

*Nobody Gets Off the Bus: The Viet Nam Generation Big Book*  
Volume 5 Number 1-4  
March 1994

Jesus Was a Gook  
Part I  
By Ron Ridenhour

New Orleans, LA

Gooks. I know, I know. It's a dirty word. When you come right down to it, through, the world is filled with gooks. Gooks, gooks, gooks. The poor motherfuckers are everywhere. Doesn't really matter what you call them, of course. They're there.

I've known them all my life. I just didn't always know it. They knew it, of course. They never forgot. If you're a gook, you know it. It's simple. Nobody lets you forget. Happens in all kinds of ways. But then, that just means that there are all kinds of gooks.

I first came face to face with my own intimate knowledge of gooks in Vietnam. First time I heard the word was on the way to Vietnam. "When you get to Vietnam," one of my first drill sergeants said, "you'll have one job. Killing gooks." Seemed straightforward enough.

By the time I got to Vietnam, just before Christmas 1967, everydambody was talking about killing gooks. Gooks this, gooks that. The gooks, the gooks, the gooks. At first there was some confusion. How did you tell gooks from the good Vietnamese, for instance? After a while it became clear. You didn't have to. All gooks were VC when they were dead.

Understanding that sure took the uncertainty out of things. You could kill 'em all, if you wanted. Well, not literally, at least not literally most of the time. Sometimes, like at My Lai, you really could just waste 'em all. Usually, though, you did have to be more selective. And you did have to say grace over the dead, of course. Looked like a VC to me, sir. Went for something. Figured it was a grenade. Zapped 'im. Not everybody was doing that, but there were plenty who were. Everybody who knew them, knew what was happening. Within a few weeks of its occurrence, for instance, hundreds of American soldiers knew about My Lai. Within three months, thousands knew.

Gooks weren't all on the other side, of course. I had a sergeant, for instance, who was a gook. Actually, he was a Pima Indian. Grew up on a reservation not eighty miles from my family's home in Glendale, Arizona. We got lots of gooks other than Pima Indians, though. Blacks and Mexicans, bunches of other kinds of Indians, for instance. Arizona is part of America.

His name was Juan, Sergeant Juan, and he was the team leader for my first LRRP mission. He was a thin, tawny-skinned man who seemed to know his business. His nickname when I got there — nearly everybody in Nam had a nickname — was "Gook." Made me blink the first time I heard it, but it didn't seem to be any big deal.

It was a strange lot, that first mission. It was me and Juan and four guys who'd been in Lieutenant Calley's platoon at My Lai. Juan — through some confusion, I'm sure — had me take point. Walking point was a heavy responsibility. It was an honor, of however dubious sorts, to be the first man down the trail on a LRRP mission. I eagerly and stupidly accepted the assignment without question. When Juan learned later that day that my combat experience was all earned firing a machine gun from the skid of a chopper, his cheeks turned pale. My taking off without waiting for the rest of them was no accident. I was stupid. Point was too critical to be turned over to a cherry.

We went into the landing zone led by a pair of shark gunships and followed by an empty slick. The LZ was a stinking, abandoned, overgrown rice paddy cupped into the wrinkle beyond the crest of the ridge. A small finger forked north from the ridge there, away from the valley. We'd lifted off from Camp Baldy at daybreak that morning, nosed over and lifted out, floating high above the paddies towards the mountains to the west. Thirty miles from the coast we descended to the treetops and began to wind west along the side of a slender finger of low, jungled hills that wandered along the north side of a huge valley. The valley, a huge green mouth that opened towards the coast until it looked like it might swallow the sea, progressively narrowed away from it, eventually melting into the mountains in the distance, a thin crack in the horizon. It was said to be a major route of gook infiltration west to the coast from the Ho Chi Minh trail.

A few miles past where the first fingers of the mountains stretched east, our ships turned away from the valley floor, popped over a ridge, and dropped into the small rice paddy nested in the cup two-hundred feet below the hill's crest. We were out of the chopper in less than five seconds. Six figures in camouflage, boonie hats, grenade-laden web-belts and full field packs, pounding heavily through thigh-high grass, lumbering toward the relative safety of the jungle at the edge of the paddy. The sharks and trail ship circled once, the insertion bird lifted up to join them and all four peeled out back toward the sea. It was still less than an hour after daylight. It had been a nearly perfect insertion — except for one thing.

