Twelve Days in Viet Nam:

The Life and Death of Nicholas Conaxis

Alex Liazos

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In memory of

Ourania and Stavros Conaxis, Nick's parents;

Bill Beckler, Nick's and my friend;

All the people who died in the Vietnam War,

Vietnamese and Americans

With love and affection, for my grandchildren

Aleco

Cole

Georgia

Rowan

Marcelo

Contents

Acknowledgments

It all started in 1968, when Bill Beckler sent me copies of four letters Nick had written him.

Through three decades, Eric Bogle's words and music provided inspiration, and reminders of the horrors of war.

Stacia talked with me in 2006 and opened a window on Nick's struggles and accomplishments.

And in December 2010, Janis Ian's song about Vietnam, "The Last Train," became the spark that gave me the strength to begin this book.

The following people made the book possible. They shared their memories of Nick during interviews and at other times; sent me emails; shared letters Nick wrote them and other materials; and helped in many other ways, all explained in various chapters and in Appendix B.

I am deeply grateful to them. It's impossible to thank them adequately.

They may or may not agree with my views and conclusions about Nick or the Vietnam War, or with Nick's views on the War and other matters.

I apologize if, inadvertently, I left out the name of anyone who helped me during the research for the book.

The list below is alphabetical.

Jon Aldridge
Eugene Alexander
Bill Beckler
Judy Beckler
Eric Bogle
Norbert Brauner
Brad Brooks
Jack Carey
Joan Colligan

Ethel Conaxis
Jimmy Conaxis
Lee DeSorgher
Barbara Dowds
Linda Duffy
Cornelius (Connie) Duggan
Bob Erickson
Peter Evers
Stefanie Farrell
Gordon Fellman
Ted Fitzpatrick
Sheila Frankel
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Bob Golding
Marsha Greenberg
Kevin Groden
Barbara Gurczak
David Hardy
Janis Ian
Steven Kenney
Larry Kneeland
Jerry Lembcke
Tasha Lingos
Tony Lorusso
Armando Lujan
Andrea Murdock
Dennis Nolfi
Gwen O'Brien
Virginia Porter
Larry Richard
David Slaney
Linda Smith
Lee Stevens
Jeff Storey
Florence Sundquist
Bob Turco
Rich VanWart

Louis (Tee) Verrochi
Emily Wagner (Burnett)
Nancy Walsh
Max Wells
Doug Wiley
Stacia Xerras (Conaxis) and Killy Xerras

In the telling of Nick's story and in Appendix B you will read how each person helped tell that story. Here I would like to say a few words about the contributions of some of the people named above.

Stacia Xerras, Nick's sister, not only talked with me many times, she also allowed me to copy all the letters and other material she has from Nick and about Nick.

Jimmy Conaxis, Nick's brother, shared memories of his childhood years with Nick in various foster homes, especially with the Nixons in Rowley, MA. He and Stacia gave me a copy of Nick's social work records during his years as a foster child, which shed light on Nick's childhood and later life.

Nick's friend Tasha Lingos kept all of the letters Nick wrote her from military training and Vietnam. She sent me copies of almost all of them. In addition, we had a number of talks and she sent me helpful emails.

Nick's friend Marsha Greenberg also kept Nick's letters from military training and Vietnam and sent me copies. During phone talks and email exchanges she shed light on Nick's year in Cambridge, MA.

Jerry Lembcke discussed the project with me in 2006 and then in 2011. He made useful suggestions and encouraged me to undertake the research for the book.

Sheila Frankel gathered the material from Nick's years as a foster child and advised I wait patiently for it. That material made the telling of Nick's story more complete and much richer.

Stefanie Farrell transcribed accurately the taped interviews.

My friend David Slaney talked many times with me about the research and he read the first draft of the book. My friend Barbara Dowds was my unpaid research consultant. Almost daily we talked about the interviews I was conducting and my thoughts and worries about the research. She also read the first draft of the book. I

followed most of the suggested changes David and Barbara made on that first draft.

Leslie Cohen, my copy editor, made many suggestions and raised questions that improved the book considerably. She is not responsible for the suggestions I did not follow.

For permissions to reprint material:

Thanks to Eric Bogle, for his permission to include lyrics from his songs.

Thanks to Christian Appy, for permission to print passages from his book *Patriots.*

And thanks to Janis Ian for permission to print the lyrics to "The Last Train." Copyright 2005 Janis Ian/Rude Girl Publishing (BMI). The title of Chapter 7, "Many a Young Boy Who Won't Come Back," is taken from a line in "The Last Train."

Important Notes to Read Before Chapter 1

1. I wrote the book as I think Nick would have written it about himself. He would not have hidden his mischief, mistakes, and struggles. He was beginning to confront them in his letters from military training in 1967-68. That he wrote such sensitive, honest, and loving letters; that he showed kindness to many people; that he was a character all day long and brought joy to those around him – all are testaments to the person he became despite the anxiety and insecurity life dealt him.

2. In childhood and even later, Nick was often called "Nicky." I call him Nick because that is the name he signed to almost all his letters. In all references to the country of Vietnam, Nick wrote it "Viet Nam," so I decided to use that form in the book's title.

3. Maria Nixon was Nick and Jimmy's foster mother for eleven years. That is not her real name, however, and does not refer to any real person who may have that name.

4. For this book, I chose to print all of Nick's letters are printed in *Lucida Handwriting*. I hope this typeface gives a feeling of the letters he wrote in longhand. Also: except in correcting a few obvious spelling mistakes, and creating paragraph breaks because Nick usually wrote his letters in one long paragraph, I have changed nothing in his letters. For example, Nick often used multiple exclamation points and question marks, such as !?!. I have kept his style in this and other matters. Many letters are printed in their entirety, and I have included some parts of almost all his other letters. In all letters, I have taken out personal and private comments, but that does not diminish the content of his letters.

5. When I use the exact words people spoke during interviews or wrote in emails, *I use Italic print, to avoid the annoying use of quotation marks.* I do use quotation marks when I refer to other sources. The idea to use italics came to me after I read Carol Stack's book *Call to Home*, where she uses italics when she quotes people she interviewed.

6. I quote at length from materials the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families sent to Jimmy and Stacia, Nick's brother and sister. They are reports, letters, and other items from the days Nick was a foster child and ward of the state, from 1948 to 1966. The department was then called the Division of Child Guardianship, DCG. When referring to or quoting from these materials, I will simply indicate they come from DCG.
   The reports and letters are a rich source of information, but they are probably an incomplete story of Nick's childhood, and may be mistaken sometimes.

7. In 2011-12, when I interviewed people, they were remembering events from forty-three to sixty years earlier. Everyone did their best, but memories are fragile, wear out, and sometimes are embellished, diminished, or changed over time. Everyone commented on the fragility of their memories. Nevertheless, people's stories do include much information about Nick and tell us the essence of his life.

8. From September 1967 to July 1968, I visited Longview Farm,where Nick lived from 1961 to 1965, usually four days a week, from four to eight hours a day. I took detailed notes immediately after each visit, and I use some of them in this book. (For more details, see appendix B.)

9. Nick's story ends with chapter 8. I hope you go on to read the epilogue and the two appendices that follow it.

10. I did not follow the academic practice of indenting long quotations. They would have been distracting.

Twelve Days in Viet Nam:

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1

"It's Very Sad, War is Sad": Letters from Vietnam

Nicholas S. Conaxis is one of the 58,271 names listed on the Vietnam War Memorial Wall in Washington, on Panel 55E Line 007.

NICHOLAS S. CONAXIS
PRIVATE FIRST CLASS
A BTRY, 6TH BN, 29TH ARTILLERY, 4TH INF DIV, USARV
ARMY OF THE UNITED STATES
FRANKLIN, MASSACHUSETTS
AUGUST 06, 1947 TO MAY 05, 1968

(Nick never lived in Franklin, as we will see later.)

During his twelve days in Vietnam, April 23 to May 5, 1968, Nick wrote letters to at least four people: his sister Stacia, William Beckler (an older friend), Tasha Lingos, and Marsha Greenberg. With individual variations, they contained the same reflections about his life as a soldier in Vietnam.

Below are those he wrote to Bill Beckler, which I first read in the fall of 1968. All are undated.

Dear Bill:

Presently I am at Cam Rayn Bay amid a drenching monsoonal rain and a nearly tangible degree of anticipation. The rain goes unheeded as thoughts are directed to and about the War. The war still remains remote as we are in a very secure place. However within 2 days I will be an active participant in an event that is the American way of life. The topography is resort like, with sandy shores and gently sloping mountains surrounding the bay. Sadly the war detracts immensely from its intrinsic beauty. Civilians work at the base with robot like efficiency. Amazing the energy generated by such tiny creatures. The women are particularly vain, or at least much more vain than I would have expected. This, I am sure, is a result of sex-starved and imposing G.I.'s.

Cold water, canned milk and outhouses are a way of life which will take some time to get accustomed to. These inconveniences are mitigated somewhat by a lack of emphasis on military courtesy. An imminence of death results in unprecedented equality. There is a syntheticness to the closeness but regardless there is very little rank pulled. Mail will be essential to morale and virtually the only unbiased news media. I purchased some more of [Bertrand] Russell's works. I'm sure if the army realized that he presented a very serious proposal for the trial of [President] Johnson as a war criminal they would be quick to deprive me of some very interesting literature!!

Underground publications are strictly prohibited, a reminder of our supposed freedom of press!! I am confident everything will be fine.

Please write.

Love Nick

Dear Bill,

Just a brief note to keep you abreast of the developments. Tomorrow we proceed to our units in the central highlands near the Cambodian border. Naturally stories differ according to each narrator, but I'm confident it isn't as bad as some people say. We went on patrol yesterday and encountered some Montagnards (aborigines). I bought this fantastic hand made pipe for $5. This is relatively high but I am certain it brings an interesting heritage and certainly held a great deal of sentimental value for the old man. He was reluctant to sell it (he was smoking it at the time) but finally relented.

The natives are pitiful, asceticism is an unquestioned way of life. Infant mortality is high and various diseases infect the majority of the population. This country doesn't need soldiers it needs social workers. I became attached to some small children and ended up giving away half of my rations and any trinkets I could scrounge. They react readily to any kindness and are very grateful. The elders by their knowledge of the value of money aren't as authentic but still very pitiful. Nudity is very prevalent with the only clothes they own being military items or rags. It's very sad, war is sad and I'm wet - Monsoon has started. Please write.

Love, Nick

Dear Bill,

I'm currently at Pleiku and war becomes a stark reality of piercing fear and unmitigated discomfort. The agony of human suffering can only be comprehended after a direct involvement. Vivid war stories by wounded G.I.'s inspire awe and then a deep feeling of sympathy for the wounded and dead. These mentions aren't intended to

spur concern for my plight because I am alive and have all my limbs.

Water is rationed making showers a coveted luxury. My last shower was better than a week ago. I manage to keep my teeth clean but the rest of my body is rotting away. The dirt blankets the area with a dingy film and a too deep breath I think would be lethal. The food is comparable to Hayes Bickford with very little fresh produce. For my birthday [August 6] I could use some canned fruit!! It is only tolerable because I am thankful I am not in infantry. It is impossible to over emphasize the value of mail. Remind the twins to write if they have time.

My being here further reminds me of the value of an education, not only for personal betterment but more so to preclude having to be here. Each day seems to be one of philosophic rationalization, while never totally engrossing myself in the war effort. I've talked to many short-timers who have changed from anti-war to pro war. I am convinced it is merely because they have completed their tour and are anticipating praise for their valour!?! I can honestly say I wouldn't want anyone here even though I have to be. This reversal seems a little feeble to me, almost like many of last year's Red Sox fans!! It also makes me wonder about demonstrators. If they weren't subject to the draft I doubt if they would be such active participants.

Well Bill No news except the war. Please write and give my regards to Mary, the twins, and Longview.

Nick

To the right is a copy of one of these letters in Nick's own handwriting.

