

Beth Taylor

Crossing the Line: Finding Butch

I was raised a Quaker in the lush farm lands of Bucks County, just 25 miles north of Philadelphia. We were a family of first, second, and third cousins, many of whom attended the same Quaker schools and colleges, and joined each other in family reunions. Our parents were lawyers, teachers, doctors, and homemakers. We used the plain language—*thee, thy, and thine*. We eschewed TV and material gluttony. But most important we believed in non-violence, social reform, and finding God through the inner light in silent meeting for worship, without the necessity of a minister. In wars the men of my family proudly did their duty through alternative service, doing the work left behind by men who chose to fight. During World War II my father built roads in New Hampshire, fought forest fires in Montana, and supervised the violent ward in a mental hospital in Virginia. In 1965, as we became more aware of Vietnam as a “conflict,” my older brother voiced his feelings about war during history class in his public high school and he was called a coward. Later a gang of boys cornered him in the hallway, and pummeled him with fists and names. Then, at a local Veterans Day parade, our neighbor was vilified for her antiwar views as the national head of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. When Norman Morrison, a Quaker, immolated himself in front of the Pentagon to protest the war, we were horrified. But we also began to understand that the problems of this particular war had become impossible to ignore.

During the late '60s and early '70s, I visited my neighbor in prison after he refused to register for the draft; I said goodbye to a boyfriend as he chose to make a new life at age 18 in Canada; and then I mourned

my favorite first cousin when his plane crashed in Viet Nam, where he was working for the Quaker hospital in Quang Ngai. Life seemed gritty and sad, and it was comforting for me to be as good a Quaker as I could—organizing moratoriums at my Quaker high school, standing quietly in peaceful demonstrations against the war, doing guerrilla theater with Vietnam vets in the streets of Washington to demonstrate what a raid on a Vietnamese village looked like. I was earnest, well meaning, and sure of my mission. Although most of the young men I knew were able to get college deferments from the draft, the few I knew or heard about who left for Vietnam as a soldier or medic, or for Canada as a resister in exile, or for prison as a draft card burner or antiwar protester, seemed a human sacrifice to a war that offered little redeeming value.

In October of 1969 I went to Washington, D.C. for the National Moratorium Against the War. I had heard recently that Butch Geary, an older boy I had loved watching in 4-H, had died in the spring fighting as a Marine in the war. I hadn't even known he had gone. Ensconced in my Quaker world, I had hoped I would never have to know someone actually lost to battle in that sad war. Now as I walked through the masses of worn blue jeans, handmade peasant blouses, and funky scarves along the mall I saw a group of veterans, dressed in fatigues, hunkered down around a campsite. In my mind's eye Butch's clear face grinned at me. But these men looked tired and old despite the youthful fuzziness of some of their beards. I studied their faces, trying to see—what, I don't know, but thinking, they've been there, they've seen it, and wanting to comfort each one of them.

Joan Baez sang that day in Washington. She introduced David Harris, her husband, just out of jail for resisting the draft. The crowd roared its approval. And then, suddenly, the mood broke. Screams and yells came from atop the grassy rise behind us as we faced the stage. The crowd seemed to push against us as if the middle was retreating, and suddenly we could see clearly a band of protesters dressed in black, running, slicing through the crowd, holding aloft huge North Vietnamese flags. "The Weathermen," somebody said. And I was scared. Their rude, out-of-control violence drowned out the peaceful recognition of sorrow and non-violence. It would be their picture that made the papers the next day. But I knew that most of us there saw them only as the school bully who had found one more way to upstage the peacemakers. Peacemakers like my older brother and the other young men I

knew who rejected violence. Peacemakers like Butch Geary. Or was he? Butch had seemed to me like an older version of my brother—tall, lean, freckled round face, a great grin, and a leader with smarts and humor. I realized that even though I had had a crush on him, watching him run 4-H meetings on beautiful sunny summer Saturdays out at Howes' farm in Bucks County, I didn't know him at all. Butch had seemed a peacemaker. But he went to fight in this awful war. I didn't have a clue as to why that handsome, strong young man had to be dead.

Years later, in the early 1990s I drove out to the Howes' farm to find my former 4-H Club leader. Eugenia greeted me like family and we sat in the sun with the fields stretching out around the Pennsylvania stone farmhouse, the old barn now looming empty and decrepit behind us. Together we remembered other sunny days and sewing projects and who had what champion dairy cow. I told Eugenia I was trying to write about the young men I had known who, one way or another, were lost to the war in Vietnam. She told me more about Butch, how he had been great with the younger kids in 4-H, how he was a poised and very funny public speaker, how he had taken the Howes' daughter on her first date, and later how they argued about the war—he was so sure the war was right; she—a Quaker—was adamant that it was “stupid.” “Remember,” Eugenia said to me, “as Quakers we often judged soldiers harshly.” She said she would try to help me find Butch's family, but she didn't know how they might respond.

In 1995, twenty-six years after Butch's death, his family invited me to join them around the kitchen table of their small neat house in the working class neighborhood of Roslyn, Pennsylvania. Bill Geary, 72, was somewhat weakened by spinal-cerebella degeneration, which he developed—perhaps coincidentally—the year after Butch died. But he still flashed the grin I remembered on his son, particularly when he told a family joke. Polly Geary, 71, was still strong, working part-time as a salesperson at Sears, and as a volunteer at Holy Redeemer Hospital. Diane, training to be a nun when Butch was killed, was now 46, married to a public defender, and working as a full-time mom with three boys, living in upstate New York. Joan, 44, was an insurance adjuster living in nearby Glenside. John, 38, lived nearby, was married with three children, and working in computer maintenance and repair. Glenn, 31, was not at this gathering, but later, on the phone he told me he now lives with his companion—a Marine in Vietnam during 1968, in New Hope, not far from the Bucks County farms of Butch's youth.