There was a cherry on point who didn't know what to do. When we reached cover at the edge of the landing zone, Juan, the second man out, stopped to gather the rest of the team and listen for a moment.

Not me. Nope. When we hit the bush I kept going, moving steadily and quickly, off-trail, toward the crest of the ridge, perhaps a quarter of a mile uphill to the south. I had not gone far, however, when one of the others caught me, and said wait for us, stupid.

Oh yeah, you guys.

It was less than a mile to where Juan wanted to set up our observation post. It was a small, clear spot on the edge of the hill, just over the crest. From it we could look south, into the valley and see a well-worn trail that wound along the base of the hills on the valley floor below us, a gook highway from the mountains to the sea. Perhaps two miles west of us the trail emerged from a line of forest, crossed a half mile of open rice paddies, and then went back into the woods as it wound east along the hill maybe two-hundred feet below us. Our mission was to sit there for four days, maybe five, watch the trail, count the gooks that came down it, and call in some artillery on them — if we had the chance.

It was a tense boredom. We rotated three modes in two-man teams, one team watching the trail, one team watching our back, and one team off-duty. Silence was the rule, especially at night. During the day, though, everybody brought a book to read during their breaks.

My buddy Mike Terry and I were sharing a book, *The Passover Plot*, taking turns reading each successive chapter. Mike was an intensely religious Mormon guy. He had also been the state wrestling champ in his high school weight class — which may have been as much as 133 pounds — and had gone on to a full scholarship at BYU, where he was drafted. He was nineteen. And he was pure. He didn't cuss, discuss women, lie, cheat, steal or speak badly of anyone. It was enough to make most people sick. It did, too. And he wasn't even that sanctimonious about it. Just sort of determinedly innocent. And Mormon. People hated him for his purity — that and the fact that he seemed determined to convert every soul he met to the buoyant, white optimism of the Church of the Latter Day Saints.

So Mike the Mormon and I the atheist spent all our off time that entire mission arguing in whispers about the book and religion. Mike thought maybe he had a potential convert. Me? I just liked to fuck with Mormons. It can happen to you. If you grew up and went to high school in Phoenix, Arizona in the fifties and early sixties, there's a good chance that it did. Everybody went to school with at least one Mormon kid who made it his or her life's work to convert you.

There we were, Mike the Mormon and me. Trying to figure it out. Christ, according to the book, was a clever political activist, a revolutionary whose plan was to fake his own death at the hands of the Roman Empire. Things just got a little out of hand. It was almost predictable. Jesus was a gook. That was his problem. Something like that was bound to happen. He gets up on the cross and some soldier decides to stick him in the side with his spear. It didn't matter. Jesus was a gook. Shit happens to gooks — especially if they get in Caesar's way. Who cared?

I haven't the faintest idea what either of us thought about any of it then, only that we sat in the scrub brush on the side of a hill in Vietnam for five days together, reading

it, and occasionally arguing about what it meant in low, earnest whispers. What did it all mean, anyway?

Sergeant Juan, who was about twenty-three, indulged us as long as he could not hear our whispered argument. The irony of it did not strike me at the time. As Mike and I sat and read and argued in whispers about religion and right and wrong and what it all meant, I already knew that when we got off that hill I was going to ask him about Pinkville. I would not learn its Vietnamese name, My Lai, for another sixteen months, but I knew by then that it was the site of a big massacre.

The pickup choppers came in with the last breath of daylight at the end of the fifth day. There was a big firefight over on the south side of the valley. We had heard it in the distance all day, watching the jets make run after run at something unseen in the jungle at the foot of the far mountains. The occasional lines of North Vietnamese soldiers we had counted trudging along the trail below us were probably there now.

We had seen several groups of NVA on the first day, one of roughly thirty-five men, all well equipped, clad in full uniform and field gear, carrying AK-47s: battle ready. About thirty minutes after the largest group disappeared into the jungle below us Juan called for artillery, ordered in several marking salvos, and zeroed the big guns in on the trail. He must have been too eager. They pretty much stopped coming down the trail after that, as if someone had been watching and knew that we were waiting. That made the next four days a little more tense than they might otherwise have been. Made you wonder if the NVA were out looking for us. They usually were.

