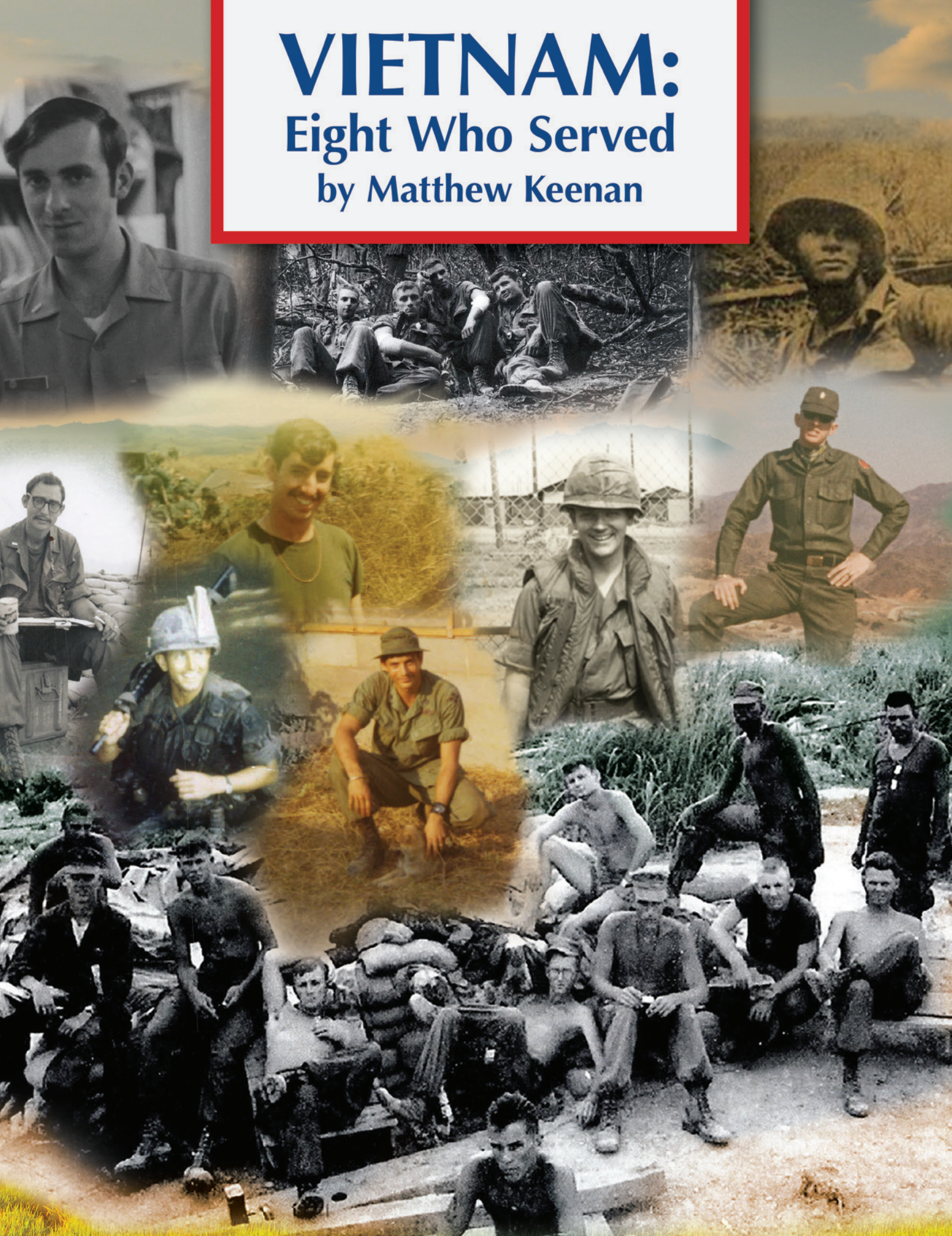


# VIETNAM: Eight Who Served by Matthew Keenan





Historians have labeled the Korean War as the forgotten war. That's what the U.S. News and World Report declared in 1951, giving it a moniker that remains today. Yet I think that label may be more appropriate for another war: Vietnam. For a war that influenced and, in many ways, dramatically changed everything from culture, politics, policy-making – few people today under the age of 50 appreciate how it changed the lives of those who fought it. This for a war that inspired thousands of books about it, and impacted cities and universities close to home, like KU.