As John pulled up extra chairs to the table, Polly said, “They want to know why you’re doing this.” “They” meant her children, and her tone said she would not suffer fools where her family was concerned. Her frank challenge startled me. I had sent her a report of my research; I presumed the family understood that I meant well. Suddenly I remembered the old tensions: I was on the other side; I must prove to the Geary family that I was not out to vilify their soldier-son. I told them of my memories of Butch out there on the Howes’ lawn, and my infatuation with him as an 11- and 12-year-old girl. I described the young men I knew who were lost somehow to the war. I told them how each one seemed to have traveled a sometimes lonely but inevitable path because of who they were and because of the family they had been born into. I described the story by Tim O’Brien in *The Things They Carried*—about rowing out into the middle of the river on the border between the U.S. and Canada, facing that excruciating choice: Do I flee the war and risk ridicule or do I fight in a war I abhor? I explained how over time I had come to see that even though the young men I knew had made decisions they saw as brave—decisions to fight, to resist the draft, to leave the country, or to do Quaker service—the consequences they suffered had never seemed valued or redeemed in any way. I told them about reading a report of my research to faculty at Harvard and how many in the room—all of the Vietnam era but only one a veteran of the war, responded emotionally with stories of their own time of choice, or failure to choose. These stories, I said to the Gearys—Butch’s story, my other young men—they are the stories of many American families. We didn’t talk about them for a long time because we knew we had to get on with life to survive. But now it’s time I think, to hear their voices again, and the voices of their families, to see what we can understand about that time, each other, and ourselves.

Polly told me it was the first time ever they had talked as a family—all together in one room—about losing Bill Jr., or Butch. I nodded, and registered deep in my brain, behind the questions I started to ask, that this was not going to be just a group interview; this would have to come carefully. I knew from other families who had lost a loved one that it was not uncommon to never gather as a whole family to grieve; that instead, twos and threes within families tended to have their occasional, often unexpected, conversations that remembered and sorrowed and cried.

Slowly now, in the trim white coziness of Polly’s kitchen, the Gearys

started remembering for me who Butch had been, the Butch I remembered—his “Pepsodent smile,” his smarts and energy, his enthusiasm and willfulness. By high school he was 6’3” and still growing, with light brown hair, and confident hazel eyes. His dad, Bill Sr., made nuts and bolts at Standard Pressed Steel, and each child got a job as soon as they were able. Butch raised goats and rabbits for our 4-H Club, and liked working on the farms of our Bucks County neighbors—feeding cows, milking, mucking out stalls. “He always stank when he came home,” Diane said. At Council Rock High School, Butch sang in the chorus, wrestled, debated, and did well academically.

Diane and Joan remembered that as the oldest of five kids Butch ruled the roost. In fact he could be a “tyrant”—ordering the girls to wait on him, complaining if Diane ironed his shirt wrong, or making Joan wash his car without reward. But he was also generous—lending money, giving rides.

He was raised a faithful Catholic—even stopping somewhere for Mass when he went north to the Poconos or New York state on hunting trips with his farm buddies Steve and Rich Daniels. An altar boy since childhood, at 19 Butch served at the altar for a Mass at the 1964 World’s Fair. Diane remembers Catholicism of the ’60s as encouraging social activism, so when Butch went to Temple University, he helped run its Catholic Newman Club, helped some non-Catholic colleges start their own branches, tutored kids, and even sang once for Vietnam vets at the Valley Forge Military Hospital.

Butch was the first in the family to go to college even though, as Diane said, “we were trained to be worker bees,” not to go to college. Butch earned his own way through scholarships and jobs. He had a “whole plan of how his life was going to go,” Diane remembered. “He knew early on that he was going to major in political science at college. Until Vietnam and the military came along, he was going to law school. He wasn’t getting married until he had \$10,000 in the bank and owned his own home. His goal was to be a gentleman farmer and United States Senator—his hero was John F. Kennedy.”

Butch graduated from Temple University in January of 1968 and immediately enlisted in the Marines. Bill Sr. remembers the recruiters saying they didn’t see too many college grads down there at The Naval Yard in Philadelphia. But Butch had grown up hearing stories of his father’s time in the Marines, and he was proud to be a Marine, to do his duty for his country, and to go to Vietnam. As Diane said, Butch’s

options were those of most kids in working class America. "You knew a lot of people who came out of high school and went into the military."

In March of 1968, Butch headed for officers' training at Quantico, Virginia. Polly showed me Butch's letters and they took me into a world I knew little about—a world of arbitrary rules, harsh training, physical hardship, and presumed courage. To a noncombatant, it is the kind of information that spawns a sense of respect for any soldier, no matter who they are or what their views on war. Butch also told funny stories about training—"Did you ever see a 6'4" Marine curl up into a foxhole 2' by 2'? I'm told I look hysterical." And he followed the news of the growing antiwar movement, asserting "I'm a good guy (even though Marines aren't supposed to be good guys)." I paused at that line, knowing that at that time I too had been suspicious of soldiers: to want to go to war was unimaginable in my Quaker circle, and of course we presumed all soldiers wanted to fight; it wasn't until late 1969 or 1970, after Butch's death, that we began to understand that many soldiers in Vietnam were there under duress or they were struggling with a conflict between duty and belief.