But there was another source of tension, too. Juan was beginning to rankle about being called "Gook." Not that he said anything. It was a look. Everybody knew that "Gook" was about to wear out its welcome as a nickname. And it was easy to keep quiet out there. We didn't want the mean gooks with the guns to come and get us.

When the choppers finally scooped us up on the fifth day, it was nearly dark again. We did not make it back to the coast that night, either. We'd been in the air only a few minutes when the pilot changed direction and headed for the nearest firebase, a primitive forward camp that had been gouged into the mouth of the valley. A circle of bunkers and barbed wire less than a quarter mile across, it was the U.S. Army's point fort in the grand plan to staunch the flow of gooks through the valley. The battle on the south side of the valley was part of the plan. Now, our pilots told us, we were going to be dumped there for the night while they headed off as makeshift medevacs. There were some wounded who had to be gotten out now, while there was some light left.

That evening the firebase was a beehive of activity. The GIs fighting the battle a few miles away were laagered there. A couple of companies of grunts, filthy and greasy with sweat, were standing around in clumps, eating from field kitchen trays, talking wearily. The gooks were dug in at the base of the mountains to the south. One company had walked into an ambush there. That was two days ago. Been going on

ever since. We shot the breeze with some of them, grabbed some chow from one of the field kitchens, and decided to turn in.

All the inside space was taken. Terry and I walked out to an outer ring of bunkers near the perimeter, chose one that looked like it had a soft top, climbed up, spread our ponchos and poncho liners and lay down. It would be the first time in five days we would be able to sleep for more than four hours in a row. We were not likely to wake up there in the dark with somebody trying to slit our throats. We could relax. Off in the distance we could hear the sounds of the battle. Not far away a battery of 155s was belching rounds into it. But on top of that bunker it was cool, clear, relatively safe, and you could see every star in the sky. It felt good to come back from a LRRP mission alive.

As we lay there we began to talk about what happened at Pinkville. Mike had been my closest friend in the service. We were drafted on the same day. We were from similar circumstances in some ways. We were both blue-collar, working-class kids, athletes and from the west. For whatever reason, we'd latched onto each other in basic training at Fort Bliss, Texas, and ended up the best of buddies from there all the way to Vietnam. We'd been in the same units every step of the way, from basic, to advanced infantry training at Fort Ord, to jump school at Fort Benning and from there to jungle warfare training at Scholfield Barracks, Hawaii. The only time we were separated was the four months Mike spent in Lt. Calley's platoon in Charlie Company before transferring to LRRPs. I'd been a door gunner in a small helicopter unit during that time. When I transferred into the Americal Division's LRRP company in late April, 1968, Mike had already been there for several weeks.

It was a reunion of sorts, but things had changed. Charlie Company had been through Pinkville by now. Although I knew he'd been there, I did not ask Mike about it right away. I'd heard a couple of versions of the massacre by then — and what Mike had done that day. It was tough stuff. First time I heard it, I didn't believe it, didn't believe he would do what they said he'd done. I would not believe it, I guess, until I'd heard it from him. I thought the odds were higher that I would do what they said Mike had done. Me first. Mike Terry? Never.

Funny, how it sometimes takes forever for the perfectly obvious to crystallize for you. I'd been seeing little murders right along, ever since I'd gotten to Vietnam and started flying light air cover for grunt companies. Sometimes, standing on the skid, flitting along fifty feet above them, you'd actually see some grunt just blow some peasant farmer away. Blip. Blip. Like that. Nothing to it. One VC KIA. Got us a gook, Captain.

In five separate cases I actually saw, the poor bastard who was killed just happened to be home when the grunts arrived. In other instances, we'd fly over moments after some infantry company or Vietnamese patrol had blown holes in a bunch of civilians for no apparent reason. They'd be laying there, three, four, maybe as many as half a

dozen, bleeding and dying, some piece or another of them flopping around in the road. No weapons. Travel was hazardous for gook civilians.