Michael Herr, a former war correspondent in Vietnam said it best, "All the wrong people remember Vietnam. I think all the people who remember it should forget it, and all the people who forgot it should remember it."

But perhaps the public's awareness of the Vietnam era and appreciation for those who fought it is now changing. With the 40th anniversary of the fall of Saigon, historians are busy revisiting the history. PBS recently aired "The Last Days in Vietnam," directed and produced by Rory Kennedy. Described by critics as a masterpiece, and a documentary triumph, at the box office it earned a meager \$500,000. But then it was nominated for an Academy Award for best Documentary, and aired on PBS and received more attention. One critic described it this way: "A remarkable piece of work that should be seen by everyone who thinks they know everything about the Vietnam War."

And central to the war, like seemingly all wars, were teenagers –18, 19, and 20 year olds. In this month's Journal, we profile eight who served in that time. They have more in common than responding to the country's call in the 1960s and 1970s. When they returned, each one attended law school, then served their communities in countless ways, including becoming active in the Bar Association, serving as elected leaders in the state Legislature and in some cases, remaining active in the Reserves.

Here are their stories.

### Mike Farley

Navy Intelligence, assigned to interview returning POWs

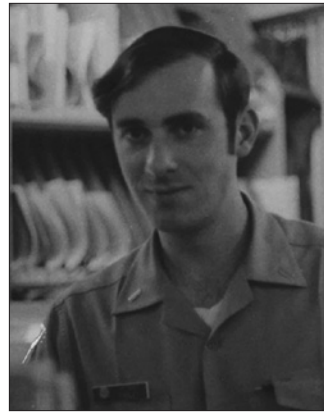
#### Military Experience

##### U.S. Navy

- September 1968 – January 1970: Enlisted Reserve Program Kansas City, Missouri, Reserve Center
- April 1970 – August 1973: Selected into Air Intelligence Officer Program, Aviation Officer Candidate School, NAS Pensacola, Florida, Commissioned, Ensign; June 1970: Intelligence Officer Training
- September 1973 – July 2000: Intelligence Reserve Program, member of a series of drilling reserve units
- Two cruises aboard USS Constellation October 1971 – July 1972: Combat Cruise to Western Pacific, Gulf of Tonkin; January 1973 – August 1973: Cruise to Western Pacific, Gulf of Tonkin
- Rank at retirement: Captain (O-6)

#### Legal Experience

- University of Kansas School of Law, Juris Doctor, 1974
- Johnson County District Court Judge, Olathe



Mike Farley

"I joined the squadron in January 1971 and drove from Kansas City to Central California in January 1971 in a horrendous blizzard. I was the person in the squadron who was responsible for the day-to-day briefing and training and preparation of missions, debriefing of missions, and several other responsibilities. So, they were all intelligence related.

"While I was on active duty, toward the latter part of the Vietnam War, and it had become very clear that the war was winding down, there was substantial diplomatic effort to try to end the conflict and ease our way out of that situation. And along with that, we were going to receive the return of the POWs who had been captured, kept in captivity in North Vietnam. And over the period of time before my first cruise, I had some training exercises on becoming ready to be an escort and debriefer for POWs who would be returned. So, I had a set of general orders that allowed me to travel anywhere in the world, keep anybody off an airplane, if my mission required that I use the asset. And just try generally to be ready for their return.