Butch apparently never felt conflicted, and perhaps that is a blessing. By the time he graduated Basic Training, Butch was a "Second Lieutenant, Sir!" and thinking about the path ahead.

I'll be responsible for the lives of men. That's kind of hard to picture. Human beings, Mom. I'm not afraid to admit that I'm a little bit on the nervous side. I already know that I'll be going to Vietnam. First of all, I'm a Marine; and secondly, I'm an officer. I think that's the only thing that really keeps me paying attention in classes. . . .

Butch knew the Marines needed officers desperately because they were being killed so fast. A friend who had been over already confirmed that the quick turnover of Marine officers meant that each new officer had to be taught by the grunts what to do; their inexperience made them easy targets. But Butch moved forward according to the script he had written. He wrote his parents,

. . . No matter what happens, I just want you to be proud of me. I think it's my responsibility to more or less uphold the image that I've created of myself. Thanks for every little bit of

encouragement and help you have ever given me. My family has got to be the best thing that ever happened to me.

Butch returned home for Thanksgiving and Christmas of 1968. He visited friends on the farms, from the Newman Club, and Temple University. Each time his usual good humor was tinged with poignancy. Friends remember he seemed to have intimations of his fate. He wanted to do things he hadn't done before—like see a boxing match in a rough area of Philly even though his buddies, the Daniels cousins, couldn't join him. When Rich Daniels did visit, Butch mused to his mother, "That may be the last time I see him." Nonetheless, Steve Daniels said later in a phone interview, their attitude was more bravado. "It was like, 'He'll be back.' The thought he could be hurt—you always thought it would be someone else."

In early January of 1969, Butch headed for Camp Pendleton in California for the final leg of training before Vietnam. On the flight out, the stewardesses invited Butch and a few other servicemen to fill vacancies in First Class, and served them filet mignon and drinks—a last feast before the trials to come. As a 2nd Lieutenant, Butch was put in charge of a unit of about 145 men, responsible for their final 15 days of training: 3 days for administrative details (updating service record books, handling personal problems, wills), 9 days of field training (search, evasion, patrolling, firing and cleaning the M-16, Viet Nam orientation), and 3 more days of administration (final updating of record books, ironing out embarkation details).

Butch described his men as "a bunch of clowns," but he noted "they always put out 100% especially in PT (Physical Training). As the PT officer for his unit, Butch had to lead his men through difficult conditions which they didn't yet know would seem easy compared to the actual war:

This training is really hard. We usually walk 4-6 miles, one way, to the training area. And it often is up and down hills, which makes for good exercise, but also for tired bones. And to compound matters, it has rained every day, for about 17 days; 10 days in a row. . . .

What a mess! Mud is everywhere, the men have colds, sore throats; all the staff are sick; four of them are on no-duty, and I have a sore throat, too. Last Friday, it rained, real hard, all day.

We fired the M-16 at the range, night and day.

Butch traveled off base a few times—to bowl (“they have a human pin setter!”), to see *Bullitt* and *The Split* for \$2.00, and to San Francisco. Although he took pride in trying “to walk the straight and narrow” as he said in one letter, he also enjoyed wandering where his fellow Marines usually did not—into Haight-Ashbury and Fisherman’s Wharf. He was surprised to discover hippies working as shopkeepers, cable car conductors, telephone linemen; less surprised when he saw hippies begging on the streets—for food, for a ticket to a rock show. San Francisco was truly the city of the young, he wrote his parents. While most of the wanderers he watched seemed “healthy-looking,” there was also “a lot of sadness and sickness” in the faces of those who clearly needed a bath, a place to stay. Butch was cheered when he stumbled across a concert at the Fillmore by Chuck Berry, one of his childhood idols—“here he was, tearing the place up like crazy!” During the concert Butch watched as some Hells Angels created a small ruckus, and then on his way out he grabbed some underground newspapers to send home to the folks. “Be sure to keep them from John and Glenn and Joan—they are kind of risque! Just thought you’d like to see what the hippie press classifies as ‘news.’” The next day, as if to cleanse himself, Butch went to church, bought his mother some sandalwood incense, and rode to the Top of the Mark to see the city from a more conventional view with a retired Army Master Sergeant he befriended on a cable car.

Butch finally got the word that the men of his unit were assigned to the 5th Marine Division, stationed at Pendleton. Only officers, like himself, were being sent to Vietnam at that point. Impatient to get going, he lobbied to get a flight out of California four days earlier than his allotted time slot. He landed in Vietnam on February 15th, 1969 and was assigned to the 3rd Battalion, India Company, of the 7th Marines. He was to be the Weapons Platoon Commander until a vacancy opened up in a rifle platoon. He went to booby trap school for a few days and then he got his gear—“jungle utes, boots, .45 pistol, pack, helmet, etc.”

Butch wrote to his folks that Tet, the Vietnamese New Year, had started with an uneasy “truce of sorts” which both sides had already violated. Memories of the Tet Offensive of ’68 kept everyone on edge. Already, he knew, the war was creeping closer. He told his parents a soldier he had known in the Basic School had just been killed by rocket fire “after only 8 days in country.” Another friend was wounded after 14 days, but was OK. Butch asked his parents to keep such news in

perspective, and to have faith, as he tried to do.

I hope this doesn't disturb you. If it is going to make you a nervous wreck, I'll "censor" the news, and save you the grief. It shouldn't bother you—what happens, happens, because it is God's will—and it doesn't bother me in the least. So let me know, OK? And don't worry, right?