I had even heard two sergeants talking about another smaller massacre a few months earlier. Same thing as My Lai. Lined up a hamlet of perhaps forty people and blew them away. A platoon sergeant from a line company, an E-6, was visiting a buck sergeant whose bunk was next to mine. We'd all been in the same unit together, in Hawaii. The platoon sergeant was telling the buck sergeant a story about how his company had done this massacre of roughly forty women and kids from a small hamlet one night. "Jesus," the buck sergeant said, "how did you shoot women and kids?"

"Just closed my eyes and followed orders," the other guy said.

There was other stuff, too. Even with all of that I had not gotten it. There was a pattern to all this. It was on purpose. The whole plan all along really was to kill a lot of gooks. Didn't really matter who they were. What was happening all around us in Vietnam was not a strategy that went awry, or one that had some unforeseen and regrettable consequences for civilians, but one in which the deliberate military aim was to lay waste the countryside. Yes, yes, kill them all. Let God sort 'em out. The brass knew what they were doing. They knew what we were doing.

It took me a long time to really understand that. I knew the first time I heard the story that My Lai was not some grunt's idea. These dirty motherfuckers, I thought. Look at what they've gotten me into. Funny, the things you think at certain times. How stupid. I had been "into" it for months, of course, but for some reason it never dawned on me just what the "it" I was into was.

It did the night I heard about My Lai for the first time, though, and the story ignited an instantaneous spark of anger that soon grew to rage. I decided that I would track down the story. If it was true, then the chips would land where they fell.

They fell all over two friends. Mike and Billy Daughtery sat down for lunch near the infamous ditch in Pinkville on March 16, 1968 at roughly eleven. We had all been to jump school and at Scholfield Barracks together. Their squad had followed Calley through the village, just as the rest of the platoon had done, shooting people, burning their houses, killing their livestock. By the time Mike and Billy stopped to feast on C-rations, there wasn't much left at Pinkville except live Americans, burning hooches, dead animals and dead Vietnamese — nearly five hundred of them.

Eating must have been difficult. There were dead Vietnamese everywhere. To sit down near the ditch, however, must have been a special horror. For there arose from the ditch a continual, sometimes piercing din, the wailing and thrashing of the wounded. Earlier, somewhere between 9:00 and 9:30, after Charlie Company's first sweep through the hamlet, Lt. Calley ordered his men to round up the rest of the living and bring them to the bank of a ditch at its edge. When somewhere between

two hundred and three hundred people were herded into the ditch in a clump — nearly all of whom were women, children, and old men — Calley ordered his men to open fire. A few soldiers resisted the order, but there were plenty who did not.

## Part II

It took Calley and two dozen grunts fifteen minutes or so to put all the gooks down and silence most of the cries. With that many, of course, it's hard to be really thorough. By the time Mike and Billy hunkered down for lunch an hour later, Calley and his triggermen had moved on and the undead in the ditch had begun to cry out, their limbs flopping about spasmodically, the way the seriously wounded do. It must have been a terrible sound, all that flopping and slapping of flesh, the crying, all that agony out there polluting a now otherwise peaceful morning.

After a certain point, after the pork and beans but before the peaches, Mike and Billy stood, checked their M-16s, and walked down the ditch, dividing up the survivors and finishing them off. Just the two of them, pacing deliberately along the edge of the death pit. There's one moving. Pow. Pow. There's another one. Pow. Up and down the ditch bank once and no one moved any more.

As Mike told me the story, my head felt like it must feel when someone is scalping you alive. Even as it is actually happening, you can't bring yourself to believe it. But yes, yes, yes, he said on every detail. It was all true. He hadn't shot into the people when Calley first had them all crowded into the ditch. That was awful. The whole thing was like a bad dream. "It was like a Nazi kind of thing," he said.

But he made a distinction between what Calley had done at the ditch and the coups de gras he and Billy administered later. The people he and Billy polished off, Mike said, were mercy killings. Those people were going to die anyway. No need for them to suffer. How many were there? He didn't know. A dozen. Maybe two. It was hard to count.

We'd been laying there for nearly an hour then. It was not late. It could not have been past 21:00 hours. We were laying on our sides, looking at each other across a few feet of sandbags. We were both tired. It had been a long, nerve-wracking five days and we had not gotten much sleep. This conversation wasn't going to help any. A long silence hung there after Mike finished the story. I was stunned. Finally, after what seemed forever, I whispered the last question I ever asked him about My Lai.