Dear Bill,

Presently I am at Cam Rayn Bay amid a drenching monsoonal rain and a nearly tangible degree of anticipation. The rain goes unheeded as thoughts are directed to and about the War. The war still remains remote as we are in a very secure place. However within 2 days I will be an active participant in an event that is the American way of life. The topography is resort like, with sandy shores and gently sloping mountains surrounding the bay. Sadly the war detracts immensely from its intrinsic beauty. Civilians work on the base with robot-like efficiency. Amazing the energy generated by such tiny creatures. The women are particularly vain, or at least much more vain than I would have expected. This, I am sure, is a result of sex-starved and imposing G.I.'s. Cold water, canned

milk and outhouses are a way of life which will take some time to get accustomed to. These inconveniences are mitigated somewhat by a lack of emphasis on military courtesy. An imminence of death results in unprecedented equality. There is a syntheticness to this closeness but regardless there is very little rank pulled. Mail will be essential to morale and also virtually the only unbiased news media. I purchased some more of Russells works. I'm sure if the army realized that he has presented a very serious proposal for the trial of Johnson as a war criminal they would be quick to deprive me of some very interesting literature!! Underground publications are strictly prohibited, a reminder of our supposed freedom of press!! Well am confident everything will be fine. Please write

Love Nick

In a letter he wrote to his sister Stacia from Vietnam on May 1, 1968, he closed with these words:

It's very real over here and I must admit I'm scared shit. I hope the year flies. (I read this letter in November 2011.)

I first read the letters to Bill in the fall of 1968. I have never forgotten them. As I read them now, forty-four years later, I can remember the passages that made me stop and think, that changed the course of my life in some important ways: His concern and care for the children; his reflection that the people of Vietnam needed social workers, not soldiers; his understanding of the limits of freedom in the army; his critical reflections on the war, especially that working-class men were fighting it; and so much else.

In my dissertation in 1970, I said that the letters were "a shock of recognition for me. The more I read them, the more they moved me… I can say that those four letters were the most important influence in the writing of this report." (The fourth letter to Bill is found in chapter 6.) Nick's letters did not introduce me to information and ideas I did not know. Critiques of the Vietnam War were prevalent in the 1960s. I had already been to anti-war demonstrations. But his words, his actions, and his death added a deep emotional impact on me. The horrors of the war became more real and more personal.

Here, then, is a short history of how this book came about. (For more details, see Appendix B.)

From 1964 to 1970 I was a graduate student of sociology at Brandeis University in Waltham, MA. In 1967 I had to decide on a topic for my dissertation. With the approval of the dissertation committee, I decided to research and write about the Longview Farm for Boys, in Walpole, MA. Longview was a small residential group home for about twenty boys from thirteen to eighteen years old. They were classified as "emotionally disturbed," but they were essentially boys from dysfunctional or absent families, and most had committed only minor crimes.

The New England Home for Little Wanderers, which operated Longview Farm, and William Beckler, the director of Longview, agreed that I would be allowed to spend time at the home to observe and talk with the boys and staff.

So, from September 1967 to July 1968, spent from four to eight hours at Longview during four days of each week. I kept careful daily notes of each visit.

In early May 1968, word came that Nicky Conaxis, who had lived at Longview from 1961 to 1965, had been killed in Vietnam on May 5. For the next few days many people at Longview who had known Nick, especially Bill Beckler who had been very close to him during his stay, were devastated. I decided not to attend the funeral on May 21, for reasons I explain in Appendix B.

I moved to New Haven, CT in September 1968 to teach at Quinnipiac College (now University). Sometime that fall I either wrote or called Bill to ask him if he could send me anything I might use in writing about the boys, their stay at Longview, and its effect on their lives. He sent me copies of fifteen letters from former and current residents of Longview. Among them were four from Nick, the three you read above and another letter Nick wrote Bill in March 1968 (printed and discussed in chapter 6).

In the fall of 1968, the protests against the war in Vietnam were escalating. Many college students, among them Quinnipiac College ones, were becoming more opposed to the war and participating in various protest actions. I joined in many of these actions. It was in this social climate that the letters came to me. They forced me to change what I was planning to write about Longview and the boys. I had planned to write, and did write, about daily life at the home, the boys' relationships with their families (usually struggles to reconnect with parents), and boys-staff interactions. But Nick's letters showed that to understand what shaped the boys' lives I needed to look outside Walpole and Longview. (See Appendix B for an elaboration of this point.)

I went on to teach at Quinnipiac College from 1968 to 1971. I moved to Massachusetts and began teaching at Regis College in September 1971. I don't remember now how often I thought of Nick and the letters during the 1970s and early 1980s. Teaching, children, visiting my family in Albania in 1980, a divorce, and other matters preoccupied me.

Then came April 1985. Many of us took an overnight bus from Watertown, MA (where I lived then) to Washington to protest U.S. involvement in the civil war in Nicaragua. Early in the day, before the

protest march began, a friend and I decided to visit the Vietnam War memorial wall, she to look up a friend and I to look up Nick. I wrote an account of the visit in a column for the *Watertown Sun* of April 11, 1990. (See Appendix B for the full text.) In "A Tribute to Nicky Conaxis," I quoted parts of the three letters from Vietnam and talked about what they had taught me. I concluded:

"In April of 1985 I rode the bus all night to Washington, DC, to join thousands of others to protest the Reagan administration's support of the Contras who were killing children and older people in Nicaragua. Before we began the long march to the Capitol I visited the Vietnam Memorial. As I moved slowly towards Nicky's name, I was overcome by the tragedy of his death, and I cried and sobbed, silently. I stood staring at his name, thinking of the sharing of his food with the children and of the dead children in Nicaragua and of my being in Washington that day. I stood there for a long time. I felt his presence near me. At last I had come to know Nicky Conaxis."

Since 1990, almost every year on Memorial Day I read Nick's letters again, read the column I wrote, and listen to Eric Bogle's "No Man's Land" and "And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda," two powerful songs against all wars and the deaths of young men. "No Man's Land" tells the story of Bogle's visit to a cemetery in France where thousands of young men killed during World War I are buried. Facing the grave of William McBride, Bogle says:

Well how d' you do
Private Willie McBride
Do you mind if I sit here
Down by your grave side?...
And did you leave a wife
Or a sweetheart behind?
In some faithful heart
Is your memory enshrined?
And though you died
Back in nineteen sixteen,
To that loyal heart
Are you forever nineteen?

Thirteen years later I wrote a second column about Nick. It was sparked by the war in Iraq and my participation in a protest against that war on April 5, 2003. I entitled it "Forever Nineteen," but the editor of the *Watertown TAB* changed it to "Another cruel and senseless war is happening" (April 11, 2003). (See Appendix B for the text of that column.) I included parts of Nick's letters again, and I turned to Eric Bogle's "No Man's Land":

Did you really believe them
When they told you the cause?
Did you really believe
That this war would end all wars?
Well the suffering, the sorrow, the glory, the shame
The killing, the dying, it was all done in vain.
For Willie McBride, it all happened again,
and again, and again, and again, and again.

Sometime in the late 1990s I began thinking of writing a biography of Nick. The first mention was in an application for a sabbatical leave (a half year with pay, without any teaching duties, and devoted to research and writing) from Regis College. Instead I began writing a sociology text during the 1999 leave.

But Nick has never left my thoughts and plans since then. At the end of each academic year, faculty typically write an annual report of their work over the past year and their research and writing plans for the next few years. Usually I mentioned my hopes of writing a biography of Nick.

In 2006, as I was nearing retirement, it seemed a good time to finally write about Nick. Bob Erickson, veterans' agent for the town of Watertown, found an address and phone number for Stacia Xerras, Nick's older sister, in Peabody, MA. We talked on the phone in early August 2006, and we met at her house for dinner on August 14. It was during that visit that I first learned of Nick's family history and his life in foster homes before he went to live at Longview Farm for Boys in Walpole, MA, in 1961. (See below for an outline of his life.) For reasons I explain in Appendix B, I did not pursue the project in 2006. Primarily, teaching and grandchildren took all my time and energy.

In May 2007 I retired from teaching, with two projects in mind (in addition to spending time with my grandchildren). One was to learn more about Colin Turnbull's *The Forest People*, a book I loved and used in my classes for forty years. (For what I wrote, see turnbullandthembuti.pbworks.com.) The other was about Nick. Even though I finished *The Forest People* project in 2009, it took two more years before I would start the research on Nick's life.

And it took a song, Janis Ian's "The Last Train," to provide the spark I needed. On December 7, 2010, a little before noon, I was going to pick up my grandson Aleco at his school. As I was driving I was listening to WUMB in Boston. I did not pay attention to the beginning of the song, but then something turned my attention to the lyrics about Vietnam. I pulled over to the side of the road, listened to the rest of the song, and wrote down the title and singer. The words and the music were haunting, and for me will always remain haunting.

That evening I went to Janis Ian's website and listened to The Last Train many times. I bought the CD and played it daily for months. The music, the words, the memory of Nick would not leave me.

How long, how long has this train been gone?
Was there a man who asked for me?
I thought he'd wait to say so long
I'm later than I meant to be

The station master closed his eyes
Said – My dear, the trains are gone
Though forty years ago this night
the last train left for Viet Nam

She said – My hair is lit with gray
No roses bloom upon my lips
it seems like only yesterday
he graced me with a lover's kiss

Then in the distance, thunder pealed
A whistle pierced the cricket's song
and you could see the sparks and the wheels
of the last train back from Viet Nam

It stopped just long enough to board
and as she ran, time set her free
A young man helped her through the door
and said – I knew you would wait for me

There's many a young boy who won't come back
Many a young girl who waits alone
Sometimes they meet on life's long track
They board that last train and go home

The words and music I heard that cold December day have never left me, especially the last four lines. I think of them, and Nick, daily. I don't think I would have written this book had I not heard "The Last Train." To appreciate this book, the consequences of the Vietnam War, and Nick's life, you might listen to Janis Ian before you read on. Just go to her website, Janisian.com, click "Listening room," and it's in the CD *Folk Is the New Black.*

On Sunday morning, May 8, 2011, finally I began the research. I went on the Internet and googled "Nicholas S. Conaxis." There were about fifty hits, most of them listings of his military service and death. But I also came across remembrances of and tributes to Nick. People wrote on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund website and other places.

Virginia Porter, a classmate from Nick's 1965 Walpole High School class, wrote twice.

On June 24, 2006, she wrote:

Problems of Democracy was my favorite class and you were the most thoughtful guy who always made the best point… You paid the ultimate for the "Problems of Democracy."

On May 5, 2010, she said:

Hi Nick. Wanted to say hello today, May 5. On this day in 1968 they say 187 service members made the ultimate sacrifice. You were not alone then and you are remembered with them today. Ginni.

Tasha Lingos' words were a striking reminder of "The Last Train." She wrote on February 28, 2003:

My Dearest Nick – Hopefully our lives together continue into eternity. Loveth Forever Tasha

Ted Fitzpatrick, a friend and football teammate, said on July 3, 2002:

Thank you for your true blue friendship, Nick, and for giving "the last full measure of devotion" that President A. Lincoln spoke of. You're young forever.

And Andrea Murdock, a friend, wrote on June 11, 1999:

Funny Nick. Always good for a practical joke. Dear friend and partner in "crime." When you left Boston, my heart went with you. In my memory you will always be young and handsome and full of hell.

A few days later I found remembrances on other websites. Linda Smith, another classmate, on August 17, 2002, wrote on thewall-usa website:

remember the smile, the glint, in his eye. a friend to all. Warmth of spirit, love of life. so sad, to see this go, in the space of a moment. Gone, but never forgotten. A memory, to hold on to.

Eugene Alexander, who was in basic training at Fort Jackson, SC with Nick in the fall of 1967, writing as "Alex44" on the footnote.com website, said:

To my good friend from basic – Nicky – I just found out. You were a class act and I'm so sorry that you couldn't live a longer life. I know you are in a better place – at peace & with a big smile on your face!! Rest in Peace, brave friend.

When I talked with Alexander in July 2011, he said that Nick *got us through basic training with his jokes.*

When I read these memories and tributes to Nick I knew that I needed to find people who knew him, to find more letters he wrote, in order to understand his life and death. Thus began my journey of discovery. The following is a summary of that journey. (For more details, see Appendix B.)

There were two important limits and problems in my search.

1. People suggested I talk to some other friends of Nick's. Some of them I could not find, and some that I did find did not respond to letters and phone calls.
2. People who talked with me were very cooperative, but all pointed out that they could not remember fully and clearly events and experiences of fort to sixty years ago. But some memories were clear and vivid, as you'll see.

People could not recall many dates and places, but they all did their best to remember. Here is an outline summary of Nick's life. It covers the major points in his life.