Well, I'm going to sign off for tonight. We have a briefing tomorrow at 0800. . . . Hope I can slip in Mass somewhere. I went to Church on Friday (yesterday), and received Communion, so I would have some "flight" insurance for today. I also said the Rosary last night, on Diane's beads, and will do the same tonite. I hope to keep them on my person at all times, and "make a trip around the beads," as Captain Anderson used to tell us, at least once a day.

Soon Butch went on his first combat patrol, joining another 2nd Lieutenant and his platoon.

We swept through this nearby ville. It is considered a VC ville, with sympathizers. The people, especially the kids, eyed us cautiously. I understood from the platoon commander, that the kids will really come out to greet you, if it is a friendly ville. It was pretty quiet. They blew a couple of tunnels that looked suspicious. This particular ville had been hit by tank fire two nights ago, when the V.C. were on the move. I saw the damage—they blasted the roof on a few hooches, and the people were busy knocking the cement off, to replace them.

Despite this sobering view, Butch still felt like the good guy Marine—interested, caring, trying to understand the situation:

Some of the people seemed friendly to me. I just smiled and bowed a little, and most smiled back. Nevertheless, the rest of the platoon was not happy with the villagers. It seems that we received hostile fire from them, and the guys don't like it. The condition of the place was, well, deplorable. You wouldn't believe the way they live. I believe the term for it is "cultural shock." Pretty appropriate, I think. The kids are real cute, but pretty dirty. Like all kids, they are somewhat shy, but they like an approving pat or smile.

The people in our area of operations (AO) are generally considered friendly, with a few exceptions, like the ville above. They are very industrious . . . out in the fields—kids, babies, mothers, grandmothers—from early morning, until dusk. It is fascinating to watch them, cultivating their rice fields (cautiously looking for booby traps), and irrigating them with methods used centuries ago. Also fascinating is the water buffalo, commonly called the “water boo”. The Vietnamese kids ride them everywhere, as they graze; but let an American come by, and look out! They act like a fresh cow who spots you with her calf—they charge in a rage. The theory is that Americans, who are primarily meat eaters, have this smell on them, which infuriates the water boo. The Vietnamese, you see, are fish eaters. More than one Marine has been gored by one of these gray beasts, who are short and stocky, about the body weight of a Guernsey!

And then, for Butch, the war began. On March 10th, 1969 he wrote he was “suddenly busy!” as the 3rd platoon commander. Butch felt lucky he had an experienced platoon sergeant—SSgt. Rivas of Nevada—who, with four years and a tour and a half in Vietnam behind him, helped Butch guide recruits who were barely newer than Butch. “The platoon is generally good,” Butch wrote, “but we have a lot of new guys, who are careless, because they are not ‘broken in’ yet.” His platoon had been on an ambush and done the blocking for two sweeps made by another platoon of a deserted ville that was heavily booby-trapped. In the sweeps several men were wounded or killed and for the first time Butch felt blind anger.

Everybody is really bitter and mad. My platoon is fine, but we feel hurt for the other guys. It is so frustrating. They (the VC) use nylon line, like fishing line; the area is thick, so that makes it worse. No one was in there. There is a ville nearby, which is a VC suspected area. After the last guy left (by chopper; he was an emergency medevac), we finally moved out of that place. I hope they just bomb, nape, and bulldoze the area. What else—there is nothing else?

Butch apologized in this letter for his “poor use of words, and sentence structure.” He wanted to write quickly, he said, “before something sudden happens, which would make writing impossible.”

Although these last comments show that Butch was beginning to feel the pressure of the war, in his next sentence, he bounced back to his determination to make the best of it. He asked Joan to send tapes of his favorite albums—Big Brother, Supremes, Temptations, Miracles—along with his tape recorder. Of course, he included the money to buy the tapes. In the same week he sent requests to Philadelphia’s Mayor Tate and Pennsylvania’s Governor Shafer for a city and state flag for his platoon.

When he wrote that week to his buddy, Steve Daniels, Butch thanked him for a care package of cigars and reported “We should see some good contact in a week or so—they have us scheduled for a forty-day op, called “Oklahoma Hills,” on April 1. Read your local paper for time and channel! Ha! Ha!” Reading that letter now, knowing “Oklahoma” was the operation that would kill Butch, makes his determined cheerfulness seem poignant, or blessedly innocent. But he knew his calm wasn’t for long. To his parents he wrote:

We are mobile battalion for the next eight weeks, which means we go where the trouble is, whenever it happens. I may not write for weeks, simply because I don’t have the time. You’ll be the first to know if I’m hurt . . . So don’t make it worse on yourself, if you don’t hear from me regularly, OK?

. . . I say the Rosary every night for the whole family, that the good Lord gives you everything you deserve, & DON’T WORRY, OK?

On March 20th, Butch and his men were called out again. To his sister, Diane, he wrote from a small field where his company had set up a block to protect some nearby South Vietnamese soldiers who had pinned down a VC company—“no shave for five days, no showers, two meals a day (“C” rations), and B-52 sized mosquitoes.” Later he wrote to his folks as he hunkered down under his poncho liner on bamboo stakes in a rice paddy in high 80s heat under a sun that reminded him, he said, of their family summers at Avalon, New Jersey.

Soon Butch’s battalion was called in from the field and sent to round up deserters in Da Nang, in the slum called “Dogpatch” where refugees from the war torn countryside settled. The alleys were choked with shacks and people, including Americans who had gone AWOL.