"One of the POWs I was assigned to return had been – he was a young man, he was married, and he had a fight with his wife the day before he deployed on a cruise and was shot down about the first mission. He had told his wife that he never wanted to see her again. She had stayed with him in spirit for six and a half years. And so it was identified as a special case. I was walking down the hallway in the hospital at Clark Air Force Base where these guys were, encountered a POW. So, I am walking down the hallway with this fellow and the more conversation I am having with him; just as we parted company, he looked at me and he said, 'You know, all these years we wondered what it would be like to return.'

"And that comment after all these years just blew me away. Because I knew that I did not know his experience. I never experienced that, what he had done for six and a half years, and he wasn't a normal guy and he wasn't super human either. But the experience was an absolutely unique experience and would be something that I have to understand and he would too from the other side."

### John Gerstle

Finding hostility upon returning to KU in 1970

#### Military Experience

##### U.S. Army

- December 1969 – November 1970: Deployed, Vietnam
- Rank at discharge: E-5

#### Legal Experience

- University of Kansas School of Law, Juris Doctor, 1973
- Criminal litigation practice, 40 years, Olathe
- Johnson County Bar President, 1998

"Now, a standard tour in Vietnam is one year. They did give Christmas drops to people and you could get anywhere from



John Gerstle

two to six weeks, but the standard tour was one year.

“So, one of the things that I can tell you was universal and at the time I was there officially, there were 535,000 troops. To a man, everybody had a calendar and at the end of the day, you crossed off that day. Now I only have 364 days

and you did that every single day until you got to 99 days. You still crossed your days off, but now you were officially a two digit midget. That sort of gave you some seniority for maybe somebody else would have to do a duty that you might not have to do because you are getting closer to rotating home. And then you got to the magical time of 10 days. When you got to 10 days, we had a code. It was called Figma . . . it is an expletive, which means I got my orders, I’m going home.

“And in 10 days you didn’t do anything. You hung out in the bunker, you did safe things, you did not put yourself in harm’s way intentionally. Because for 10 days you didn’t want to risk an injury – even a shaving cut because if you couldn’t pass your physical, when you came back into the country, they would keep you. So, you had to leave in good health. So, at 10 days unofficially, you just were exempt from duty to make sure you wouldn’t get hurt.

“I have to say that returning back to the world as we called it – from the land of jolly green – was very dismaying. Obviously, I was delighted to be home and in one piece, and I was eager to put my life together but this country was not in much of a mood to help us put our lives back together. We were treated horribly. At the incoming military bases, frequently they had demonstrations, and they would carry signs “baby killers,” “pigs.” It was not very much fun coming home in fact once we grew our hair out and started dressing normally, we didn’t really discuss that we had been to Vietnam. It kind of marked you as being looked down at. There was no “Thank you for your service.” That’s a modern thing. You just stopped telling people that you were in service.”

### William Grimshaw

Married, then Army Infantry

### Military Experience

*U.S. Army*

- July 1967 – July 1969: Active duty; June 1968 – July 1969: Deployed to Vietnam until discharge
- Rank at discharge: 1st Lieutenant USA infantry
- Three-time Purple Heart recipient
- Vietnam Cross of Gallantry
- Combat infantry badge
- Three bronze stars (two for Valor)

### Legal Experience

- Washburn University School of Law, Juris Doctor, 1972
- Grimshaw & Rock, criminal law (defense), Olathe

“I got married about three weeks before I went to Vietnam. Why, I don’t know. I mean it probably doesn’t make sense to most people. But, nevertheless, we did. I got to Vietnam – I

flew on a commercial jet. They opened the door and the first thing that hits you is the heat and the humidity. It was right before the monsoon starts. We spent a day or two there and then we went to – soon after the 4th Infantry Division we had some orientation for about a week and then we went out and were assigned to a new unit. I got off the helicopter and the monsoon had started and – captain came in and introduced himself and said this is your platoon and introduced them and then said grab your shovel, home is where you dig it. And that was that. And we lived in bunkers most of the time.