- Nick's parents, Ourania and Stephen (Stavros) Conaxis, came from Greece. His father came to Lawrence, MA, sometime around 1920, went back to Greece in the mid 1930s to marry Ourania, and returned with her to Lawrence around 1940.
- Nick's sister, Stacia, was born in 1942, brother Jimmy in 1946, and Nick on August 6, 1947.
- In 1949, their father died from tuberculosis.
- In 1948, while her husband was hospitalized, their mother had a mental breakdown and was hospitalized for most of the rest of her life. Eventually Stacia went to live with a Greek family in Watertown, MA, and Jimmy and Nick grew up together with foster families around and in Rowley, MA. Their mother died in 1994 and was buried next to Nick in Peabody, MA.
- In 1961, Jimmy and Nick went to Longview Farm in Walpole, MA. Jimmy returned to Rowley in 1962, but Nick stayed in Longview and graduated from Walpole High School in 1965.
- During the academic year 1965-66, Nick attended Manter Hall School in Cambridge, MA, to improve his academic record in hopes of attending college. It was probably at Manter that Nick was introduced to opposition to the Vietnam War.
- In the summer of 1966, Nick lived and worked on Cape Cod, MA.
- In the fall of 1966, Nick enrolled at Umass - Boston. But he and two friends dropped out of college at the end of November and went on a trip to California and back.

- He returned to Massachusetts in early 1967 and lived with his sister Stacia in Peabody.
- He was drafted in the summer of 1967 and in September he went to basic training at Fort Jackson, SC, followed by artillery training at Fort Sill, OK.
- Nick arrived in Vietnam on April 23, 1968, and was killed twelve days later, May 5. He is buried at Cedar Grove Cemetery in Peabody, MA.

The following is a summary of the people I talked with and the information on Nick's life that I gathered.

- Stacia and Jimmy talked with me about their brother, and Stacia gave me all the letters Nick wrote to her, as well as many other documents about his life.
- Four friends from Nick's Rowley days (1950s) shared their memories of Nick.
- Sixteen people from Walpole, mostly classmates, also shared their memories.
- Seven people, two of them high school classmates of Nick, talked with me about Nick's life after he left Walpole in 1965.
- Two people, one from Walpole, shared stories about Nick during their basic training in Fort Jackson, SC.
- Four people – Stacia, Bill Beckler, Tasha Lingos, and Marsha Greenberg – sent me copies of letters Nick wrote them from military training and from Vietnam.
- I have some second-hand information in the notes I kept in 1967-68 while I was studying Longview Farm as a Brandeis University graduate student.
- I have been unable to find anyone who lived with Nick at Longview Farm in Walpole (other than Jimmy, who also lived at Longview during the 1961-62 school year) or who went with him on a trip to California in late 1966.
- I wrote a letter to the Walpole Times looking for people who knew Nick. It was the most productive way to find people. At least half of the interviews resulted from that letter.
- In June 2012 I was given copies of various documents covering the years 1948 to 1966, when Nick was a foster child.

Details of the above and of other means I used to find people are given in Appendix B.

In 1984, a Vietnam veteran told Appy: "Those guys who died, their stories died with them. I'm not sure people really want to hear the kind of stories they could tell. I think a lot of people just want to bury the war." (Appy, *Working-Class War,* p. 9.)

It is the story of one of these men who died in Vietnam that I want to tell here. Nick was not a war hero. He was in Vietnam for only twelve days. But he was a son, and a brother, and friend to many people, all of whom still miss him, still remember him. His letters moved me and affected my life. I undertook this journey to get to know him, to respect his life and memory, and to remind all of us of a difficult and tragic era in our history. We must not bury the memory of the Vietnam War.

And his story, as you see in the outline of his life, was a difficult and troubled one. Deprived of a family and growing up in foster homes, he endured anxiety and uncertainty for his entire life. But he also managed to be funny, friendly, mischievous, and sensitive. His friends knew and loved the outgoing Nick, but he hid his anxieties from them. From military training, he wrote many thoughtful letters criticizing the military, the war, and social conformity. From Vietnam, as you read in his letters, he showed concern for the children, the people, and the land around him. He is a "hero" for overcoming a hard life, reaching out to people, and making them laugh.

1950
Nick, middle, with Jimmy, left, and another foster child

2
Lawrence and Foster Homes

Nick's parents were born in Greece and migrated to America early in the twentieth century. His father, Stephen ("Stavros" in Greek) Conaxis, was born in a town near the city of Megalopolis, in the Peloponnese. Deducing back from his death on June 2, 1949, at age fifty-two years, seven months, and seven days (as stated on the death certificate) he was born about 1897, but the DCG records state he was born on October 26, 1895. He migrated to the U.S. in 1914 (DCG). He first appears in the Lawrence city directory in 1920. For the years 1920-23 and 1925-33 he was living at 201A Lowell Street and working at various times as a fruit dealer, clerk, and chauffeur. He is not listed for the years 1934-1940, and appears again from 1941 to 1948, working again as a fruit dealer from 1945 to 1948. He became a U.S. citizen on September 22, 1927.

Sometime in the mid-1930s he returned to Greece, and while in Greece he married Ourania Collias, from Pablia, also in the Megalopolis area. (Ourania was the muse of astronomy; in Greek, Ourania means "heavenly.") She moved to Lawrence on July 15, 1935, and became a U.S. citizen on November 24, 1941. She was younger than Stephen, born on March 14, 1913, according to her gravestone, or on

March 14, 1914, according to DCG records. Ethel Conaxis, daughter of Stephen's second cousin, recalled that when the newlyweds returned to the U.S., they lived in Dorchester (part of Boston) with Ethel's family for about two years. Ethel said, *I remember them living in the house. When they came [to the U.S.] they lived in our house* for about two years. (It was common among Greek and other immigrants to help newly arrived relatives.) Ethel remembered Ourania as *a very beautiful, lovely-looking woman. She was an intelligent woman. Very sweet, very nice. And I know that my parents were very fond of her.* Stacia said her mother was *beautiful and educated*.

Around 1940, Stephen and Ourania moved to Lawrence.

Lawrence had been a city of industry, immigrants, and labor strife. The city website states:

"Lawrence was built in the 1840s as the nation's first planned industrial city…. The harnessed strength of the Merrimack River and its system of canals fueled the Lawrence mills that produced textiles for the American and European markets. By the early twentieth century, with a population of nearly 95,000, the city was a world leader in the production of cotton and woolen textiles in massive mills.

"… The successive waves of immigrants coming to Lawrence to work in the mills began with the Irish, followed by French Canadians, Englishmen, and Germans in the late 1800s. Around the turn of the century and early 1900s, Italians, Poles, Lithuanians, and Syrians began arriving. [When Stephen, Ourania, Stacia, Jimmy, and Nick lived in Lawrence from 1920 to 1948, it was still an industrial and immigrant city of Irish, Italians, French Canadians, Jews, and some Greeks.] The wave of Puerto Ricans and Dominicans started in the mid to late 1900s, and the newest arrivals have originated from Vietnam and Cambodia. The current population of roughly 70,000 is largely Hispanic and has given a Latino slant to the local economy and culture." (Retrieved on February 2, 2012.)

Although Stephen reappears in the Lawrence city directory in 1941, Ourania is not listed with him until 1945. There is no occupation next to Stephen's name from 1941 to 1944, but from 1945 to 1948 "fruit dlr" appears again. Stacia said her father was a self-employed pushcart

operator selling on the streets of Lawrence. Jimmy thought he worked for a store owned by Greeks, the Lambros family. Ourania had two miscarriages and a baby who died. Then in 1942, Aspacia, later called Stacia, was born. James was born in 1946 and Nick on August 6, 1947. His birth certificate lists Clover Hill Hospital in Lawrence as his place of birth, and his parents as living at 903 Essex Street. In July 2011, I saw a three-story house at that address, in what is now a largely Hispanic neighborhood.

About a year after Nick's birth, severe illness and mental problems broke up the family. Tuberculosis struck Stephen in 1948 and he was sent to the Middleton TB Sanitarium. The official record of death states that he died of "pulmonary tuberculosis" on June 21949. DCG records state that he was buried at the United Syrian Cemetery in Lawrence.

Very soon after Stephen was hospitalized Ourania had a nervous breakdown, probably from the strain of caring for three small children alone, worries about her husband's health, and financial problems. Jimmy said that *she couldn't handle us*. According to DCG records, "On 5/8/48 [Nick was nine months old at that time] she was committed to the Danvers State Hospital…. Mother was said to be easy to get along with and a good mother and housekeeper until her illness. She was discharged from the hospital for a period of a year and then in 1951 was again committed diagnosed dementia praecox [now called schizophrenia]. The prognosis is that mother will require hospitalization for an indefinite period of time."

The Lawrence Department of Public Welfare stepped in after Ourania's first hospitalization. They sent the following letter, dated July 27, 1948:

"Division of Child Guardianship,
State House,
Boston, Massachusetts.

"Gentlemen:

"We are interested in a family of two little boys [no mention of Stacia] whose parents are both incapacitated and would like to make application to your Division for their care. The mother is a patient at the Danvers State Hospital and according to a recent report regarding

her condition, her stay at the Hospital will be indefinite. The father of these children is a patient at the Middleton State Sanatorium and shows little progress.

"… These two little boys have been boarded by us with a woman who is unable to care for them any longer. Through the Greek [church] minister, relatives were contacted but no offers are forthcoming.

"An immediate reply would be appreciated."

The DCG records on Nick, "Dictation on Child," started on November 11, 1948. (Social workers would dictate their reports of home visits and other matters into a dictating machine, and a clerk would type them at some later date. Each report includes the date it was dictated and the date it was typed.)

"35107 – B

"CONAXIS, Nicholas (Gr. Orth. – P)

"11/17/48 – Received Sec. 38 from Lawrence Ct.

"11/17/48 – Examined by Dr. Hamilton. Diag. – Diaper rash; ? upper respiratory infection. For recommendations see field report.

"11/17/48 – (PVS) [social worker's initials] – Pl. wi. Mrs. Kathryn B.… (C) Reception Home, … Lawrence. Temp. bd. $3 day."

I cannot tell from these records how long Nick and Jimmy were boarded with a woman in Lawrence, nor how long they stayed with Kathryn B. By November 1948, when Nick was only fifteen months old, he and Jimmy had already lived in three different homes: with their parents and in two boarding homes.

Immediately after the mention of Kathryn B., the record begins the story of their first foster home placement. ECT was their social worker for the next few months.

"11/17/48 – (ECT) Transported Nicholas [and Jimmy] to new foster home [of Veulah Courage in Rowley, a small town south of Lawrence]. He made quite a scene at the doctor's office and screamed and kicked while the doctor examined him. Dr. H … also gave Nicholas a patch test [to test for TB, since his father had TB. Nick went on to have the patch tests every six months for years. Sometimes these tests proved positive for TB but follow-up X-rays were negative]. The nurse tried to

quiet him down with a lollipop but Nicholas would not be consoled. Nicholas seems to have quite a temper and also a little stubborn streak. When ECT tried to get him to walk somewhere against his will he just collapsed in a heap on the floor and refused to move so that he had to be carried. After the physical examination Nicholas was so exhausted he slept on the way to his new foster home [it was actually the first foster home]. Upon arrival he soon woke up and joined his brother, James, playing with the toys foster mother brought out for them.

"Nicholas is apparently not fully trained as yet. He is still wearing diapers. He walks very well and is a big boy for his age. He has light hair and heavy-lidded brown eyes, and his complexion is very light for a Greek child." This is the first of several mentions of Nick not looking and not acting "Greek."

In his first fifteen months, Nick had lived with his parents for some months, then he was "boarded" with a family for the next few months, and was at Kathryn B's "reception home" for an indeterminate amount of time. His life was insecure and in some turmoil.

Within a few days Nick began to settle down.

"12/2/48 – (ECT) – Nicholas was rather slow in adjusting to a new foster family but has improved a great deal during the past week. Foster mother states he is a regular cry-baby and cries at the least little thing…. At first, foster mother had a difficult time getting Nicholas to do what she wanted him to do. He just sat down on the floor and refused to budge. He is getting over this now and does not cry as much as he used to. Nicholas has a good appetite and likes everything foster mother gives him…. Foster mother's son, Donald, is very fond of Nicholas and gives him a lot of attention." The last sentence is the first of many references that Nick was likable and charming throughout his life.