What we came for were about 25 hard-core deserters, some of whom have been there since 1965! All types of Americans—Marines, Army—and all colors. They have been suspected of various crimes in the area; eg. murder, drugs, prostitution, pimping, and even worse, collaboration with the VC. They had machine guns, grenade launchers, M-16s, etc, and they were reported to be willing to shoot it out.

Butch's company swept in by truck; another came by choppers. Once the cordon was set, the MPs and National Police swept the area. They captured 40 suspects and confiscated black market soda, weapons, and, to Butch's dismay, maps—"like the one we used!"

A few days later, back in the field, he reported the ongoing challenge of a typical day:

Sunday we checked out a TOT (time on target—all the regiment's artillery, or some of it, fires on a certain spot or area). We had to sweep from south to north, along a stream, and then turn around, and go back, north to south. It was real hot, and the terrain was pretty rough, but the platoon did a good job, and worked well together. We came back at 1700, only to get a briefing at 1900, brief my squad leaders at 2000, hit the rack at 2200, and get up 0300 this morning! Whew.

We left by truck, debarked, moved to a river crossing site, and crossed two platoons from India, as well as a platoon from Kilo [Company]. We had to drive stakes, and set up a quick rope. The river was about 100 yds. across, and about 20 M deep at the center. We had "rubber ladies" (rubber rafts), and put our gear on them, to keep it dry. Yet, we lost three M-16s, and over 50 magazines, when a raft tipped over. . . .

We got two platoons on line, with Kilo 1 back, and swept an area about three and a half kilometers. When we sweep like this, we look for rocket sites, dud ammo and rounds, new bunkers or caves, and any materials. When we swept the TOT, we found medicine, bloody clothing, 50 lbs. of buried rice, and bunkers. We mainly look for rocket and small arms caches. The area is wild and desolate, with abandoned villes, long empty and bombed out. We rarely see people, and no suspects during the day. It is hard work, keeping everyone on line, and in con-

tact, and you never see the enemy. But it must be done, and there is always that one time. . . .

Back at base camp, as he relaxed briefly, Butch took bets on the Temple University basketball game broadcast for GIs, and read in the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin about the antiwar demonstrations back home. To his parents he excoriated those “who desecrate my flag, disgrace my uniform, and destroy public buildings. These shameful events...make me doubly and triply proud to be an American, a fighting Marine, and a devoted Catholic.” I wondered if he ever distinguished between those violent antiwar protestors and the greater number of peaceful demonstrators like myself, or if he understood both groups just wanted to bring guys like him home. To Butch it was probably a moot point as he continued to face physical and psychological trials he had only imagined before, trials which he had willingly signed up for, and about which he had no choice.

Soon he prepared to head out for his final trial, the operation called “Oklahoma Hills.”

They say we’ll have to take 20 salt tabs a day, and drink ten quarts of water a day, or some high figure like that. Up there, it is all double triple canopy, with temperatures in the high 90s, or 100, in the day, and cool at night. Mosquitoes are a special problem, too, so it should be fun. Just the place to camp out!

The following is one of Butch’s last letters.

Dear Mom and the Gang,

Hi! Here I am in the tropical paradise of Vietnam with its swaying palms and sunny beaches. The weather is beautiful. We’ve had solid monsoons for the past three weeks. My room is simply magnificent. It has genuine wall to wall mud with a little diversity of mud wall. Great, huh? Hey, listen. Remember when I told you about how horrible it was way back in O.C.S. [Officer’s Candidate School]? Well, it really paid off. I do feel kind of moody sometimes. They told us to expect to be homesick. But it’s not that, I lost two of my men last week and a friend of mine was killed right next to me. When I was still in the States, I thought I would never have it in me to kill. But I

can. You know, I think it's the idea I have to get him before he gets me.

Last night I was on guard duty. We are right on the front lines. A sniper had hidden in one of the trucks. He had a little boy with him and had him loaded down with grenades and explosives. He threw that kid into our ammo truck and not only blew up the truck but the kid with it! Mom, that's the first time I cried in a long time but I couldn't help it. Why is it that the innocent are always the victims of the worst hardships possible? Remember those fox holes I told you about? Well they're our permanent quarters now and I don't think I've climbed so many fences or under them or around them to get to my humble abode. Well, I have to go now. Duty calls. Bye.

Semper Fi,
Butch

On Saturday, April 5, 1969, Butch led his men out of a field toward enemy entrenched in the woods, and a sniper shot him cleanly through the head, just behind the ear. His commanding officer wrote to Butch's parents:

On the afternoon of April 5, 1969, our company was assigned as part of a battalion size search and clear mission near the Song Tam Giap River, approximately eleven miles south of Danang, in Quang Nam Province. At approximately 12:30 p.m., our company encountered intense enemy automatic weapons and small arms fire from a nearby treeline. William was leading his platoon in an assault against a well entrenched enemy position in the treeline when he was hit by an enemy sniper round. He did not suffer as he died instantly from his wound at approximately 12:30 p.m., April 5, 1969.

Andy Kuhn, a soldier from Ambler, PA, with whom Butch had shared his Philadelphia Bulletin, and who had been with Butch on the day of his death, wrote to his parents that the Marines were outnumbered—200 of them against 600 of the North Vietnamese Army. Air support did not arrive until 5:30 that afternoon. The soldier from Ambler said it was the worst battle he had been in and that he never expected to walk away from it. He did, but in June 1969, he stepped on a booby trap and was killed.