“Anyway, it worked out for me and I ended up going to law school. I think when you are that young – I was 22 when I went in and 23 when I got out – I had been responsible for a lot of people, and you feel that responsibility. You are responsible for every decision – better try to make good decisions, but you feel a kinship with it. So, that’s what you take to law school. You try and treat your clients the same way you treated your troops. They are yours. You represent them. You do what is necessary to try to help them – can’t help them all. But you do what you can and that’s what I did. You take to law school. Law school was kind of disconcerting because you know I felt pretty good about why I had gone and served my country and all that – and Vietnam was very unpopular war and soon as they were out, if anybody figured out that you had been, especially if you had been a combat soldier, they would call you baby killer and they would spit on the sidewalk and stuff. And so you didn’t talk about it. You just didn’t do it. Because that was how unpopular it was. So, I never said anything to anybody for years.”

### Mick Lerner

Deployed to Korea, not Vietnam. North Korea capturing the USS Pueblo broke the calm

### Military Experience

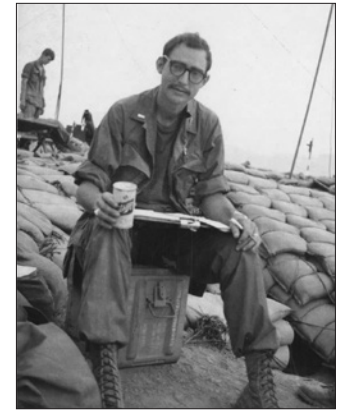
*U.S. Army/Reserves*

- August 1966 – August 1968: Army
- 1968 – 1972: Reserves
- April 1967 – April 1968: Stationed in the 7th Infantry Division headquarters in Korea
- Rank at discharge: First Lieutenant

### Legal Experience

- Boston University School of Law, Juris Doctor, 1971
- The Lerner Law Firm, commercial litigation, Overland Park

“Back in 1966 when I graduated from college, everybody was going into the military because of the draft and because of Vietnam. And I went into the ROTC program at Stanford, and the day before I graduated I was commissioned a second lieutenant. At that time with the Vietnam War going on, 15 percent of the young officers were sent to South Korea and the rest mainly to Vietnam. I happened to be in the group that went to South Korea. We had 20,000 troops in South Korea to try to deter the



William Grimshaw



Mick Lerner

North Koreans from invading and they were constantly threatening to do that.

“I was the Division Transportation Officer, on the commanding general’s staff. I was way out of my depth, yet I learned a little bit about transportation. The main challenge I ever faced during my entire tour was on the night of January 23, 1968, when the USS Pueblo, an intelligence gathering

ship for the United States, was attacked and captured by the North Koreans. Washington told us to get ready, we are going to war. And so I was sitting in the officer’s club having a drink after dinner, 65 cents is what the drinks cost at the time in the Officer’s Club, I got word that the General wanted me to see him. And I thought I would finish my drink and then go over. Before I could finish my drink, the General had sent his jeep for me and he had collected me to come to the Division Tactical Operation Center. And he told me we are going to war. The North Koreans are going to invade and that’s what the Pentagon had been warning us about.

“The next day we learned of the capture of Lloyd Bucher, the commander and his 82 crewmen and, even though on high alert, we were never forced to utilize the transportation plans. That was a great comfort to me because being so naïve and inexperienced, I’m sure that would have been utter chaos when I moved the whole division through the small Korean villages to get south of Seoul.”

### Steven Ray McConnell

Combat Infantry, Leader Third Platoon, A Company, 11th Infantry

#### Military Experience

*U.S. Army Infantry*

- September 1969 – July 1971
- September 1969 – December 1969: Fort Benning, Georgia; Infantry Officers Basic Corps
- December 1969 – September 1970: Fort Campbell, Kentucky; Served as a training officer
- October 1970: Left Fort Campbell for South Viet Nam. Assigned to 1st Brigade 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized)
- November 1970: Assigned to Headquarters Company of Battalion. Moved to Quang Tri – 12 miles south of Demilitarized Zone. Worked in Tactical Operations Company
- February 1971: Became Leader of Third Platoon A Co. 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry
- March 1971: Lead Platoon into bush country to search and destroy enemy
- July 1971: DISCHARGED from Fort Campbell
- Purple Heart, Combat Infantryman’s Badge, Vietnam Campaign Medal
- Vietnam Service Medal with One Campaign Star, One Overseas Service Bar, National Defense Service Medal, Expert Badge (M-16)