Three weeks later things were somewhat better.

"12/27/48 – (ECT) … Foster mother states he is getting along fairly well but is still a whiney child. He is easily upset and screams and throws himself on the floor when things do not go his way. Older brother James teases him which aggravates him more. Nicholas responds well to attention and is very fond of foster mother's 14 year old son."

A month later Nick had calmed down even more and was playing well with Jimmy. "He is getting along fine and has improved a great deal since placement… ECT delivered clothing purchased by Miss

R. of TB League from money received from Greek Association for the Conaxis children. There was a sweater and a pair of shoes for Nicholas."

Another month later, on February 23, 1949, ECT reported that Nick looked "fine." He was now teasing Jimmy. "Nicholas seems to have a happier disposition than his older brother James. Foster mother has discovered, however, that Nicholas is more of a trouble maker than James, and likes to tease his older brother. He goes about things in such a sly way, however, that foster mother has to laugh at him." It was another early sign that it was hard not to like Nick. People from every stage of his life told me that almost everyone liked Nick.

The DCG record includes many references to Nick's health: the TB patch tests, inoculations, regular check-ups, hospital visits for infections, and two incidents of "convulsions." The first convulsion came on April 29, 1949, when Nick was not yet two. Both times the doctors concluded that Nick did not have epilepsy.

A week later, ECT visited Nick and Jimmy. "Nicholas looks very well. He is a healthy looking youngster with a mischievous look in his eyes." This is the first mention in his record of Nick's mischievousness. Nick was then twenty-one months old. Friends in Rowley, Walpole, and later all referred to him as "mischievous," all of them smiling and laughing when they said it. His mischief and other actions were all attention-seeking devices, as we will see.

A new social worker, IHH, became Nick's and Jimmy's social worker by June 1949. On the first report in Nick's record by IHH, we read on June 14, 1949: "He is very fond of this foster family and especially foster mother's grandson [unclear if this is the same person as foster mother's son mentioned earlier]. Visitor has the impression that he is being very well cared for." Sixteen days later, IHH reports, "Nicholas seems to have a very pleasing disposition and tries to talk with visitor whenever he sees her. He has a charming smile and a very healthy appearance."

On August 6, 1949, Nick turned two. The foster mother continued to find him charming and "easy to take care of," but also said he was not minding her and was mischievous. When IHH visited, Nick "ran around the living room pulling doilies off the stuffed chairs and getting into mischief trying to impress visitor." Two months later, in

late October, we read more of the same. "Nicholas was on the glider swinging vigorously on the sun-porch. He has a cute smile and seems like a happy, mischievous, but normal little boy. Foster mother threatened several times during the visit not to take him riding with her or give him a lollipop if he didn't behave." On November 17, IHH noted: "Foster mother does not mind the care of Nicholas and seems to like him much better than his brother, James." No explanation is offered for the preference for Nick, but there may be a clue when we read on January 4, 1950, that when he was told to prepare for a nap, Nick "removed his shoes, socks and overalls in preparation for bed. He then helped foster mother's grandson by taking off the same clothes for him in preparation for their nap."

The last sentence points to the future Nick, who was helpful and empathetic with small children.

Two weeks later, on January 18, 1950, Nick and Jimmy were taken to a new foster home. No explanation for the move is given in the DCG record. All signs had been that Nick was happy and that Veulah Courage liked Nick. Not yet two and a half, Nick was about to live in a fifth home, that of Mrs. Doris Sturtyvant of Danvers (a nearby town). But according to IHH, he did not seem unhappy:

"Visitor transported Nicholas and his brother to a new foster home. He was his usual good natured self and sat or kneeled on the front seat beside visitor all during the trip. He did not object to foster mother removing his snowsuit and was very congenial. Nicholas seemed thrilled with the freedom of a playroom and brought a kettle he found out to the living room to show visitor. He seemed anxious to make friends with another little DCG boy in this foster home."

A few days later Nick was hospitalized for a few days with a "fever of unknown origin" and after a second "convulsion." Doctors decided that the causes were an infected throat and an infected ear.

Despite an apparently auspicious beginning in his new foster home, the foster mother soon found Nick to be a problem. "She said Nicholas has been a problem ever since she took him. He imitates everything his brother does and James is constantly into mischief, has a bad temper, cannot be trusted alone and needs strict supervision. She would gladly keep one of the boys either Nicholas or James but is unable to cope with the two at the same time." (February 3, 1950.)

She added a week later that Nick was throwing temper tantrums and threw whatever he had in his hands when he "did not wish to do what he was told."

So on February 28, 1950, Nick and Jimmy were moved to their sixth home. Nick was only two years and seven months. Their life with Maria Nixon was to last eleven years, although in six different homes. (See Chapter 3.)

Before we turn to Chapter 3, here is a brief report on their sister Stacia's life as a child and teenager.

Probably because of her father's tuberculosis, Stacia was sent to a sanitarium when her parents were hospitalized in 1948. She apparently lived there until her mother was released from her first hospitalization. She said that her mother *had a breakdown and they treated her for a little while, then she was fine.* After she came out *I was living with her at that time* in an apartment on Dexter Avenue in Watertown, MA. Ourania worked at a nearby bakery, where she became friends with Mrs. G., one of her co-workers. *The boys were not with us at all. When she had, I think, her first breakdown, I think they took the boys. But they left me, so she was okay to take care of me. She couldn't take care of all of us. I think that was the situation.*

Stacia said that while Ourania was out of the hospital she *went to a funeral or wake of a relative and she had a relapse.* Then she was hospitalized again, this time at Metropolitan State Hospital in Waltham, MA, in 1951. *That is where she was most of her life. Most of her life. And then she went from there to Westboro State when she became older, and then the last years of her life was in Medford in a nursing home.*

When Ourania was hospitalized in 1951, Stacia became a ward of the state. The Division of Child Guardianship wanted to send her to an orphanage but, according to Jimmy, Mrs. G. *stepped up and said I'll take Stacia.* She did so even though she had three children of her own. Stacia remembered that the state was paying the G. family *ten dollars a week or whatever it was.* Thus Stacia went on to grow up in Watertown and graduated from Watertown High School in 1961. The boys continued to live with foster families in and near Rowley, about twenty-five miles away. (See Chapter 3 for details.) Stacia was very much part of the G. family, to the point that a granddaughter of Mrs. G. referred to her as "Aunt

Stacia" and said Stacia was adopted by the family. However, Stacia explained she was not; her mother would not agree to an adoption.

(See Epilogue for a brief account of Stacia's and Jimmy's adult lives.)

While we talked in her house in November 2011, Stacia reflected that her mother was needlessly hospitalized. We agreed that in the 1940s and 1950s doctors and social agencies were quick to send people to mental institutions and there were no medications for mentally troubled people. Ourania had no one to advocate and look out for her to find any existing medications or other help outside institutions. Three times Stacia said that it was unfortunate her mother was hospitalized so quickly, as was common then. She would not have been hospitalized today, she told me.

Thinking back on Ourania's and the children's history, Ethel Conaxis said, *It almost sounds like a Greek tragedy, really.*

1957
Nick, in Boy Scout unform

3

The Nixons and Rowley

A note of caution on this chapter:
My own experiences as a child might influence how I understand Nick's childhood. I was born in Albania in 1941, but from 1947 on my brother Chris and I were separated from our parents because of wartime conditions and social revolutions. We grew up in Greece, raised by our grandmother. We migrated to the U.S. in 1955 and could not see our family in Albania until 1979 (Chris) and 1980 (me).

After Nick and Jimmy moved in with the Nixons on March 1, 1950, they went on to live with them for eleven and a half years, until they were sent to Longview Farm in Walpole on August 15, 1961. These were generally happy years for Nick. He was close to his brother, despite some conflicts common between brothers. He had good times, both with the Nixons and the many friends he made in Rowley after he, Jimmy, and the Nixons moved there on October 4, 1955. They went on camping trips; Nick joined the Boy Scouts and enjoyed the experience; he went biking, fishing, and swimming with his friends. The four Rowley friends who talked with me all had fond memories of the times they spent together with Nick. Jimmy told me that the

Nixons made every effort for all six children in the house to live a normal 1950s life.

Nick continued to be the fun-loving, charming, likable, friendly, and mischievous boy social workers described during his first three years. It was impossible not to like Nick.

These eleven and a half years, however, were also marked by problems, crises, and insecurities, especially during the later years. Uncertainty about where and with whom Jimmy and Nick would live was often looming on the horizon. Adoption for both, preferably with a Greek family, was pursued during 1953-54, before DCG stopped the search. The boys knew about the search and felt the threat of losing the people they had come to see as parents. In addition, Nick's relationship with and perception of his mother left him unhappy and worried that he had a mother locked up in a mental hospital. (In the 1950s, there was a stigma attached to people who were or had been in such places.) Perhaps partly as a consequence of his mother's condition, Nick went through some years of denying his Greek heritage, vehemently wanting to be a Nixon, not a Conaxis.

In the last four years with the Nixons, Nick's actions and perceived misbehavior, and Maria Nixon's discipline of Nick, led to conflicts and problems between them. Both Nick's social worker and school personnel thought her discipline and punishment of Nick were overly strict. Nick rebelled, ran away, and caused major property damage in his school. At the end, both Nick and Jimmy wanted to leave the Nixons. DCG staff found the situation at the Nixon house untenable and agreed to send the boys to Longview Farm in Walpole, a town southeast of Boston and about an hour away from Rowley.

Before Rowley

Before they moved to Rowley in 1955, the Nixons, Jimmy, Nick, and the other foster children lived in five homes, all in the same general area north of Boston.

On March 1, 1950, when Nick and Jimmy moved in with them, the Nixons were living in Ballardvale. The boys came to the Nixons after Maria Nixon met the boys when visiting the Sturtyvants in early 1950. Doris Sturtyvant may have told Maria that she could not keep

both boys (as she had told DCG). Maria was so taken by Nick and Jimmy that she said she would take them.

On April 4, 1950, the Nixons moved to Danvers.

On September 8, 1950, they moved to a different house in Danvers.

On September 6, 1951, they moved to Hamilton, where Mr. Nixon was superintendent of a 300-acre farm.

On June 25, 1953, they moved to Beverly.

And on October 4, 1955, they moved to 109 Wethersfield Street in Rowley.

There is nothing in the DCG records to explain the frequent moves. Nor is anything said about whether Nick was upset by them. He was happy about the move to the farm in Hamilton; Mr. Nixon had promised to buy a pony for the children. Despite the moves, social workers kept saying that Nick was doing well and was fairly happy, with no major problems. The following report from his social worker on October 10, 1952, is typical of other reports.

"GLL to foster home where she saw Nickie as he bounced in from playing in back yard. Nickie is now attending Public Kindergarten in Hamilton and also goes to Sunday School regularly at the South Hamilton Methodist Church. Nickie was his usual effervescent self, eagerly looking for attention from GLL and inclined to do a little showing off in her presence. He has such a bright sparkling personality and such a mischievous look on his face that it is hard for one to dissuade his showing off."

Earlier social work entries report some minor concerns, continuing charm, and health problems. "3/8/50 … [Foster mother] feels Nicholas is more mischievous than his brother and needs careful discipline." But on April 12 we read, "Nicholas is considered the pet in this home as he is the youngest child and foster parents are very fond of him and his brother." He continued to get sick often, so the doctors decided to remove his tonsils and adenoids, and he seemed to enjoy better health after that.

On September 20, 1950, shortly after his third birthday, Nick was visited by a new DCG staff person, PVS, whose initials appear only once in the reports. "Nicky is always happy, says the foster mother, hardly ever cries. Seems very content and gets along with his brother, 'no complaints about Nicky' who looks well and sturdy." A new social

worker, R. Dosick, enters Nick's life, and says, "Nicky is a 'personality kid' according to foster mother. She believes he has quite a sense of humor" (2/9/51).

Two entries by Dosick later in 1951 speak of contact between the boys and Ourania during the time she was out of the hospital.

"3/7/51 To the home. Children were all dressed up as mother was expected. Nickey did not show any emotion when mother arrived, but foster mother says that usually he is quite upset after visits." (More on this below.)

"7/27/51 Spoke to mother regarding TB check-up last year."

Sometime later in 1951 Ourania entered Metropolitan State Hospital in Waltham, MA, where she lived most of the rest of her life.