The Gearys remember where each of them was when they heard the news, or saw the green military car drive up to the house. They remember the explosion in each of their hearts, and the disorientation, then the numbness, the disbelief, and finally the oppressive sadness. The funeral was packed. Butch's sister Joan remembers "he was such a Big Man on Campus that we had people from Temple, the Young Democrats, the Newman Club, Council Rock High School, family, friends, even Mayor Tate and Police Commissioner Rizzo!"

In the weeks after Butch died Polly Geary felt utterly whipped. Losing that smart, handsome boy challenged her sense of everything she had believed in—God's will, patriotic sacrifice, and common sense. A few months after Butch was buried, Polly read in the newspaper that Andy Kuhn, the soldier friend of Butch's from Ambler, had been killed. Polly went to visit Andy Kuhn's mother and heard more details of the battle that had killed Butch. Finally she sat down and wrote a letter to President Nixon as a mother who would not suffer fools when it came to her own children. She told Nixon, "THIS IS A DIRTY WAR." Why, she asked, was Butch's battalion left for so long without air support when they were so outnumbered? And,

What good has the death of my son, and all the others done? You're pulling out the troops and heaven only knows what will happen to the remainder. In the meantime, The REDS progress a little more, and that's what my son fought to prevent. He wanted to save our country from further RED infiltration. Believe me, President Nixon, I am not a violent person, but I firmly believe the bombing should be resumed.

So often I have heard the expression, "a politician's war", and I'm beginning to believe it. I'm beginning to doubt if my son's death was truly "God's will"—perhaps more like the "politician's will".

In February of 1970, Polly and Bill Geary came out of the Philadelphia Academy of Music after a concert to see a line of demonstrators protesting the war. One girl held a homemade North Vietnamese flag, and Polly could not contain her fury. She marched over and ripped the flag from the girl's hand. When the girl demanded her flag back, Polly said, "Not until I get my son back from the grave."

Now, in 1995, near the end of an intense afternoon, filled with memo-

ries and emotion and humor and thoughtful observation, Diane's husband Jonathan asks, "Was there ever a word uttered about not going, or a thought expressed about not going?"

"I thought it," Polly says quickly. "I wanted to say, 'Don't go, don't do this.' But the patriotism—and he was 21 and I felt that I did not have the right to say to him 'Don't do this.'"

Joan, who was 17 when Butch left, intercedes. "He was going to do what he was going to do. Mom has thought her and Dad's patriotism kind of led him, so he thought that was the appropriate thing to do. In one regard that's probably true. However, he was going to DO this."

Diane says, "I don't actually remember ever having a conversation about the war. It never occurred to me at the time that you could die." This is startling to someone like me who grew up discussing the war and who presumed that war meant probable, horrible death. But if the script for my kind of pacifist family was clear—work for peace, choose alternative service, the opposite script was just as clear for Butch. Diane explains:

In retrospect I think Butch's decision was not a well-thought-out decision. There were two things to do. One would be to go. The other would have been to do the whole C.O. thing, which was so abhorrent an idea. Conscientious Objectors were long-haired hippie traitor-types. Then there might have been a whole other intellectual way to get deferments through [more] college. There are people who managed to get PhDs to avoid going.

As Diane says, the boys the Gearys knew who went to Vietnam were "ALL products of parents who had been in World War II or Korea." I think to myself this sounds so cut and dry, but some of those people in that Harvard faculty room the day I read my report were children of parents who served in WWII or Korea; they were also students who earned PhDs because of deferments. Sometimes their veteran fathers had even approved. Others of course had been furious. Butch was ambitious, but not in a way that would challenge the family script.

Bill Geary Sr. met Polly in September of 1942, entered the Marines in October, left for training at Parris Island, married Polly in March of 1943, and then headed overseas. I ask him to tell me some stories, and he grins, and then the whole family starts chuckling. "Which one do you want to hear?" Diane asks wryly. Joan smiles: "We've heard 'em all."

John says, “Once a Marine always a Marine.” Diane explains that the stories are ongoing because friends made in the Marines became god-parents to each others’ children. “The fighting was over but the Marines go on.”

Jonathan, Diane’s husband, says to Bill Sr., “World War II is the place in your life where when you talk about your life that’s your reference point. The whole world spins around your war experience.”

Bill Sr. nods, considers for a moment, and then, just in case Jonathan was suggesting that Bill Sr. romanticized his war, he says, “I watched a TV program on Vietnam and heard an officer say, ‘That was a bad war.’” Bill Sr. pauses again. Then he shakes his head, says, “There is no ‘good’ war. All are bad.”

Nonetheless, going to war seemed to make complete sense to Butch. As Polly recalls, “He said to me, ‘Ma, I’d rather go over there to fight the communists in THAT country as opposed to having them come to America.’”

Diane says, “He bought that propaganda line.”

John: “Nobody understood exactly what it was. In the long run, you know, all those hippies at Kent State, they were right.”

Diane: “We were too naive to know.”

Polly: “Even Jane Fonda was right. We should not have gone to Vietnam.”

John: “Welllllll, she gave aid and comfort to the enemy. I don’t care what you say.”

Diane: “WHO was the enemy? WHAT were we fighting for?”

John: “We had just come from the Cold War, and that was the philosophy—You HAVE to stop the reds.”

Bill Sr. remembers how gung-ho Butch was. “They wanted to put Butch in intelligence because he knew hogs [an important animal in Vietnamese culture].” Bill Sr. grins proudly. “Butch said, No he wanted his own platoon, he didn’t want Special Forces.” Butch got the job he wanted, and its awful consequence. The family was left to learn a new version of the Marine story.