#### Legal Experience

- University of Missouri School of Law, Juris Doctor, 1974
- McConnell & McMahon, Overland Park

“While in Quang Tri, which is a province in the North Central Coast of Vietnam, I took the LSAT. I received an early discharge to start law school at UMKC in August 1971. On my last day of combat, I was leading a team of about six or seven of us on the Ho Chi Minh trail in and out of Vietnam and Laos.

“Upon a hilltop ahead of us, we observed enemy mortars firing on the 1st ARVN Division [South Vietnam Army] as they were invading Laos. I climbed a few feet up a tree to call a fire mission on the hilltop. We were just off a trail hiding in the bamboo and foliage.

“The Army’s artillery bombarded the hill per my instructions and as I walked the artillery shells closer to us, I could feel the debris it was causing and the shock waves. We could also hear the North Vietnam Army screaming and running down the trail to get away.

“Eventually after a few fire missions, my artillery cut me off and I hear a voice on the radio saying, ‘Lieutenant’ this is Captain ‘somebody’ of the USS ‘some battleship,’ ‘May I be of assistance, I have been monitoring your radio communication?’

“I responded, ‘Yes, sir, I would like a battery 3.’ He said, ‘You want me to fire three of my biggest guns three times on the position you previously gave your artillery?’ I said, ‘Yes, sir.’ He replied, ‘Here it comes, good luck.’ I said, ‘Roger, out.’ Those shells shook the earth and made me reel in the tree.

“I have recently learned that the Navy’s shells were about the size of a Volkswagen.

“We heard more NVAs running and screaming. We went up the hill, saw a booby trap, blew it and all hell broke loose. The enemy was everywhere. I had two Cobra gunships on my radio strafing the enemy. They were shooting at us, and we were shooting at them. I got shot in the neck. My men dragged me and two others to a Medivac chopper that took us to Quang Tri for treatment.

“I was unconscious during part of the time I was being dragged, but regained consciousness when the chopper lowered the cable and seat. I reached for it and one of my squad leaders sat on the seat opposite me and held me on the way up. He returned to the ground the same way.

“The enemy was still shooting at us and the choppers during this time. None of my men were killed, but my Colonel and his pilot were killed, my Company Commander was wounded and my Forward Observer was also wounded, as they were all in the same helicopter.

“The only thing we fought for in Vietnam was the guy next to us and this proves it.”



Steven Ray McConnell



## Tim Owens

All in the Family

### Military Experience

U.S. Army

- June 1968 – August 1971: Active Military Duty
- May 1969 – May 1970: Vietnam service
- May 1970 – January 1994: Active Army Reserve
- Graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College
- Rank at retirement: Colonel (O-6) from U.S. Army Reserve in 1994

“I served with the 199th Light Infantry Brigade in Vietnam as a Counterintelligence Officer and continued to serve my entire career in both active and reserve capacities as a Counterintelligence and Strategic Intelligence Officer specializing in area studies and foreign armor systems studies. I carried both a military intelligence (9666 and 36B) MOS and an infantry officer (11B) MOS.”

### Legal Experience

- Washburn University School of Law, Juris Doctor, 1975
- Kansas State University, Bachelor of Arts, Political Science, 1968
- General Practice, family law, Overland Park
- Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services, General Counsel, Topeka, 1988 – 1991
- Kansas State Senator, 2008 – 2012
- Kansas State Representative, 2001 – 2008
- Overland Park City Council, 1981 – 2005

“I graduated from Kansas State University in the ROTC program in 1968 and was the first in my Army ROTC class to receive orders for Vietnam. My wife, Donna, and I were



Tim Owens

married and shortly thereafter I departed for infantry training at Fort Benning, Georgia. Upon completion of that training, I was sent to the Intelligence School at Fort Holabird, Maryland. After a 30-day leave, I departed for Vietnam and my next assignment.