In his last entry on Nick, Dosick wrote on February11, 1952: "He is growing taller and putting on weight although the doctor feels he is still small for his age. He recently had a physical examination and was found to be healthy. Nicky gets along well with the other four children in the house, even though their ages are close."

G. Linehan became Nick's social worker in 1952 and was with him for four years. On her first visit to see Nick her observations were similar to those of the previous social workers. "3/12/52 – (G. Linehan) Visitor to foster home where she saw Nicholas for the first time. This youngster with his smiling brown eyes, long eyelashes, is definitely a charmer. He is a good size for his age and is not Greek appearing or acting [one wonders how Greeks were meant to act in the 1950s]. Foster mother says he is the clown type and is always staging a performance in his efforts to secure attention and affection. He is a lovable little boy and it is easy to see that he has already won the affection of both foster parents. He was quite friendly towards GLL and was interested in telling her about the various animals on the farm."

Nick was about four and a half then, and, as he had from the age of two, he was still seeking affection and attention.

Entries by Linehan on her visits to the foster home in the next few months note that Nick was a "bundle of energy" and "a little boisterous and rough at times but presents no particular problem." His kindergarten teacher "reported that Nickie is a very polite youngster. She seemed to like him very much." Finally, on March 31, 1953, when Nick was about five and a half, Linehan said that "Nicky is a

very attractive youngster with smiling eyes and infectious grin. He appears quite mature for his age. He possesses a vivid imagination and is quite a verbalist."

Nick attended Sunday school regularly at the Immanuel Congregational Church while in Beverly. He continued to be an average student, with his teacher commenting that he could do better if he paid more attention. His second-grade teacher in Beverly reported his grades on January 20, 1955: "Nicky received an S [satisfactory] mark in caring for materials and an S- in his ability to work independently and follow directions. He received a U [unsatisfactory] mark for not working at capacity. In his social habits Nicky received an S for neat appearance and an S- in getting along with others, respecting authority and being courteous. In general abilities Nicky received S in expressing himself orally and U in expressing himself in written work. For his scholastic marks Nicky received S- in reading, art, and writing. He received an S in arithmetic, spelling and music. Miss R. feels that Nicky could do very much better. He would rather give attention to those about him than to concentrate on his work."

That last sentence would apply to Nick in his later years at school.

Adoption Search for Greek Parents

Then a month later, on April 21, 1953, the DCG reports include the lines "Referred to Adoption Unit" and "Memo to John J. Cahill referring Nicholas and James for adoption." There is no explanation about who decided, and why, to search for a home for Nick and Jimmy. The boys seemed happy with the Nixons and made it clear that they preferred to stay with them. For the previous three years they had had a stable home environment. I infer from an Adoption Unit report (sent along with the other DCG records) that DCG wanted Nick and Jimmy to live with and grow up in a Greek family, as it probably was DCG policy to place children with parents of similar cultural and religious background.

The adoption process began with psychological and physical examinations of the boys on August 26 and August 27, 1953. Nick was then six. At some point, Nick and Jimmy were told of the adoption search, but the DCG record does not say when they were told the purpose of these examinations.

The psychologist concluded that Nick was normal. "Nicky is a smiling boy who assumes a somewhat coy role with the examiner. He is active and watchful at the beginning of the examination, but he soon becomes restless and his attention wanders…. he is presently functioning on a level with those persons considered to be of average intelligence. From the point of view of Mental Age, he is functioning only slightly above his chronological age."

Next day Nick was given a physical examination. At six, he was forty-six inches tall and weighed forty-eight pounds. His development was "normal." His eyes, ears, teeth, heart, and all other body parts were also judged normal. The doctor wrote by hand at the bottom of the report: "Physical exam fails to show any deformity or disease. Subject to lab work, X-rays, etc. adoption is recommended."

The Adoption Unit report on Nick opened with a summary history of his early months, ending with "he is very light complexioned for a Greek child." It continues with brief statements on Nick at sixteen, eighteen, twenty-four, twenty-six, thirty, thirty-six, forty-two, and sixty months. The last one says, "Nicky now attends kindergarten and goes to Sunday school regularly. He has developed normally both physically and mentally and appears to be a very bright child. He is apt to be a little boisterous and rough at times but foster mother feels he is a normal, happy boy. He possesses a vivid imagination and is quite a verbalist. Weight 45 lbs., height 45 inches. His nutrition is excellent."

Nick knew that he was being considered for adoption. Linehan reported on December 12, 1953: "He was very concerned over the meaning of adoption and questioned Miss Law [visiting social worker] thoroughly. For about a week after their visit for a physical examination, he was quite upset over the possibilities of leaving their foster home."

Then follows a comment that was repeated several times in the DCG reports during the next few years. "The foster mother although she is very fond of Nicky and his brother Jimmy and will hate to lose them, does not feel that she is financially able to adopt them." Foster parents were paid for raising foster children, but such payments ended upon adoption. (Sheila Frankel of the Department of Children and Families told me that some years later the policy changed and adoptive parents now receive financial support.)

In early 1954, the Adoption Unit recommended adoption, while pointing to the difficulty of finding a Greek family to adopt the children. "1/29/54… Both boys are good-looking, attractive children, and would make some parents very happy. It is felt, however, that 2 boys with their background and with their religion would be difficult to place. A memo has been sent to the Lawrence office indicating this problem." On April 12, 1954, the adoption process began formally: "The adoption study has been completed and this child has been accepted for placement as of this date…. We are making every effort to recruit a Greek Orthodox home which will be suitable for these children. However, if we are not successful we will consider placement with a straight Protestant couple." Also on April 12, the Adoption Placement Unit was looking for "a written statement from Dr. Gabler regarding the mother's mental condition and inability to care for her children."

On June 3, 1954, Maria Nixon reported behavior problems likely related to Nick's anxiety over adoption. "Fos. mo. said that Nicky was also affected over the possible removal from his home for adoption purposes. She has talked with him more about having his own parents and he is gradually getting used to the idea." She may have been overly optimistic, however. On February 10, 1955, "foster mother said that Nick can be an angel or a devil and the teacher seems to feel the same way…. Foster mother believes that Nicky's personality is affected by this adoption business and the fact that he does not know whether he will stay in the home or will be moved. She is willing to keep Nicky and his brother on a permanent basis but is not financially able to adopt them."

DCG ended the search on April 7, 1955. "Memo received from the adoption unit to the effect they were discontinuing their study and placing Nicky and his brother on the deferred list." On May 24, 1955, they sent a letter to the Lawrence Board of Public Welfare informing them of their decision:

"In reply to your recent telephone conversation regarding the Conaxis boys we wish to inform you that they have been in the foster home of Mrs. Maria Nixon of Beverly, since March 1, 1950. These children have been on our adoption list also since that time and every available source has been checked for a possible adoptive home for them. We have contacted Greek organizations and

the Greek Bishop in Boston and various Greek couples have been visited but no one has been interested in taking the boys into their home for adoption purposes. At present, they are on our deferred list but if a home is available our Adoption unit will be interested in making an immediate study."

Nick was informed of the end of the search by May 19, 1955. "Worker told Nick that he had been taken off the adoption list and that he would be allowed to remain in his present foster home. Nick said that he wanted to stay with his mother and father." We do not know if Nick himself referred to the Nixons as his "mother and father," which is what I think, or whether the social worker used those words. But clearly he was relieved. He would be eight on August 6. He had endured almost two years of uncertainty.

Though not actively looking for adoption, DCG kept open the possibility of adoption, as we see, above, in the letter to the Lawrence Board of Public Welfare. I found nothing on whether Nick and Jimmy knew this. Finally, on June 1, 1957, "Nicholas removed from the Study Deferred list of the Adoption Placement Unit." It had been four years since the start of the search for a Greek couple. From the time Nick was six until he was ten, the boys were living with the possibility of a move to a different family.

Belatedly, in March 1959, a Greek organization, the Pan Arcadian Federation of America, apparently expressed interest in finding a Greek home for the boys. L.S. Duley of DCG replied that "these boys have been living in their present home for some years and have been accepted very well in the family. They consider this their home and I know they would be greatly disturbed if there were any threat of removal from it." Duley added that DCG had tried unsuccessfully to find them a Greek home.

The Rowley Years

Founded in 1639, Rowley was a small farming community for most of its history. It is seventeen miles east of Lawrence and twenty-eight miles northeast of Boston. By 1955, when Jimmy and Nick moved there, it was still small, but it was growing and becoming a bedroom community. Its population increased from 1,073 in 1850, to 1,768 in 1950, to 2,768 in 1960.

Rowley was still a small town when Jimmy and Nick lived there. Even today, with double the 1960 population, it remains a small town. Lee Stevens told me, *we were such a small town … everybody knew everybody…. We were small town USA.* Others also described Rowley in the 1950s as a friendly and pleasant place to grow up. Jimmy said, R*owley was a wonderful place to grow up as a kid. You could ride your bike, leave your door unlocked, and everybody knew everybody.*

However, Lee also remembers Rowley as a place with nothing to do. *It was such a small town. And there wasn't really much to do other than go out and drink beer, race cars, and get killed…. There wasn't much of anything going on.*

Fun, Friends, and School Nick enjoyed living in Rowley. The Nixons and the children partook of "normal" 1950s activities. Teachers liked Nick and he made many friends. Four of his friends were David Hardy, Lee Stevens, Jack Carey, and Barbara Gurczak (married name). When they talked with me, all had warm memories of Nick and their days together.

Nick was the charmer he had been since two. On August 2, 1956, four days short of Nick's ninth birthday, G. Linehan said, "Nicky continues to be a very personable youngster, seemingly wanting to please everybody." Two years later, L. Duley, his new social worker, said Nicky "is an extrovert" very friendly to others. "The boy has an effervescent personality and [is] full of enthusiasm." In October 1958, Duley added that Nick "is quite active in the community and now has a paper route, as also does his brother, Jimmy. Nicky is in the Boy Scouts and sings in the church choir, plays baseball, football and basketball. He is taking dancing lessons."

On May 1, 1959, Duley said that Nick's teachers found him intelligent but somewhat restless and bored. According to Duley, Nick's teacher said "he knows that the boy is very intelligent and quick which creates somewhat of a problem since he is able to compete so easily with smaller students in his class. However, the school has no real problem with him and it is hoped in time the boy will settle down." After a check up, Nick's doctor found him healthy and "stated he is somewhat hyperactive and did comment on his intelligence." Duley also found Nick to be "considerable [considerate] and generous." (In

later years, Nick often showed generosity to friends and strangers, such as fellow soldiers in basic training; see Chapter 6.)

Nick attended the Rowley schools for six years, graduating in 1961 from the Pine Grove School. He was an average student. His teachers kept commenting that he could do better if he focused more on his studies and less on socializing. G. Linehan reported on October 31, 1955, that Nick loved the Rowley school and his teacher, and she "said she likes the boy very much and she wants to help him adjust in her classroom" (Nick had just moved to Rowley on October 4). The following June she said that Nick "will do anything for attention." Similar comments appear in DCG entries for 1957: "His constant clown actions earned him a C in conduct and more recently a poor in conduct…. [He is] still engaged in attention-seeking conduct."

Nick's grades for the fourth grade reflect his ability and also his conduct. He received a C- in Attitude and also in Work Habits. In academic subjects he received a C in Spelling and B or B- in Language, Arithmetic, Social Studies, and Science Studies.

In the fifth grade, his grades were very similar, with the exception of an A in Science. Duley reported that Nick's teacher said that despite Nick's clowning and attention-seeking she "does not consider him a disciplinary problem…. The boy's actions were not malicious, but appeared to be motivated by a desire to get attention."

His grades in the sixth grade were also mostly B's. Duley said on February 16, 1959: "Aside from a few fights in the beginning of the year, the boy has been no real problem. He continues to be a boy who gets somewhat bored with the smaller pupils in his class and sometimes is inattentive. However, I feel there is no real problem with Nicholas, that he will have somewhat of a stormy period of adolescence, but should be of no real concern."

Duley's prediction proved overly optimistic, as we will see later in this chapter. Nick's "stormy" adolescence and the Nixons' discipline would eventually force him out of the Nixon household and Rowley.

Nick's life with the Nixons had appeared stable. The house included the parents, an adopted child, and five foster children (including Jimmy and Nick). DCG wrote to Ourania's social worker at Metropolitan State Hospital on June 9, 1959: "The family appears to be quite

closely knit. They regularly do things together even going on camping expeditions to Maine and New Hampshire." They added the usual comment that Jimmy and Nick wanted to be adopted by the Nixons, "as these are the only parents they have known," but the Nixons felt they could not afford to adopt them.