John became a Marine in 1974, five years after Butch’s death. Glenn was in the “Young Marines” when he was 12 and 13, in 1975 and 1976. As John explains it, being a Marine means the same training in each generation. “You were the elite. You had to SIGN UP. Only the Marines are called in for the toughest jobs—like D-Day.” The Marines trained for 12 weeks while other branches of the military trained 8-9

weeks. And it was total immersion, John says. “You didn’t get to make a phone call, you didn’t have people come to visit you. As the old saying goes, “Kiss your ass goodbye because your body belongs to me.”

John actually landed in the Marines by default. For several years after Butch died he frequently got stoned, drunk, into bar fights, and he defied his parents and teachers. Looking back, John says his rage and violence might have happened even if Butch hadn’t died: “I always felt I couldn’t measure up.” John dropped out of high school in October of his senior year, knowing he had two options—get a job or join the military. “I had no real work skills so I joined the Service.” He says now he “didn’t give a shit” about anyone or anything, including himself. “I had a death wish. I mean one night I hung on to a speeding car by holding on to its windshield wipers for two miles!” It was 1974 and he knew he would not go to Vietnam, so he would just let the Marines do what they would with him. He would keep his mouth shut and do what he was told. It had to be better than school or home, where the tension of grief still reigned.

John walked into a Marine training program slightly more humane than in Butch’s time and claims now it was no big deal, but his family remembers one phone call from him they’ve not been able to forget.

One day, during routine exercises, a drill sergeant came up to John and yelled in his face, “Did you have a brother, Geary!”

“Yes, Sir!” shouted John.

“Was he 2nd Lieutenant William Geary, Geary!”

“Yes, Sir!,” shouted John.

“Well Geary, You’ll never be the Marine he was!”

“Yes Sir!” shouted John.

John remembers the exchange, but he doesn’t give it the weight his family does. Maybe the drill sergeant knew Butch, maybe he just searched John’s file to find information with which to humiliate him—as he did every other soldier. “It was no true attack on my character,” John asserts. “He just wanted to see what kind of spine I had. They break you down and build you back up.” Actually, he says, “It woke a little bit of pride up in me.” He explains he knew he wasn’t stupid, that he could do this Marine stuff easily. In fact he says he angered one instructor because he slept through lectures on Marine history. When he got an A on the exam, the instructor yelled, “Geary, You’re a high school dropout! How can you be so smart and so stupid at the same time!” John says, “I told him, ‘I’ve been studying this stuff since I was 5 years old. It’s not a

school subject for me. It's family lore!"

At the end of the afternoon I ask, "Does it help at all, knowing Butch died doing something he wanted to do and that he believed in?"

Everyone is silent for a bit.

Bill Sr. shakes his head. "Nothing will help you."

Polly says grimly, "You just learn to live with it. That's all you do."

John raises his arms and crosses them behind his head, as if to help himself breathe. "I felt cheated."

Polly nods her head. "He lost the brother who was big and handsome and he admired."

Diane says, "That was a great loss. I don't think any family should ever have to go through this—go through the death of any sibling, for whatever reason."

There is another pause.

John seems to regain his jaunty composure. "You grow up and you grow old."

Joan adds, "And you move on."

Diane's husband Jonathan, like the lawyer in the courtroom that he often is, tries to tease out the complexities here. "That phrase 'you move on' needs explanation." He looks at me and alludes to my description of Tim O'Brien's story about rowing out to the middle of the river between America and Canada:

The point of your writing is you don't move on—that some piece of you is grounded right at that moment. This generation—those faculty in that Harvard room, the Vietnam veterans on-line in chat rooms, everybody I know, is stuck in some respect in 1968 in the middle of that river—or you made that decision, and there's a piece of everybody not going anywhere. You're getting older but you're not moving on.

Joan: "There's always going to be a piece that's lost there, but my life does not revolve around that, at all."

John: "No, but it's always there."

Diane: "It's like the seed that your life grew out of."

Joan: "It certainly altered everybody's direction, but who's to say that some other thing wouldn't have done that that wasn't necessarily negative."

I say, "You mean accidents do happen and change families. But the

ways Vietnam destroyed, and disturbed family dynamics is something certain families share.”

John says, “I think it’s more ‘distorted.’ The death doesn’t obliterate what was there, but it’s a whole new spin. You still go on. I always have something I can touch back to.”

Sometimes, John says later, he’ll be having a bad day—too many irritable computer customers let’s say, and he’ll be driving along, tired, and he’ll talk to Butch:

“What am I doing?” I’ll say to him.

“Give me some patience here!” I’ll tell him. . . .

He’s my tie to God (Now I’m sounding religious!). . . .

“See what you can do for me,” I’ll tell him. . . .

You try not to ask for much. I just try to be grateful for what I got.

Now at the kitchen table Diane, who has been listening carefully to her siblings, says,

The bullet that shot Butch shot right through the center of my life and all my understanding. It changed me more than having children. . . . I knew so little about Vietnam. Butch’s death was like a slap in the face, a “get with the real world,” you know. It was: from this moment is how I will see life from now on.

