation of the incident presented in a sturdy red folder marked with the Marine emblem. He recalls being shocked as he read over the citation and thinking, “That’s not how it happened at all...”

The official citation reads as follows:

“For heroic achievement in connection with combat operations against the enemy in the Republic of Vietnam while serving as a Machine Gun Squad Leader with Company L, Third Battalion, Fourth Marines, Third Marine Division. On 26 February 1969, a squad from Company L was conducting a patrol north of the Rockpile in Quang Tri Province when the Marines came under a heavy volume of automatic weapons and rocket-propelled grenade fire from a large North Vietnamese Army force occupying well-concealed bunkers. Alertly observing two seriously wounded Marines lying in positions dangerously exposed to the intense hostile fire, Lance Corporal Chrisinger unhesitatingly maneuvered across sixty meters of fire-swept terrain and placed his machine gun between the casualties and the enemy while simultaneously throwing hand grenades, he thereby enabled his companions to move the injured Marines to safety. Resolutely maintaining his exposed position and continuing to fire against the enemy while his squad reorganized, Lance Corporal Chrisinger contributed significantly to the defeat of the North Vietnamese Army force. His bold initiative and sincere concern for the welfare of this comrades inspired all who observed him and were instrumental in saving the lives of two Marines. Lance Corporal Chrisinger’s courage, aggressive fighting spirit and unswerving devotion to duty in the face of great personal danger were in keeping with the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and of the United States Naval Service.”

Dad says that after the incident, several of the people involved were required to write out their own accounts of what had happened. He doesn’t know what happened with the information after that point, or through what channels it went, but three individuals were awarded medals. Dad feels that the citation is “beefed up”—making him sound like a stunt devil rather than a soldier doing what needed to be done.

Why does the military citation sound so different from the story as told from Dad’s perspective. Is it Dad’s modest and low-key nature? He doesn’t enhance stories for effect. Was it some of his commanding officers who embellished the story to ensure that it qualified for a medal? Or did the others who observed and wrote about the event see Dad do more than he, in the intensity of the moment, realized he was doing? Regardless of the exact details and answers to these questions, the citation does emphasize what appears to be most important to Dad, that his efforts “were instrumental in saving the lives of two Marines.”



## **The Storyteller**

Dad was a tough dad, but a good dad. Complaining wasn't allowed, and we were expected to be tough. If we whined on a humid day in August, he had been hotter: the jungle temperatures rose as high as 120 degrees. If we were cold, he had been colder: during monsoon season, he was wet and chilled for extended periods. If we complained about our food, he told us he had drunk warm water from a mud puddle mixed with grape kool-aid to mask the taste of the halizone purification tablets.

Since returning from Vietnam, Dad has been a father, a minister, a school principal, and a substitute teacher—giving him constant opportunities for storytelling. In speaking to large groups, he frequently tells stories—some from the many books he reads, some from the experiences of others, and some from his own experience. Because he often acts in the capacity of a teacher or counselor, his stories serve to instruct, to illustrate, to inspire, and sometimes, simply to entertain. When he told the footsteps story to my Sunday school class, he was entertaining us, but also teaching us subtle lessons of bravery and trust in the protection of God.

Vietnam stories represent only a small percentage of the stories he tells. People often asked me, “Does your dad talk about Vietnam?” as if it were unlikely. I always said, “Yes. He doesn't mind.” But I think he uses a lot of discretion when he does talk about it. Undoubtedly, there is much that he has never mentioned. I always felt comfortable to ask him questions about Vietnam, but I didn't want to ask him if he'd ever seen anyone killed. I probably didn't really want to know, and probably didn't think he would want to talk about it.

I don't think he ever told me before about the two soldiers killed in that ambush—only the wounded. When I was twelve, Dad's Vietnam friend from Utah came out to visit, and we all went to the Vietnam Memorial together. Dad and his friend took a rubbing from the wall of the name of a fellow soldier, Richard H., but I didn't ask any questions. It was only in this recent telling of the story that I realized the connection.

