

From Marine to Priest, One Man's Path to God

By Charles Cadwallader

Not everyone goes from professional assassin and interrogator in the United States Marine Corps to an ordained Episcopal priest, but John Ferguson did.

Ferguson's story began when he was approached by a couple friends in college who told him that he should join the United States Marine Corps.

"Hell yes," was the typical response from Ferguson who wasn't planning on going to graduate school for anything and had been set to go into the navy before his friends had come to him.

So in 1966, soon after graduation, Ferguson was in Detroit, Michigan taking his oath of service and enlisting in the United States Marine Corps.

Ferguson was then off to Quantico, Virginia to attend the USMC Officer Candidate School, in the hopes of taking a commission as a 2nd Lieutenant.

"I refused to quit," said Ferguson, even though OCS wasn't always easy, especially after he gave his platoon commander a piece of his mind, in the form of a few choice words.

After the ten weeks at Quantico, Ferguson's OCS class completed the course; however, Ferguson was one of the inevitable few who aren't offered commissions.

Ferguson left OCS as a corporal; he remembers when a fellow marine asked a non-commissioned officer what their chances were of going to Vietnam. The NCO replied, "Somewhere between excellent and perfect."

Before Ferguson could ship out he was sent to Camp Pendleton to complete training at the Basic School. As a corporal, Ferguson was made the platoon commander of his platoon during basic training.

One day he was called down to the company First Sergeant who gave him a stern look and asked him, "Who the hell are you?"

Ferguson was stunned as he simply replied, "What?"

"Who the hell are you?" the First Sergeant asked again, "You have a set of hand-signed orders, and I haven't seen a set of hand-signed orders since Vietnam started."

Off Ferguson went to Vietnam, he was to report to "15 CIT" or the 15th Counter-Intelligence Team in the USMC.

When Ferguson got in country someone looked at his orders and said simply, "You're going north."

Ferguson asked how far and the marine told him, "As far as you can go."

At the 3rd Marine Division Forward base in northern Vietnam, which was little more than a prison compound, living quarters and an out-door mess hall, Ferguson reported in and was issued his weapons.

Later Ferguson said he was approached by a warrant officer who said that Ferguson would probably want to know what was going on.

The officer explained that currently as a warrant officer, he was the temporary team commander for the 15th CIT, while they waited for an officer to come take command.

Next the mission of the marine counter-intelligence team was explained to Ferguson; "neutralize the Viet Cong infrastructure in their area of operation."

Ferguson was clear on what the job was, find out who was a member of the VC and then eliminate them.

At first Ferguson wasn't part of the interrogations, "I did a lot of clerical work, documenting VC atrocities and stuff," he said.

After a few months of working with the CIT, Ferguson began participating in the interrogations, which included roughing people up. "I'm not a violent person," said Ferguson, but he participated regardless, though finding it difficult to be "violent on demand."

How does someone who is doing this sort of work every day make a change and become an ordained minister?

For Ferguson the change came about eight months into his tour of duty in Vietnam.

US forces had captured a VC colonel and had turned him over to the 15th CIT for interrogation.

"He had been tortured by the Japanese and French forces before us," said Ferguson, "there wasn't anything we could really do to make him talk."

The unit attempted its job regardless, interrogating the colonel in shifts so that they could keep up a constant interrogation.

After finishing his shift, Ferguson said that he went outside and sat down on a sandbag wall while he watched the sun go down and smoked his pipe.

That was when it hit him, Ferguson thought to himself, "I don't want to do this for the rest of my life."

Then as if a screen saver had activated in his head, he began to see a scrolling text in his mind saying, "I want you to be a priest."

Ferguson went to a traveling chaplain to ask for advice about becoming a priest but was turned away as the chaplain told him he was too defiled by his work to ever consider becoming a minister.

"So I didn't [consider it]," Ferguson said, "but it kept going through my head."

Soon after Ferguson was approached by a gunnery sergeant who asked him what was wrong, because, the sergeant explained, Ferguson seemed distracted and the sergeant was worried that people would get killed because Ferguson wasn't paying attention.

Without being sure what to say Ferguson told the sergeant what was going through his head.

The sergeant looked at Ferguson and said, "I don't know anything about God, but I need to think about this."

Two weeks later the sergeant found Ferguson and talked to him, "I really think you should pursue it," said the sergeant.

From then on, said Ferguson the gunnery sergeant kept him out of the worst of the interrogations, not because the sergeant thought Ferguson wouldn't do his job, but because he didn't want him to defile himself any further.

Ferguson wrote a letter to the bishop of western Michigan who replied back basically saying that if Ferguson lived through Vietnam, then he should come see the bishop.

He lived and nine months after leaving Vietnam he was enrolled in seminary.

Seminary wasn't cake either because not only was most everyone against the war, Ferguson was too at this point, but because according to Ferguson a large portion of the people in seminary were just using it to defer the draft.

Ferguson completed seminary and was ordained as a minister in the Episcopal faith.

Now, nearly 40 years after his return from Vietnam, Ferguson works with veterans who suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Most of the people he works with now are veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Ferguson, who suffers from PTSD himself, began his work as a PTSD counselor because as he traveled to different places there would be people who would ask him to speak to veterans.

He never got the chance to really do a lot of work with the veterans because he'd go to a conference, work with a few vets, but then he'd leave and not come back for a year. So when he returned any progress they had made would have been lost.

There are a great many US veterans with PTSD, as Fergusson quoted a study on PTSD which stated that during the first tour of duty the chances of a soldier getting PTSD are about 25-30%, if they go on a second tour the chances go up to 65-70%, and if they go on a third tour the chances rise to 100%.

Once an assassin for the United States Marine Corps, Fergusson now counsels the brave men and women who have served their country and preaches as a local Episcopal priest.