A few years after Butch died, Diane stopped training as a nun. Before she left the convent, she started working toward a degree in Urban Studies at Temple University. One day in 1973 she sat down and wrote a column for the *Temple News* in which she tried to honor Butch’s memory for an audience she knew had grown cynical about the prolonged efforts to end the war. In the column she described Butch’s upbringing, his love of Temple University, his enthusiasm for Glee Club, the Catholic Newman Club, his service fraternity, his part-time jobs, his dream to be a lawyer, and then his training as a Marine. “He was proud to be a soldier and felt a strong sense of duty to his country and his men,” she wrote. “Even though our values have changed so much since then I will not apologize for his values and ideals.” Nonetheless, she wrote, when she thinks about his death sometimes she says, “‘What a waste!’ Here was an idealistic young man who hoped to contribute something to

society.” And then she remembers the outpouring of sorrow, pride, and admiration for Butch at his funeral, and she knows those who knew and loved him were indeed changed by his life and death. Finally she asks the question any of us ask as we try to honor the young men whose lives were changed or lost one way or another to the decisions they made about the Vietnam War: “Why have I written all this?” Her answer:

Our value systems have changed so much since 1963. Fighting a war has become ugly, no more a source of pride. Maybe many of you consider Bill Geary a fool, but some values don't change.

If searching for truth, finding joy in others, being concerned for another's happiness and working for peace are foolish then perhaps we are all fools.

Searching for truth, finding joy in others, caring for their happiness, working for peace. That was Butch in Vietnam, and Diane working with Catholic service in the streets of Philadelphia. But those words were also used to describe those of us in the peace movement. Some thought us fools too—called us names, told us to get a job, or to leave our country if we did not love it. The point was we did love our country and that's why for some of us our job was to try and keep more friends like Butch from dying in a war that lost a clear mission early on. Robert McNamara talks now about three times when, if a phone call had been taken, a memo read, or a meeting held, the war would have ended sooner; those three moments all happened before 1965. Diane is right: “what a waste” of so many idealistic, productive young men.

Since we cannot bring them back, the one thing we can consciously do is heal, close the rift. During Vietnam most of us stopped at a rather simplistic logic of either/or—you were for the war or you were against it. You were a peacemaker or you were a warmonger. Butch spouted generic right-wing slogans just as I spouted generic left-wing slogans. But the truth of who we were went deeper: Only superficially were we the person we were taught to be by our parents, religious belief, and neighborhoods. More profoundly we were both fighters—acting assertively on our beliefs, and pacifists—desiring an end to conflict. We were both soldiers with limited vision who followed the cause we had been born into, and we were humanists who wanted the values of decency, fairness, and good will to reign no matter which banner we followed. In

the end it was the impossibility of the war itself—militarily and morally—that corrupted the simplistic prejudices that each of us followed so confidently. If we were fools, it was because we were blind: we could not see the other in our selves.

Butch's siblings have gone on to create productive lives for themselves, but they are each changed in determined ways. After years of being what her mother describes as "the rock" at home with the younger boys, Joan worked her way through college and became a rare female in a top position at a predominantly male insurance company; as she did in the years after Butch's death, she is still checking in, following up on everyone, even making sure that I stick to the facts as I ask questions of her family. John, finally settled, sober, and once again church-going, talks to his teenage children about how painful experiences are sometimes the only way to understand something important. Diane has moved the furthest away geographically, and perhaps politically. She says she still attends church with her husband and children, but they do not keep a flag in the house, they have kept toy guns away from their three boys, and, if there were a draft, she would take her sons to Canada in a minute.

Although I will always be proud of my Quaker heritage, over time I found my complicated life needed more than the secular musings that silent worship allowed. I joined a mainstream Protestant church because the service centered on the complexities of Biblical narrative, which, in my study of literature, I had come to see as central to the vision of most writers who spoke truth to me. The young woman minister seemed to know what Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner, and Flannery O'Connor had taught me: That we are all Christ and we are all crucified; but we can easily become the crucifiers—usually in the name of a religion or philosophy.

I have learned some things which I hope make me a more alert parent and constructive citizen. I have learned that religion, even pacifism, can be blind-sided. I have learned that a child imitates a parent even though the parent thinks they have offered the child free choice. I have learned that some truths I once held as self-evident just aren't. And I have learned that to truly understand an issue, one must genuinely imagine how others come to totally different conclusions. I came to understand that many people—even some, like Butch, who go to war—also believe that "there is that of God in every person." And I learned that to live as I once thought a Quaker should—to be proudly "in the world but not of it," sometimes inhibits one from participating in crucial parts of our

democracy—in legislatures, boardrooms, and public school systems, for example.

Most important, I have lost my faith in unequivocal pacifism—particularly as I discovered how it can suppress healthy anger and as I raise three boys and see what they sometimes face in the schoolyard. There are ideals and there is reality; I choose finally to live somewhere in the middle—both / and, not just either / or. Like my Quaker father, I do keep an American flag on the porch; I did let my sons play with toy guns when they cared about such games; and if there were a draft, I would tell them about Butch who went bravely to war, about my father who bravely fought forest fires as alternative service in WWII, about my cousin who died bravely doing Quaker service in Vietnam, about my neighbor who bravely went to prison in protest of the draft, about a boyfriend who resisted the draft and bravely went to Canada for good, and about my many friends who, in the face of such a questionable war, understandably went to college instead. Now, I would have to tell my sons, like all of them, you must choose which role model fits you.

Beth Taylor is a former journalist and arts council writer-in-residence who received her Ph.D. at Brown University and taught at Harvard. She now teaches creative nonfiction in the Expository Writing Program in the Department of English at Brown University. She also teaches “Writing Vietnam” which spawned the conference and website by the same name: <<http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/WritingVietnam/intro.html>>. She is working on a memoir called “Plain Language: A Quaker Crucible.”