## Interpretation and Meanings

I asked Dad to talk about what the story meant to him and why it was one that he told. He said that this was the most memorable incident he experienced during his time in Vietnam, and his reason was this:

**because  
you think of war as just killing and all that, but—  
and destruction—but  
this was an incident where  
some lives were saved, and so I'm always, have been very grateful  
about, being part of that.**

This statement reflects a choice to emphasize the saving of life in the story, rather than the loss of life. It would be easy—perhaps easier—to cling to the loss and destruction in a traumatic experience. The narrative style of the story, the tone and choice of detail, also reflect a purposefully positive attitude. Dad told the story in a steady, streamlined, matter-of-fact way, further revealing the attitude he has taken. This attitude says to the listener not “I wish this had never happened,” or “I can’t believe this happened!” but simply, “This happened.” It is an attitude of calm acceptance.

Dad was raised in the Roman Catholic tradition, and desiring to serve in the church, he entered a Catholic religious order right after high school. He spent three years in this group of Brothers, called the Josephites, who ministered to black Catholics in the South. During this time, while taking classes at Xavier University in Louisiana, he recalls reading about the war in Vietnam and the struggle against communism. Though exempt from military service as a Catholic Brother, he became convinced that he should be a soldier. His father was a Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel, and his brother was serving as a Marine in Vietnam. So at the end of 1967, he left the Josephites and enlisted in the Marine Corps.

He says that his faith grew and changed during his tour of duty. What had been an ethereal, religious idea became a living reality. He began to understand God as not just a notion, but as a real being who cared for him, could protect him, and was.

In telling me why the story is important to him, Dad also said:

**I can't explain  
some  
making it through war and some not making it, but I became  
more-and-more aware all the time as I, as my tour  
ah, went on over there that—  
that God was looking out for me and  
was protecting me, and that just even that incident of  
having to jump up and get that-ah  
helicopter sling  
was just one of many**

**(continues next page)**

**times where I felt like, you know, the outcome could have been different  
but that there was  
there was just something else going on there that I couldn't explain.**

This belief has grown and followed him into his life after Vietnam. Shortly after returning home, he left the Catholic church and began studying in a Protestant seminary to become a minister. Instead of acquiring a victim's identity from his war experience, he accepted the fact that his life was spared, and entered into ministry through which he has been able to help countless people, including other veterans.

His faith was tested in 1990, when he was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. The disease is recognized by the Department of Veterans Affairs to be linked with exposure to Agent Orange, a chemical defoliant used by the US military in Vietnam to clear vegetation. He approached this news and subsequent treatments with unusual calm, the reality of a higher power more relevant to him than the threat of disease. It was not that he assumed his life would be spared again, but that he understood his spiritual well-being to transcend time and place. His life was spared, and he has been healthy for almost 15 years.

For Dad, the story he told is linked closely to his faith—the sovereignty of God and his own purpose in life. Reflecting on this story in light of the Christian faith reveals other meanings as well—ideas that I absorbed passively from the story when I was young, but that come into clearer focus now as I actively look at them.

The primary meaning that I discover in the story is the triumph of personal sacrifice over self-preservation—the idea that encapsulates the Christian story and the death on the cross. Interestingly, this notion is repeatedly idealized in other literature familiar to our culture: the fairy tale of two princes, in which the true prince spends his three-day test rescuing his fellows, while the false prince (the cook's son) sits at home to keep his pretty clothes unsoiled; and there is Dickens' Sydney Carton, and Tolkien's Frodo Baggins.

The image in Dad's story of an unhurt soldier contemplating the risk of his own life to evacuate a wounded man is particularly illustrative of the Christ story. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the believers in Rome:

<sup>6</sup>You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup>Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. <sup>8</sup>But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:6–8, NIV)

So Christ, the sinless man, died for wounded Man, who, powerless to help himself, was lifted to safety.

## Academic Discussion: Folklorist Considerations

### Narrative Elements

Dad's story is a personal narrative, a direct recounting of his own experience. He tells the story from his own perspective, except in the instance where he mentions his friend who thought they had all been killed. In this case he reports a direct quote from the friend, which adds an outside perspective to the story.