“My father was a career Army warrant officer. He and my brother who served in the U.S. Marine Corps

preceded me in Vietnam. We all served there within three years. My father was assigned to the upper peninsula of Michigan as an intelligence agent upon his return from Vietnam and it was there that I left my wife so that she could be afforded military benefits at KI Sawyer AFB during my absence. My father had met and married my mother when they were both serving in the military at what is now Fort Drum, New York. Yes, my mom was a World War II veteran as well, and proved to be a strong and supportive military wife who endured those three years of her three men serving in the war in Vietnam.

“It was May 1969. I reported for duty in Vietnam and was assigned to the 199th Light Infantry Brigade in III Corps,

central Vietnam just north of Saigon with Brigade HQ in Long Binh.

“One day while serving as executive officer of the military intelligence detachment I received a call from the Red Cross office next door requesting that I come over for a visit. One of the two men in the office asked me to sit down and have a cup of coffee. ‘Lieutenant,’ he asked, ‘were you expecting anything at home?’ I had been busily preparing for an upcoming military operation and the intelligence functions so my focus was a bit distracted. ‘No,’ I replied. But all of a sudden it dawned on me and I changed my answer. ‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Good,’ he replied, and ‘Congratulations. You are a new Dad!’ My wife had given birth to a wonderful son whom we named Craig, and here I was sitting in front of the Red Cross in Vietnam to get the news. Dr. Bowes lived across the street from my parents at the air force base in Michigan and had reported Mother and child were both doing fine. And my military mom was there to help my military wife through the event in my absence.

“I served my full year with the infantry as an intelligence officer. My duties centered around the collection of information about the enemy and involved visits with Vietnamese villagers, officials, religious figures, and captured prisoners, as well as numerous other types of intelligence operations in support of infantry operations.

“There were many stories that I could relate as could any of us who served in Vietnam. All of us had families. Mine happened to be a military family and we all served. It is who we were. When the time came for me to return home, my homecoming was like a lot of other returning veterans. There were no parades and fanfares, no bells and whistles. I flew from Vietnam to Travis Air Force Base in California, took a cab to the San Francisco airport, and flew to Kansas City. To get to Manhattan at 10:30 that night, there was only one small four-seat airplane going so I took it. At the Manhattan airport I called my wife and said, ‘Honey, I’m home, and I will be there in a few minutes in a cab.’ I knocked on the door; she opened it, gave me a big hug and a kiss and asked if I would like to see our son. Yes! I was home, and it was about family!”

## Tom Ruzicka

Army Infantry, 1968, then National Guard

### Military Experience

Army Infantry

- May 1968 – September 1969
- Rank at discharge: 2nd Lieutenant Infantry

### Legal Experience

- University of Kansas School of Law, Juris Doctor, 1972
- Hubbard Ruzicka, Kremer & Kincaid, commercial litigation, Olathe

“I graduated from KU in May 1966. I was admitted to law school. At the time I decided I would rather, I think, have a career as a commercial airplane pilot. I had got my commercial instrument ticket and scheduled to start a flight training program with TWA, a Flight Engineer Program. And on April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King was shot and we were activated in Kansas City, Kansas, for riots. Following that, I was activated to Fort Carson, Colorado, on May 12. It was a big change from being a pilot, flying airplanes.



Tom Ruzicka

“I then went to Fort Benning, Georgia, for infantry officer’s basic course. From there came Vietnam. When I arrived in Vietnam, I was a second lieutenant; our area was west of Saigon. My work, as I say, as a second lieutenant, had about 35 people that I was responsible for – that meant you normally would have about 28 to 32.