By 1956, a year after he arrived in Rowley, Nick had many friends. On April 4, G. Linehan reported that "there are several children of [Nick's] age in the neighborhood and he has made friends with them and appears to be accepted by the group."

Four of his friends told me in 2011 that Nick was popular and likeable, a great guy, fun to be with, and a *nice-looking kid.* He was *a mischievous little guy* (as he had been at two), *a little devil, a crazy bastard, a little rebel, a little rascal, a spontaneous kind of person.* Jimmy said Nick *had that impish little grin, and he was full of it. Full of life. Full of it. We had a lot of fun growing up.*

David Hardy had fond memories of Nick. As we talked in his living room, he smiled as he remembered their days together.

He was a fun guy. Always liked to have fun. Always lived to joke around. We had a lot of fun.

He was a great kid. He had lot of friends. That was just the way he was.

He was a good, friendly kid, liked to have fun just like the rest of us.

He had a great personality. Very outgoing.

To Jack Carey, *Nick was a good kid … no different than anybody else, I don't believe. Kind of a wisecracker sometimes.*

Nick, David, Lee, and Jack were in a group that hung out together. They played basketball, baseball, and soccer, went fishing, hung out in the center of Rowley, and sometimes got into mischief. David: *We were all kind of like a pack. We all hung around with each other all the time.* Lee: *We were always going downtown, walking downtown.* Jack: *We used to hang on the wall up there [Rowley center]. And there was another store, an old lady had a store named Shepherd's General Store, and we used to hang out there, smoke cigarettes and do all that good stuff.*

Smiling throughout the entire interview, David told me stories of his days with Nick in the late 1950s.

His family would camp out at Sandy Point, a local beach, all summer long. N*icky would be with me a lot. We would do fishing and swimming and do all kinds of things.*

We would go down to the Town Landing and go swimming all the time. For a little bit of money we used to pick strawberries, but a lot of us did in town. Five cents a box. [Chuckling.] But we could pick a lot. They were really big, so we could pick a lot of boxes in a very short period of time. Shucking clams, that was another thing down at Savage's.

Nicky had a paper route. He used to deliver newspapers in the area. I used to help him do that sometimes. Get it done quicker so we could go play baseball or do something in Rowley Common.

There was no theater in Rowley, so they would see movies in the nearby towns of Ipswich and Newburyport.

We used to have dances in the school on Friday nights. Not every Friday, maybe twice a month. And that was another thing we did for recreation.

At low tide, we used to go down to the Danvers River and dig sea worms for bait and go fishing.

Nick was also involved in mischief and pranks. I heard a memorable one. A group Nick was with o*ne night went up Central Street in Rowley, and we went up to Dodgers Apple Orchard, and we picked about a bushel of apples. And I said, "why are we picking up all these apples because I don't like apples too much." And Nicky said, "No. We have a plan." And [another friend] said "just work with us; work with us."* [Laughing.] *And we took the apples and we broke every streetlight going back down toward town. Back in those days they had streetlights that were bare bulbs with the little reflectors, and they were probably maybe 40 feet from the ground. And they were about the size of a basketball net. And we decided that we are going to knock out as many as we could. [Q: And nobody caught you?] Nobody caught us. It was late at night. And we blew out about 100, probably 110 streetlights…. I don't want you to get me wrong, Nick was not a troublemaker. He was a good kid.*

It is certain that some lights were broken. But when I spoke with a long-time resident of Rowley he told me he never heard of the incident. He said if a hundred streetlights had been broken, the whole town would have known.

Jimmy also remembered some mischief and pranks. Referring to some of the kids in the neighborhood, he said: *We had some good times with them. Raised a little hell and got into trouble together.*

Jimmy has good memories of their life in Rowley. By Jimmy's and their friends' accounts, the brothers were very close and supportive of each other. *We shared the same room.* [So you were very close with him?]

Very close. You've got to figure all our formative years [were spent together], right up through high school, until we went to the farm [in Walpole in 1961]…. You have your little sibling rivalry, like any kid does. Barbara, who dated Nick a few times, agreed they were supportive of each other, but added, *I think a lot of times Jimmy didn't quite understand Nicky.*

By Jimmy's and social workers' accounts, Nick was more social, outgoing, and adventurous than Jimmy, but these differences created no distance between them. Listening to Jimmy talking about Nick and their years in Rowley, I could hear love, joy, caring, and sadness at the loss of his brother. *We had the Cub Scouts, and the Boy Scouts, and we went camping, and took trips to various states, and had snowball fights, and going to baseball, and hanging with friends, and all my memories are good…. Basically life was good. Just a couple of kids growing up in a small town in New England.*

Nick's Ethnicity Probably beginning in 1953, when he was six, Nick struggled with his name and Greek ethnicity for some years. Jimmy thinks Nick had accepted it in later years, and there is a brief mention in the DCG record that he had come to terms with it by 1958. A year later, however, there is another mention of ambivalence about his ethnicity.

The problem may have arisen in the fall of 1953, when Maria Nixon registered Nick at the Beverly school under the name "Nixon." Linehan told her "this would have to be corrected as the boy has the right to his own identity." The DCG report gives no hint whether the choice of Nixon was Nick's or Maria's. There is also no indication whether she made the correction at that time.

Jimmy remembered that sometime during their years of living with the Nixons, some children at school would ask Nick, "How come your name is Conaxis but you live with the Nixons?" Such comments bothered Nick. Jimmy added that, in time, their friends learned they were foster children and stopped the comments.

Two years later, October 1955, the issue resurfaced when Nick first registered at the Rowley school. "Foster mother said that Nicky considers himself to be Nicholas Conaxis Nixon and has insisted that he be called Nixon. The foster mother went to the school and corrected the name with the teacher." Despite the correction Nick continued to prefer Nixon to Conaxis. In April 1956, "The teacher reports [to Maria Nixon] that Nicky is oversensitive about his last name, so much so that

he will not write Conaxis. If he is told to write his correct name rather than Nixon, he refuses to write anything." Nick also preferred to be known as "Nixon" in the church he attended.

A month later, Nick continued to prefer Nixon. "He definitely does not like to be called Conaxis and has strong feelings about being of Greek descent." Linehan repeated DCG policy for children to keep their own last names unless adopted, and encouraged Maria to have Nick read some books about Greece so he would be "proud of his heritage." In June, Nick's teacher told Linehan that Nick "still prefers to use the name of Nixon and when she makes him use Conaxis he deliberately spoils the paper."

His friend David Hardy told me that he asked Nick a few times what name his middle initial S stood for, and Nick kept saying it stood for nothing. It is likely the S was for Stavros, his father's Greek first name, and Nick wanted to avoid any identification with his ethnicity. In Greek tradition during those years, boys were given their father's first name as a middle name.

In October 1958, three years after the first report of Nick's rejection of his Greek name, there is a brief reference in the DCG records to Nick's finally beginning to change his mind. Nick "has begun to accept the name Conaxis now and is not talking so much about being adopted by the Nixons unless they move from Rowley." What does "unless" mean in this context?

A year later, rejection of the Greek heritage resurfaces. "It is perhaps unfortunate that both boys seem to have considerable [negative] feeling about their racial heritage. They resent any reference to their Greek ancestry." (Letter from DCG to Ourania's social worker at the Metropolitan State Hospital, June 9, 1959.) Was the 1958 comment that Nick had accepted Conaxis wrong? And what did the writer mean by "racial heritage" when referring to Greeks?

Eventually Nick must have come to terms with his Greek heritage. In Walpole he was affectionately and popularly known as "Nick the Greek," and these are the first three words that appear next to his picture in the 1965 Walpole High School yearbook.

What may account for Nick's rejection of his ethnicity? There are at least three possible explanations.

1. The DCG reports repeat the comment that Nick did not look

and did not act Greek. They begin when he was two. The implication is that being Greek carries a stigma. Did social workers tell Nick he did not look Greek? If not, did Nick sense the perceptions that he was light-skinned and looked English, and did he subconsciously begin to feel that he should not be Greek?

2. As we saw, Nick was very upset after his mother's visits to his foster home in 1951, before Ourania was re-hospitalized. Perhaps his emotions about his Greek mother partly shaped his feelings about being Greek.

3. The search for an adoptive Greek family, which lasted two years, and which Nick resented and feared deeply, may have also contributed to his rejection of his ethnicity. Being Greek threatened the stability of his home life. Wanting the Nixon name may have been his way to avoid the threatening adoption.

Ourania, Stacia, and the Boys It remains unclear to me how often Jimmy and Nick saw Ourania and Stacia after they were separated from them in 1948. It is clear that Nick avoided his family of origin, and, at the same time, according to Stacia, he also longed for one.

There is only one DCG entry about Ourania visiting the boys in the foster homes (March 7, 1951). The visits took place during the year she was outside mental hospitals. "Children were all dressed up as mother was expected. Nickey did not show any emotion when mother arrived, but foster mother says he is quite upset after visits." A four-year-old could not have understood why he could not live with his mother, nor could he begin to know what it meant that she was in a mental hospital. He probably saw her as a strange visitor, not his mother. Nothing is said in the DCG entries about whether Ourania visited them again, or whether they visited her, between 1951 and 1961, when Nick left Rowley for Walpole. (Ourania was hospitalized for the second time sometime later in 1951.)

Stacia told me that Nick and Jimmy did not visit Ourania during their eleven years with the Nixons. *The boys didn't have any contact with her. Nick, as he got older, he went. Jim, when he got married, had more contact. But growing up I don't believe they had any contact. Met State was a scary place. A very scary place. My children have had quite an experience* visiting Ourania with Stacia. A*nd to this day they have vivid memories.* In another place during our interview, Stacia referred to one possible visit of her

mother with the boys, but she wasn't sure of the date (see below).

Perhaps the saddest document I read during my research is the letter from Ednah Howard, a social worker at Metropolitan State Hospital, to the Lawrence office of DCG, on May 28, 1959.

"Re: Stacia, James, and Nicholas Conaxis

"Gentlemen:

"Mrs. Lorraine Konaxis, the mother of the above-named children, is a patient at our hospital and has recently expressed a desire to know the whereabouts of her family. Would you be willing to give us any information possible as to where they are living, their adjustment in the home or homes, their school progress, recreational and religious interests, and any pertinent information that would be of interest to the mother of these children.

"We would appreciate hearing from you as soon as possible and thank you for assisting us in our effort to help our patient."

I read and heard nothing to indicate when and why Ourania became "Lorraine", nor why they wrote her last name with a K instead of a C.

I kept reading the letter, trying to imagine Ourania, locked up at Met State about an hour away from Nick and Jimmy and only minutes away from Stacia's home in Watertown, wondering about her children's whereabouts and well-being.

The DCG response of June 9, 1959, which referred only to Nick and Jimmy, gave an accurate, brief update of their lives, including their desire to be adopted by the Nixons and the Nixons' statement that they were unable to adopt them. It then added that "they resent any reference to their Greek ancestry" and concluded: "Both boys appear to be quite secure in their foster home, as they are progressing quite normally with the usual childhood problems of their ages. They are boys anybody would be proud of. I plan to continue them in this home, as this is the only one they recognize and there is such a strong emotional tie between the boys and the foster parents."

If Ourania was given the letter to read, or was told its contents, what did she feel and think about her children and their lives?

Nick had some contact with Ourania during his four years in Walpole, 1961-65. The reports of the five Evaluation and Treatment Conferences on Nick held at Longview Farm during those years in-

clude short references to contact between them. "Has only visited mother once, with one letter since Dec., 1963. [Once since he had come to Longview Farm in August 1961?] More thought to visiting her should be encouraged." (June 10, 1964.) The next report, November 25, 1964, says that Nick "still remains fearful of mother with unresolved and ambivalent ties remaining." An indication of Nick's emotional state was that he did not attend Stacia's wedding that month because of "his fears over his mother's attending." It does not say whether Nick actually said that or staff made that inference (more on that in the next chapter).

Nobody could tell me whether or how often Nick visited Ourania, or whether either wrote to the other, after Nick left Walpole in 1965.