"Mike, Mike," I asked. "Didn't you know that was wrong?"

"I dunno man," he said and a change came over him. It was as if I saw a wall roll down behind his eyes. "I dunno. It was just one of those things."

He rolled over at that and a few minutes later I could hear the regular hum of his breath. He was asleep. We never talked about My Lai again after that, though we

pulled four more LRRP missions together and finished the remaining seven months of our tours in Vietnam in the same company. We continued to be cordial, but we were not close after that.

My question had taken me over the line, beyond a limit I should not have crossed, a line a friend should have known was there. While we did not yet know it, there would be plenty of time for judges in our lives. Life is filled with them. He did not need me to be his. It seems like such an obvious, stupid question now, in retrospect, but I could not help myself at the time. It was, I thought, such an extraordinary and awful tale, especially for it to come tumbling from the lips of pure, Mormon Mike Terry.

A few days later, back on the beach of the South China Sea at Chu Lai, someone on the team called Juan by his nickname again. "Hey Good," he said. Maybe it was Gruver. It could have been me. "When we going out again?"

Juan turned. Real sudden. Not just pissed. Really pissed.

"Listen motherfucker," he said, a furious, steely anger in his voice, "Don't you ever call me that again! You hear? Don't none of you motherfuckers ever call me that again!"

We didn't. Clearly, it had the potential to be a killing offense. I was, strangely, almost as shocked by Juan's burst of anger that day, in a certain way, as I was by Mike Terry's revelations to me a few days earlier. Perhaps I was a slow learner. It took me years to understand why.

Ten years later, sometime in 1978, a woman came to me. I had been doing some investigative reporting for a local hippie rag in Phoenix for several years by then and people with trouble sometimes found their way to my door. This woman was a Native American, a member of the Pima Tribe. Her son, whose name I do not remember, had been murdered on the reservation. The reservation police wouldn't do anything about it. Yes, they knew who did it — a neighbor her family had been having a running feud with for years.

The next week another reporter and I drove out to the reservation at Sacaton, forty miles east of Phoenix. The woman would show us the scene of the crime, the house of the killer, etc. When we got to her home, it was like a step back through time, back to Vietnam. The house was little more than a hovel, pounded together with bits and pieces of scrap lumber, cardboard and flattened beer cans. It could easily have come out of any refugee slum in a Saigon side-alley or any refugee camp at the height of the war. As we traveled the reservation that day, we came to see that her house was not unusual there. Everyone was so poor it would take your breath away. Most Americans could not comprehend it. It looked nearly identical, to me, to the state of hundreds, thousands of Vietnamese refugees I had seen, people whose entire life's effort had been reduced to a shack and some rags.



So it was in Pima country — flat, desolate and arid — a desert, except for when it is a flood plain. As we drove around the reservation, one of the many that dot Arizona, the woman and her husband would stop every few miles, sometimes every few fields, and point to the place where some relative or friend had died. By that cattle guard, right over there. That's where they found Manuel. He was my cousin. His face was hacked off with an ax. See that old cottonwood, way over there? That's where his brother shot uncle Joe with the shotgun. Most were men. All were murdered or committed suicide. Thirteen of their relatives were on the list — brothers, fathers, sons, uncles, cousins. Yeah, it was clear. These motherfuckers were gooks. No doubt about it. No matter how the government dresses it up, you can always tell by the kill ratios. These people were definitely still gooks.

Sometime during that drive I realized that Sacaton was where Sgt. Juan had grown up. He had not needed us to tell him about being a gook. He already knew. His people have been gooks for a long time.

The theaters have changed now, of course. We no longer call it Vietnam — because it is not. It is a new, much grander era. It might be called the era of perpetual internal warfare: the Perpetual War. America's military and foreign policy apparatus is its hub — the driving, organizing, controlling center of an international security state. The Vietnam war never really went away: the tiger simply rearranged its stripes, changed its name — and grew. Its mechanisms of political control were also extended home, but that is a story for another time.