“We broke it up into three squads. Our mission was primarily during the day to go out, follow the companies – what we were looking for so we went through the villages. We didn’t really have much North Vietnamese army. We had Viet Cong (VC) issues. At night, we, I spent five-six nights a week – and we would get out in our night ambushes – the purpose of which was to control the countryside. To prevent the VC from, if you would, presenting rockets and other things. To control the countryside. The biggest problem we had was primarily booby traps – I lost two boys in booby traps.

“I left Vietnam September 1, 1969, was in Lawrence on September 6, 1969 – that was when I started law school.

“We had the Student Union burn about the 25th of October 1969. I was in charge of the Lawrence National Guard Detachment at the time. When I came back – \$200 a month in addition to my GI bill, that was nice money, so I was in charge of that and then when the Union burned, we got active – we were called up again.

“Chancellor Chalmers canceled all finals first part of May 1970.”

## John Solbach

U.S. Marine. Led by Col. John W. Ripley, decorated Marine

### Military Experience

U.S. Marine

- Age 18, 1966
- August 1966 – July 1969
- Vietnam: January 1967 – February 1968
- MOS – 0311. Lima Company, 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines, 3rd Marine Division
- Rank at discharge: Sergeant (E-5)

### Legal Experience

- Washburn University School of Law, Juris Doctor, 1977
- Solbach Law Office, Lawrence
- Kansas State Representative, 1979 – 1993
- Ethics Commission, 1997 – Present

“I went to Marine Corps boot camp in August of 1966. I left for Vietnam on the 8th of January 1967. I joined the unit, Lima Co. 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines, about the 18th of January 1967.

“I knew if I didn’t go, somebody else would have to go in my place. I had four younger brothers. I ended up in this remarkable unit that would become legendary. Capt. W. Ripley, company commander, joined the unit in early January. Each time he led us in combat, when the shooting began, he knew what he was doing. He was remarkable. He took care of us. We were an effective combat unit. There was something remarkable about him as a leader.



John Solbach

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“I remember clearly the first offensive operation we went on in February 1967. We walked – actually they picked us up . . . and flew us further away from our objective. Then we walked in.

They didn’t want to tip off the enemy as to where we were headed. We walked up jungle trails – I remember there were little pools of blood all the way up. Leeches would get on the Marine’s legs, fill themselves with blood, drop off, and the next Marine would step on them. I was carrying a 70-pound pack board and another 20-30 pounds in gear.

“The jungle, most of the time, was very thick you could only go through it using machetes and it was hot. A number of men collapsed of heat stroke and had to be medevaced. The best place to travel was up and down streambeds because they were clear. The jungle was so thick that when it started to rain, it would rain for 20 minutes before the first drop would get through the canopy to you. And then when it stopped raining, it would continue to rain for 20 minutes until the rain would all filter through the trees.

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“I stayed in the field for virtually all of my 396 days (we fought large, well-trained, well-equipped, and well-led northern Vietnamese army units). Though we prevailed in every combat engagement, the cost was high. The battalion that I served in had an average field strength of 600 men, 137 were killed during my tour and more than 900 were wounded (some wounded and the dead were replaced as were those who left under normal rotation).

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“Being in combat and seeing what war is, after my tour I believed that surely we would never ever go to war again. . . if people understood what I understood about war, the sacrifices of men engaged in conflict on both sides. War is a very poor way of resolving disputes. But we sometimes forget. However, this country was founded on a Constitution, a Bill of Rights, our laws, and court decisions. There are five little magic words in the Constitution, ‘according to the common law,’ that reach back and incorporate everything from the 12th century in English law.

“Those provide us with a blueprint on how to peacefully resolve disputes. As a lawyer, I have had a great opportunity to utilize that. When political, legal, and diplomatic institutions break down, we may go to war. These institutions are meant to keep us and allow us to live in peace. That’s what lawyers’ work affirms.” ■

### About the Author



Matthew Keenan has practiced with Shook, Hardy & Bacon LLP, Kansas City, Mo., since 1985.

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