During the 1950s, it seems that there was only one contact between Stacia and the boys. The earliest reference to any contact appears in a DCG document that refers to an upcoming visit Stacia would make to Beverly to visit her brothers. It appears that the Watertown Department of Public Welfare, where Stacia lived, wrote to DCG to make arrangements for her to visit her brothers. On May 24, 1955, DCG replied, "The boys are most anxious for her to come and spend the day. The foster mother will be agreeable to making any plans with your department concerning Stacia's visit… You have our permission to make arrangements directly with the foster mother concerning your initial visit to her home. Also, if the foster mother wishes she may extend an invitation to Stacia to spend part of her summer with the boys at [cottage] at Province Lake [NH]. We will be interested in hearing more about Stacia and the result of her visits to our foster home."

Despite the reference to visits, the 1955 visit may have been the only time the three siblings were together for the next five years. In a passing comment, we read on February 8, 1960, that Maria Nixon told the boys' social worker "they knew that [Ourania] was in a mental institution as their sister had told them this on her only visit about five years ago."

During our interview, Stacia thought it may have been more than once. *I remember going with the social worker and visiting the boys. They would take me and visit, and it was a short visit. There was no connection [between us] because we just weren't together. We didn't grow up together…. the social worker would bring me. I don't know if I remember one time going with*

my mother. I think I went with my mother….

Q: So it was always you going to see them instead of them coming to see you.

Right. Right. They never came to me. Maybe because I was the older one.

Q: How often would that be? Once a week? Once a month?

No, it wasn't that often. I can't remember, but it wasn't that often.

Stacia said that contacts between the siblings began to increase around 1960. *And then when we really became close is in my senior year in high school, or junior, I was a junior or a senior [1959-61], and the boys were older and they came on their own and we met…. [One time] they came to Watertown on the bus, on the train there, and I will never forget because my girlfriends and I met them at the trolley near my house on Mount Auburn Street. We had more contact because they were older and we could do it on our own.* She thought they visited about once a month. When I asked if they also talked on the phone or wrote letters, she said she did not remember any phone contact.

Nick's family history caused him fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. Because of these emotions he avoided talking about his family with his friends, in Rowley, in Walpole, and even after Walpole (as we will see in later chapters). David Hardy, a Rowley friend, said, *Nick never said much about his family. You couldn't get anything out of him.* [Q: Did he ever talk about his parents?] *Never did, no. No. He was very quiet about that. I know people tried to get him to say anything and he would quickly change the subject.*

I asked Barbara, his Rowley friend, if Nick mentioned his mother. *No. I think he might have mentioned her once….* In the 1950s, *things were in the closet, people didn't talk about things … especially something like* Nick's mother being in the mental hospital. *You would be embarrassed.* It may be that Barbara and others who made the same comment are correct in their observation that in the 1950s and 1960s teenagers did not talk about their families, especially mental hospitalization or other matters considered deviant. But Nick went beyond not talking about his family past. For example, he told many people that his mother was dead. It must have been painful to think and talk about his family history of death and hospitalization.

Life in the Nixon home, as good as it probably was and as Jimmy remembers it, may not have been what Nick wanted. If Nick watched

Leave It to Beaver and other TV family shows of the 1950s, he might have felt that life had cheated him. He saw the families of his Rowley friends and he spent much time with David Hardy's family. Life in his foster home may not have met his wishes.

Leaving Rowley

On August 15, 1961, Nick and Jimmy were sent to Longview Farm in Walpole, a residential facility for "emotionally disturbed" teenage boys. Nick stayed there until he finished high school in 1965, but Jimmy asked and was allowed to return to the Nixons after a year at Longview.

After years of escalating conflicts with and punishments from the Nixons, and after Nick ran away and later caused property destruction at the school, DCG concluded that Nick could not stay with the Nixons. Even though Jimmy and Nick did at one time demand to move to a new family, at the end they insisted they wanted to stay with the Nixons. By then, it was too late.

Nick's social workers and school personnel clearly and repeatedly said that the Nixons were overly strict disciplinarians with Nick, especially during his later Rowley years. Nick's friend David Hardy told me a similar story. *His foster parents were very strict with him. Not so much with Jimmy, but they were with him. He would have to bend over backwards. He would have to do everything right.* David remembered going over to Nick's house to play with him and being told that Nick was restricted to the house and the yard and could not play with him. *"I'm grounded." Who knows what for. I know he was outgoing, he loved fun, he was mischievous, but not to any sense where he damaged property, except for that one time.*

Nick's social worker and teachers did express concerns over some of Nick's actions, but they repeatedly stressed that they did not see these actions as serious problems and were not worried. Maria Nixon, however, did see them as serious and her punishments of Nick became stricter over the years. By the end, the situation became untenable.

The following chronology of Nick's actions, of teachers' and social workers' comments and recommendations, and of the Nixons' actions shows the events that ended the longest period of stability in Nick's life.

Nick's stay in Rowley began with promise. The Nixons moved to

Rowley on October 4, 1955. Later that month, October 31, G. Linehan, Nick's social worker, visited the home, where she found Maria Nixon but not Nick (he was in school). "Foster mother told worker that Nicky loves the Rowley School and the teacher. He has joined the cub scouts and is looking forward to their weekly meetings." Immediately after that comment, however, we read: "Nicky presented a minor problem in the neighborhood when he deliberately filled in a cellar [with what?] that was being dug out by one of the neighbors. This neighbor called the chief of police who talked to Nicky and he became frightened and admitted that he had been filling in the cellar just because he had nothing else to do."

On the same day Linehan visited Nick's school and talked with his third grade teacher. "She reported difficulty with Nick in the beginning but now feels that he is settling down. All of his acts are attention seeking. She mentioned that when the rest of the class were saluting the flag, Nicholas would deliberately stand with his hands in his pockets or in his ears. She also pointed out that he had a habit of swearing under his breath."

Linehan reported that Nick stopped after "class disapproval." The entry ends with the comment that the teacher "does not appear to be discouraged by his behavior." On May 4, 1956, the teacher "called him a likeable youngster, said that his chief fault is that he will do anything for attention." In later years, others made similar comments about Nick's search for attention.

On August 2, 1956, Maria Nixon gave positive reports about Nick. "Nicholas continues to want to be of help to her; he is perfectly willing to do any chores assigned to him. When he does get in to any minor difficulties, it is usually because of being influenced by his brother Jimmy."

More serious problems appear in January 1957. Nick's clowning and attention-seeking began to get him in trouble at school and at home. After her last visit to the Nixons as Nick's social worker, Linehan noted on January 31: "Foster mother reported that Nicky is still engaged in attention-seeking tactics. His constant clown actions earned him a C in conduct and more recently a poor in conduct. She deprived him of watching T.V. and kept him confined to the yard," which I assume meant he could play in the yard but not leave it. The report did

not indicate the length of these punishments. Later, Nick was confined to the yard for three months.

Nick's new social worker, L. S. Duley, talked with the principal of the Rowley Center School on May 10, 1957. "He advised me that Nicky was not the best nor the worst in behavior in school and was doing average work… He expressed an opinion that possibly Nicky might be having difficulty because of the demands the foster parents were making of him. Keough thought that they were a little over-strict with the boy." That last comment was repeated often, without the qualifying "a little." Later in the report Duley added "Nicky appeared to me as a normal active boy, with behavior problems of his age."

On March 3, 1958, Duley visited Nick's teacher again, who repeated that Nick did not present a major problem and was "very honest and tries hard." She was "quite understanding and tolerant of his behavior" and found Maria Nixon's punishment excessive and ineffective. "I pointed out that the foster mother is inclined to be very demanding of him and punished him rather severely for his poor mark in deportment." Duley added that she made exceptions to her punishment and it may not be "as severe as it seems." He closed with: "She does have Nicky's interest at heart and on the whole can offer the boy a great deal. He does have some security with her."

Then, on April 23, Duley talked with Nicky and Mrs. Nixon. "She told me that she had relaxed her discipline somewhat and that Nicky had promptly tried to take advantage of her." No details of relaxed discipline or taking advantage are offered. I cannot tell if the next sentence represents Maria Nixon's or Duley's thought: "His behavior although irritating is not too serious and basically the boy is a well behaved child."

The next punishment came soon, around July 7. Nicky and Jimmy were "restricted to the yard for a week" because Nicky had yelled at the neighbors' guests. No indication what the boys said or why they yelled at them. The brief entry (five lines) ends, "No doubt, Mrs. Nixon will modify her punishment before the week is out."

On August 17, 1958, a few days after Nick turned eleven, Duley says again that there is no major worry with Nick's behavior. "He is very active and curious and can of course be irritating on occasion. The boy has an effervescent personality and [is] full of enthusiasm.

Mrs. Nixon at times finds it difficult to get him to comply with her house rules. He will not hang up his clothes, nor will he keep his room clean and he is forgetful about little minor details." (Two years earlier she had said that Nick was willingly helping with the chores.) There follows the usual comment modifying her complaints. Again, it's unclear if it's Duley's or Maria Nixon's conclusion: "However, he is not a real problem to her and his behavior is consistent with his personality."

The situation between Maria Nixon and Nick seems to have remained calm for the next year.

The DCG reports for the following events present a somewhat unclear sequence of events. What follows, however, is the essence of what took place that led to Nick leaving the Nixons and Rowley.

The conflict between Nick and the Nixons became more intense in 1960 and reached a crisis in 1961: Tensions arose steadily in the Nixon household; Duley and the school continued to believe Mrs. Nixon was overly strict; Nick, and then Jimmy, began to complain about the situation at home. In an entry marked "3/17/ - 5/26/60," Duley reports: "Things seem to be about the same with Nicky. Mrs. Nixon complains about his irresponsible ability, carelessness and failure to comply with her wishes. She still insists upon punishing him for minor behavior problems. I talked to her repeatedly about her overdemands regarding his behavior." (That is the entire entry.)

In the fall of 1960, the school still did not consider Nick a serious behavior problem and still thought Mrs. Nixon was too strict with him. So the principal, as he had been doing for some time, "tries to avoid reporting any of Nick's behavior, knowing that she punishes him at home for his behavior at school" (October 25).

A month later, November 21, Maria Nixon was "upset by his behavior" and must have felt she could do no more to control Nick. She called Duley, suggesting that he send Nick to a group home for two weeks "so he would find out how well he is treated by her" and become "more obedient and less rebellious." The two of them met Nick when he came home from school later that day. Maria "called him into the room and tried to force him to state that he wanted to move" from the Nixons. "The boy denied he ever said this and started to cry." So on that day, and to the end, even though he was very unhappy, Nick

kept insisting he wanted to stay with the Nixons. He was facing a great emotional conflict.

In the spring of 1961, Nick ran away from home twice and later caused major property destruction in the school. On May 23, Maria Nixon told Duley that "Nicholas had run away the previous night at 7 P.M. He did not return so Mrs. Nixon called the State Police at 1 A.M. He was not located that evening, but turned up the next morning in the home of one of his friends. He hid in the woods all night and one of his girl friends brought him sandwiches." (The other incident of running away is mentioned but not discussed.)

From Duley's reports, it seems clear that the school destruction convinced DCG to move Nick out of Rowley and the Nixon home. A few days before July 8, 1961, "Nicky had caused considerable damage to the Pine Grove School. He had broken several windows and had scratched a plastic sky light" so badly that it would have to be replaced. The school committee, after it was told that Nick was leaving Rowley for Longview Farm, decided not to prosecute the case and to try to "cover damages through his family." On the way to Longview on August 15, Duley "asked Nicky about his active delinquency and he would give no reason for it and claimed he didn't know why he did it. Of course, he knew that he was wrong in doing this. No doubt his action was based on resentment to the community and school for his present replacement" (move out of Rowley).

Duley reported:

"On 4/4/61, Mrs. Nixon called the office in my absence requesting replacement, because of Nick's uncontrolled temper outbursts and his fighting with other children. Mr. N. [this is a rare mention of Mister Nixon] was so upset by the boy's behavior that he stated that he was getting to the point where it was either him or Nicky that had to leave the home…. On 5/25, I received a call from Jimmy who stated he was speaking for himself and his brother, requesting that I move them to another home immediately. I talked to these boys the next day…. I told them that I was planning to move them to a group home, probably Longview Farm. When faced with this plan they protested; they didn't want to leave their friends in Rowley and their activities in the community, such as athletics. They were very apprehensive what life would be like at the Longview Farm if they

went there and were unwilling to accept replacement, even though they had called me the previous night. I tried to assure them the best I could, but they remained apprehensive and unwilling to make this change. They considered it as punishment.