Dad relates the story in a direct, fact-by-fact fashion; he does not include heavy amounts of detail or dramatization, but leaves much to the listener's imagination. This is partly owing to his nature. He tends to play things down, rather than exaggerate, and he avoids drawing excessive attention to himself. In his story, he directs attention outward—to those whose lives he was working to save—and upward—to the God in whose care he was trusting.

Labov and Pratt discuss the sections of a natural narrative, most of which can be found in this personal experience narrative.

In this telling of the story, Dad used no abstract, or short summary preceding the story, probably because he had been placed into a semi-formal story-telling situation. An abstract is usually used to capture the interest of a potential audience. He didn't need to give a pre-summary of the story, because he had been asked directly to tell it for the tape recorder; the audience was already captured and was capturing his words.

He did, however, present a few clear statements of orientation. I would identify the following section as the orientation of the story:

**During my tour  
with the  
United States Marines in  
1968 through, 1969  
ah, one incident, in particular, stands out in my mind  
and it-it was in, late February  
and  
we were in a  
jungle valley setting, and one of our smaller units was  
down in the valley  
and  
we were up on the ridge**

Though he never actually says the place name, "Vietnam," through the reference to the US Marines and the particular years, he establishes an identifiable historical context. He then further specifies the time of year, the terrain, and the relative physical positions of the people involved in the story.

Dad's story is made up of a few main episodes of complicating action (the ambush of the first group, the ambush of his own group, the struggle to evacuate the casualties) and an accompanying resolution (grabbing the sling and the helicopter leaving with the second wounded soldier). The story also includes finishing sub-episodes: carrying the killed soldier back to camp, one helicopter having to land at another base, and the friend saying he'd been told they were all dead. In the latter two sub-episodes, Dad weaves in information that he gathered after-the-fact, so these portions are separated from the main personal experience narrative; they are added to fill in the story with outside information from the perspective of other participants and observers.

The evaluation portion of the story is shown in Dad's comments about being able to save the lives of two soldiers and feeling God's protection. These comments serve to validate the story—to show that good things happened as part of the event. Through the evaluation, Dad inserts his perspective on the story and his emphasis on the saving of life, rather than the loss of life.

As a coda for the story, I would point to this small comment telling us that the main narrative is complete:

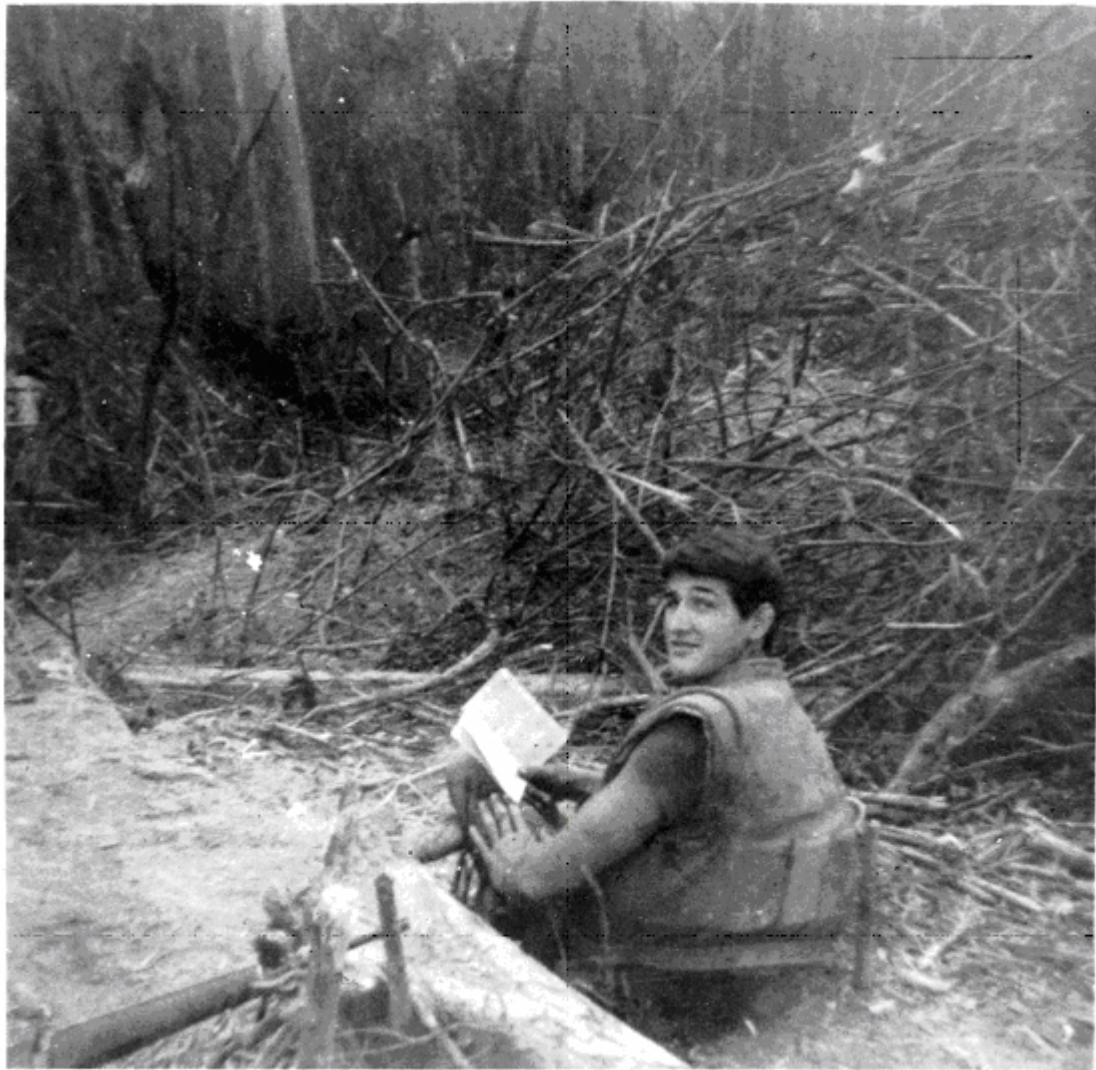
**And, ah  
and *that was*, that was pretty much  
the incident**

### **The Collection Process**

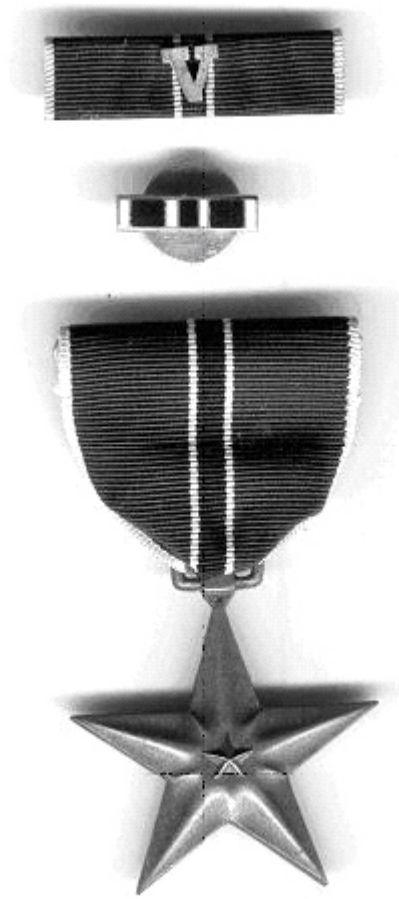
Regarding technical aspects of documenting the narrated story, one difficult task was deciding how to represent pauses, verbal fillers, and other “untidy” aspects of verbal communication. At first, I tried to meticulously record every “um” and “ah,” creating a representation of each utterance. However, after reading this version, I felt that it did not accurately portray the tone of the story. In thinking about this, I determined that when we listen to a speaker, we mentally throw out the verbal filler words, almost not hearing them at all. But if we read them, typed into a transcribed story, they stand out and become distracting. So I determined that they were better left out and decided that this was not an unfair clean-up of the story, but an omission of an artificial distraction.