Today, in Latin America, the U.S. pays for and sponsors "Vietnamized" wars of one kind or another in roughly half the countries from Mexico south. Every one of the drug war countries, for instance, is currently involved in some variation of a Vietnam-style counterinsurgency campaign. Some are disguised as "drug wars," others as counterinsurgency campaigns separate from simultaneous drug wars, or as in El Salvador and Nicaragua, as an outright counterinsurgency or insurgency operation. Each country has a MILGROUP, the modern variation on MACV, boatloads of traveling TDY (temporary duty) advisors, American military and/or drug war aid, and tons of American training. Other similar wars are also being waged in Africa and Asia.

In every case, amazingly enough, the enemy happen to be citizens, usually large numbers of them, who oppose the government we support. Gooks, I guess you'd say.

In each of those countries the tools, the tactics and the techniques of the Vietnam war are at work. The Pentagon calls it Low Intensity Conflict: Pentagon packaging of the same old thing. Richard Wright, the Assistant Commander of the School of the Americas (the U.S. Army training school for Latin American military leaders) said in an interview that LIC is nothing more than a sanitized version of counterinsurgency.

Because few allegations of direct U.S. involvement in Vietnam war-style atrocities surface in the pages of America's newspapers, however, there is not much press or public interest in the perpetual war. The U.S. is nevertheless still orchestrating the slaughter of gooks throughout the world. Massacres, assassinations, disappeared ones, forced relocation of the rural poor, government "secure" zones, death squads, the torture of prisoners, the labeling of any and all opposition as "terrorists" — all have a familiar ring.

Call it Nixon's revenge. It is Vietnamization that seems to work. We provide the money, the guns, the strategies, and plenty of on-the-scene advisors to our friends, the good gooks. They in turn steal most of the money, do the dirty work on the bad gooks, and if someone gets caught, take all the blame. A whole continent with gooks on one side and potential Lt. Calleys on the other. Gooks and Lt. Gooks. What could be more perfect in a world of perpetual war?

The Perpetual War will be bigger than the Vietnam war. And longer, of course. It already stretches from Mexico south to Bolivia, a reach that covers eleven countries. If this entire region is looked at as one theater of operations, with each country the equivalent of a U.S. Army Corps such as I Corps in Vietnam, and each ambassador as a Corps level provincial military advisor, then the drug war suddenly starts looking a whole lot like a real war — a real big war.

Some Corps are quieter within the Latin American theater, of course, but there is still plenty of action. If all the war news from each of the eleven Corps of the Drug War were ballyhooed and concentrated by America's daily newspapers the way the war news from the Gulf War was, how much space would the Perpetual War take?

Too much. All the news — let's face it — is not fit to print. Some of it is R-rated: too strong for the stomachs of discerning adults.

It's funny how people are. I never heard Mike Terry say the word "gook." If you'd have called him a racist, he would have denied it with the purest conscience. Sometimes I wonder, though, what Mike would have done if the people in that ditch at My Lai had been Mormons, white Mormons? Would he have put them out of their misery? Maybe, but I doubt it.

That's kind of the way it is with the people trapped in the Perpetual War. We only catch occasional glimpses of the victims moaning from the ditch during our lunch. The audible sound of human agony is less obtrusive for us than it was for Mike and Billy that day at My Lai.

We don't actually hear them. We still do not feel compelled to make a choice. Instead, we turn the page on the three-inch story at the back of the news section in the New York Times, down at the bottom just before the crossword puzzles begin, and barely have a second thought about the massacre of more villagers in some remote spot in some Latin American country. It doesn't even dawn on us that we're

leaving them all to die in the ditch. Perhaps, if they were white Mormons, people would be pissed.

*Ron Ridenhour was instrumental in bringing public and media attention to the My Lai massacre.*

*Texts made available by the Sixties Project, are generally copyrighted by the Author or by Viet Nam Generation, Inc., all rights reserved. These texts may be used, printed, and archived in accordance with the Fair Use provisions of U.S. Copyright law. These texts may not be archived, printed, or redistributed in any form for a fee, without the consent of the copyright holder. This notice must accompany any redistribution of the text. A few of the texts we publish are in the public domain. For information on a specific text, contact Kalí Tal. The Sixties Project, sponsored by Viet Nam Generation Inc. and the Institute of Advanced Technology in the Humanities at the University of Virginia at Charlottesville, is dedicated to using electronic resources to provide routes of collaboration and make available primary and secondary sources for researchers, students, teachers, writers and librarians interested in the 1960s.*