I chose to work with this particular story because I think it is an important and worthy task to document any portion of history that we have personal access to. Unrecorded history is lost when those who remember are gone. Several years ago I completed an undergraduate history project describing the experience of my grandparents during World War II. My grandparents had both died by this time, but each had a living sister, both of whom communicated with me by letter, answering my questions and recalling their memories. Both of these women have since died, emphasizing to me the value of gathering and recording stories.

Something that troubles me when dealing with topics of war and death is the sensitivity and gravity of the subject. In telling this story, which involves two deaths, I worry that I am tampering with something sacred. But my reason to look for and record such stories is to memorialize and honor those involved—particularly stories telling of bravery and self-sacrifice—because I believe that these qualities lie behind everything good that happens in this world; they are the qualities I would like to illuminate and imitate.

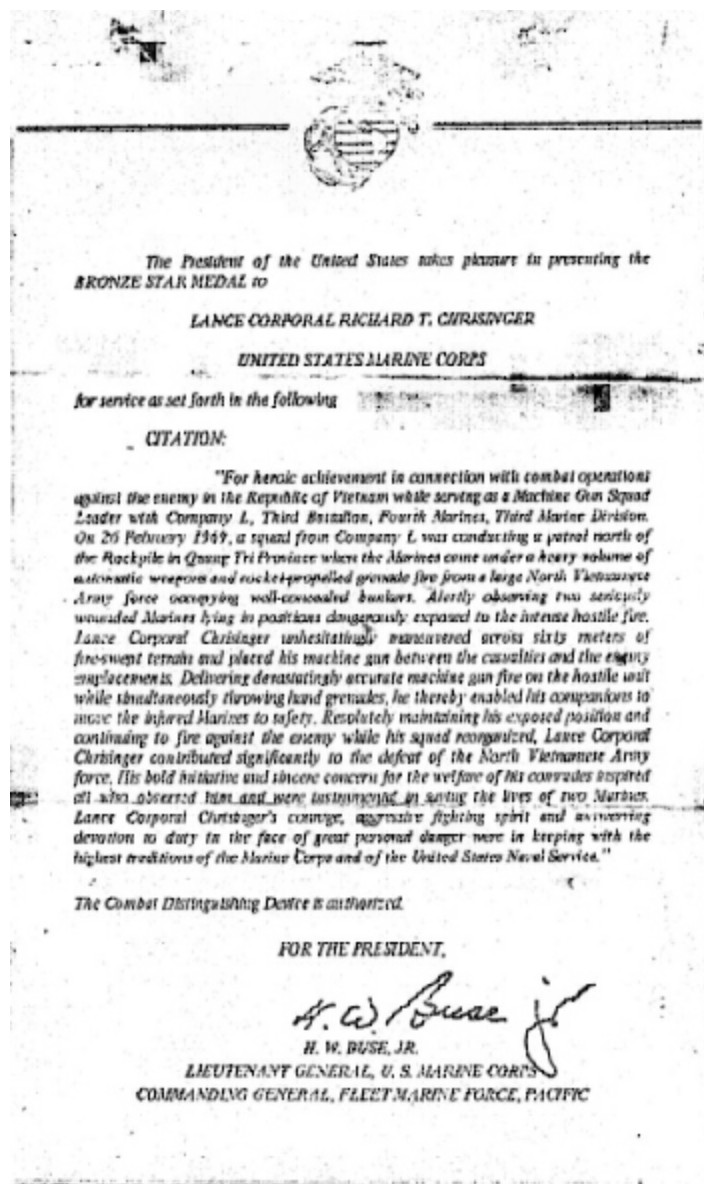


Dad, near Laotian border, Vietnam, April 1969



Bronze Star Medal

(The smaller pins are worn during civilian or nonformal occasions.)



Bronze Star Medal presentation letter and citation





Pencil rubbing from Vietnam Memorial, Richard H., killed in action February 1969



Dad reads a note left by another visitor, Vietnam Veterans' Memorial,  
Washington D.C., June 2004