"On July 8, I saw Mrs. Nixon at her home. She told me that Nicky and Jimmy were very upset over leaving. She herself felt this move was drastic despite the fact that she and her husband on two occasions had called the office demanding replacement."

Despite everyone's protestations against the move, it seemed inevitable and necessary. Duley had written to DCG administration on June 26 that conditions at the Nixon home were "rapidly deteriorating. These boys could be delinquent if permitted to stay in the foster home."

How and why did conditions deteriorate so rapidly that Nick's separation from the Nixons became inevitable? Various conditions, developments, and people's wishes seem to have come together to force the move to Longview Farm.

1. Even though Nick had said many times that he wanted to stay with the Nixons, Stacia thought Nick had a deeper longing. *Nick always wanted his own family. That's why he always rebelled against his foster parents. Jim went with the flow. But Nicky never wanted to be there. And that's why he was always very rebellious.*
2. Nick felt very insecure in the Nixon household, partly because of the threat of being moved out during the failed adoption process, and also because the Nixons did not adopt him because, they said, they could not afford to do so. Duley pointed to a "certain instability and insecurity in the home. There are several other children there." Nick had seen children come and go.
3. For his entire life, from early childhood on, Nick always questioned authority. The Nixons' very strict rules and frequent discipline clashed with his personality. Duley, Nick's teachers, and the school principal all thought that the Nixons were overly strict, but were unable to convince them to relax their standards and punishment. In a household of six children close in age, the Nixons may have found it necessary to have strict expectations and standards.
4. Mary was one of those six children. Jimmy thought that Nick began to rebel when she entered the home as a new foster child and prob-

ably reduced the time the Nixons devoted to Nick. Duley seemed to agree and reported in May: "… Nicky cannot accept Mary. He considers her 'crazy' and when thwarted in any way by her remarks, he retaliates by calling her names and talking about her problems. Nicholas knows that his own mother was a patient in a mental institution and is consequently very sensitive in this area. In March, there was quite a conflict between the two and Mrs. Nixon without my knowledge took Mary and Nicholas to see … the Probation officer to talk to them. For a day or so, there was a better relationship."

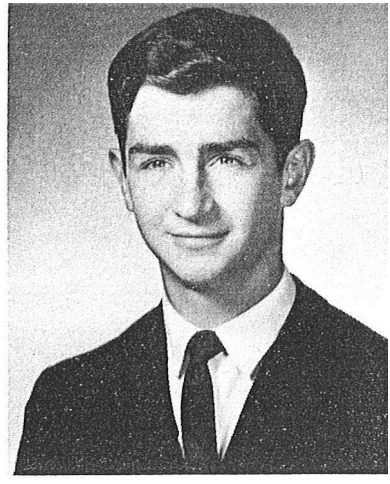
5. What would the Nixons say about how they raised Nick and why he eventually left their home? We can only speculate. They may have found it very challenging raising six children close in age, and may have seen strict standards and punishments as the only way to run their house. And there was goodness in their home. After all, Jimmy went back in 1962 and later had a good life.

Comments

Nick's eleven years with the Nixons were generally happy ones. Jimmy has good memories of those years. The brothers grew up in a house with two adults who liked them. Jimmy believes that the Nixons provided them with a normal 1950s childhood: vacations, Boy Scouts, trips, and other experiences. Nick was charming, sociable, and fun to be with. His friends still have very warm memories of their years with Nick. His social workers and teachers also liked Nick, despite the challenges he presented at times.

But Nick also lived in a constant state of insecurity and anxiety. He feared he would be taken out of the only home and family he could remember. His fears were real, fed by the long adoption search and the comings and goings of other children in the Nixon household.

In two conversations, one between the two of us and the other between the two of us and Stacia, Jimmy again said he had good memories of the eleven years with the Nixons. In a letter to Stacia in 1968, he referred to them as "mother and father." But Jimmy also kept mentioning abandonment issues Nick and he faced growing up. They knew they were foster children. Despite all the Nixons did for them, Nick may not have seen them as parents. The Nixons' inability, or unwillingness, to adopt them only added to their fears of abandonment.



1965
Nick, Walpole High School yearbook

4

Longview Farm and Walpole

According to DCG and Longview Farm reports, Nick continued to struggle with insecurity, anxiety, and some behavior problems in his first year at Longview Farm. Although these problems did not disappear, the reports say that Nick made considerable improvement through the years in controlling his anxiety and behavior. Also, he was accepted and respected by the other boys at Longview and made many friends in Walpole. Academically, Nick continued to be an average student because he still could not focus on his studies, mostly because of his anxiety, according to one social worker.

But fairly soon after he arrived at Longview, Nick focused on the high school social life and his Walpole friends. He became deeply involved in high school and town activities and was very popular. Everyone who talked to me about him had happy memories of Nick and their times together. Everyone. And everyone said Nick had many friends. As he was in Rowley, Nick was friendly, funny, and mischievous. But people did not know about Nick's troubled past; Nick kept it to himself.

Enduring Rowley Connections

Until they gradually diminished in time, Nick maintained his ties with Rowley. Friends wrote and visited him, and he wrote back and went to Rowley. DCG notes report that in 1961-62 Nick received five to six letters a week from his friends. Jimmy continued to visit Nick after he returned to Rowley in the fall of 1962.

Nick's relationship with the Nixons, however, remained stressful and eventually ended. The first sign of trouble appears in a DCG entry of October 10, 1961, two months after Nick left Rowley: "Nicki has not received any letters from Mrs. Nixon whereas Jimmy has been receiving them."

Longview and DCG must have encouraged Nick to visit the Nixons. Most boys at the Farm would visit some family during holidays and vacations. Nick apparently went to the Nixons for Thanksgiving in November 1961. The visit must have been tense. Longview staff said on December 5 "that in regards to Christmas plans they do not feel that Nick will be visiting with Mrs. Nixon in Rowley, as the previous situation [Thanksgiving visit] did not work well." It seems that "Mrs. Nixon had laid down the law Thanksgiving to Nick – 'if you want to come, cut your hair.' " Another report explains that the argument was basically over who had the authority and who was "boss" in the family.

After some months Nick cut his hair and did visit in late April 1962. His relationship with the Nixons seemed to be going well and Nick stayed with them in the summer of 1962. With the exception of a day back at Longview (for reasons not explained), Nick stayed in Rowley from June 8 to August 13. A July DCG document said "all is going well. However, he was assured that if problems should arise he may return to LVF at any point."

That may have been Nick's last visit with the Nixons. At a Longview Farm conference on Nick in June 1964 staff concluded: "Relinquish Nixon foster home and utilize only as a visiting privilege to see his brother." I found nothing on what happened in the two years since the summer of 1962 stay with the Nixons. Jimmy said that Nick never reconciled with them. Indeed, when Nick was invited to Jimmy's high school graduation in June 1964, he "was unable to attend. Said that his former foster parents were to be there and he was not about to meet them." (DCG, June 15, 1964.)

Walpole in the 1960s

Walpole is south of Rowley and twenty miles southwest of Boston. Founded in 1724, it had a population of 3,572 in 1900, grew to 9,109 by 1950, and to 14,068 by 1960, a year before Nick arrived. It kept growing during the 1960s, reaching 18,149 in 1970. The 2010 census found 24,070 people in Walpole.

While I was studying Longview Farm, I visited Walpole four days a week from September 1967 to June 1968. It seemed a primarily suburban, lower-middle-class community. I remember meeting no Black or Hispanic people in Walpole (except for four boys living at Longview Farm). The 1965 high school yearbook contains no photos of obviously Black, Hispanic, or Asian students. The names do show an ethnic diversity of Italian, Irish, and other groups.

Emily remembered Walpole in the 1960s as a good place to grow up. *I just thought it was a wonderful hometown community.* It was a nice environment with good schools. The teachers were *all very good.* There were many activities and opportunities for the children, as we'll see later in this chapter.

A very popular spot for students was Mimi's Variety, a store in the center of town, across from the town common and a short walk from the high school. Kevin Groden said that after school *almost everybody bolted down, had to go by Mimi's…. We were cool, we smoked cigarettes and we would buy Lucky Strikes there. It was a regular stop. Got soda. [But] there were too many kids there* and Mimi would not let them hang out for long. Larry Richard had similar memories of Mimi's: *Everybody met down there…. It was busy all the time. You would go there for everything, ice-cream, whatever you needed.* During the ten months I went to Longview Farm, as soon as I approached the driveway I was besieged by boys looking for a ride to the center and Mimi's. Three to four boys jumped into my Volkswagen Beetle as I drove back to the center. Nick probably frequented Mimi's also.

Most people reminisced about the good old days of their youth in Walpole. Not everyone did, however. In 2011, perhaps reflecting the looming social changes of the 1960s, Kevin Groden remembered Walpole High School as a controlling institution that did not allow students to think for themselves. *The principal wasn't someone that nurtured*

you. He was your drill sergeant. And he was the one who told you when you could fart, he was the one to tell you not to laugh.

Nick at Longview Farm

While in Walpole, Nick lived in Longview Farm, a group home for "emotionally disturbed" boys. I did not find anyone who lived with Nick during his four years at Longview, except for Jimmy who was there for a year in 1961-62, so I have very little direct knowledge of his life there. The DCG documents provide some useful information on that period in Nick's life. I also have extensive and detailed notes from my visits in 1967-68. Although the following description comes from those notes, Longview during the ten months I studied it probably had changed little from Nick's day. A most important continuity was Bill Beckler, resident director at the Farm both when Nick was there and later, when I studied it. (For details about the field notes I took, see Appendix B.)

Longview Farm was operated by the New England Home for Little Wanderers, which was founded in Boston in 1865. Concerned Bostonians then wanted to provide care for orphans and other destitute and needy children and families.

In the 1960s, it provided:

- Services for unmarried mothers
- Adoption services
- Foster home services
- Residential treatment programs – Longview, founded in 1940 on a site of 160 acres, and two group homes for girls.

This is how New England Home described its group homes in 1969:

"The Group Home Program of New England Home consists of open residential treatment units which offer psychiatric, casework, group work, group therapy, psychological, and remedial and tutorial services on a planned and integrated basis. This multi-discipline approach is further augmented by therapeutically designed group living programs. The program is planned to meet the special needs of emotionally disturbed teen-age boys and girls who have encountered problems adjusting to family and community life, but who have the capacity, when involved in a controlled and corrective group living environment, to function in the community….

"Our group homes function with the conviction that each young person under their guidance is an individual, requiring a specialized and individualized kind of help. The progress of each child is evaluated regularly with the referring agency."

Longview in the 1960s had a capacity for twenty boys, twelve to nineteen years old. It was relatively open and free; there were no physical barriers and the boys could, and often did, just walk away for a day, for a few days, or for good There was frequent contact with the community and most boys attended public schools. The director and assistant director lived next to the building housing the boys.

Who were the boys sent to Longview in the 1960s? Erik, one of the boys, told me "they can't get along with their mother, their father, or some other relative where they live." Some boys, he said, don't have parents or have only one. Don, another boy, told me that boys were sent to the Farm for "hooking, stealing; for doing delinquent things." I asked why they were not committed to correctional institutions. He explained they were not "bad enough yet" for that, and were sent to Longview to help them stop their delinquent behavior.

Indeed, in 1968, only five of the seventeen boys then living at the Farm had been in any serious trouble with the law. Bill Beckler often said at the weekly staff meetings that almost all boys could leave Longview tomorrow if "half-suitable" homes and families were available to them. During a long and heated staff meeting, a psychiatrist said, "We cannot provide families for them and undo their past. The goal for most of the boys is to teach them how to grow up without a family, how to grow away from it, to become independent of it and survive without it." (From my field notes, paraphrasing him.)

The boys came almost entirely from working-class and poor backgrounds. In some cases, their parents disappeared from their lives very early in life, as was the case with Nick. In most cases, one or both parents were in and out of their lives, leaving them for a while and later establishing contact again. Only one of the seventeen boys had lived continuously with both parents until just before he came to Longview. Their lives had been disrupted by parental desertion, abandonment, separation, or divorce. The families had been in regular contact with various social agencies and the courts.

Bill Beckler and his staff worked hard to make Longview a positive and warm experience for the boys. But it wasn't the home and family they longed for. One boy told me he thought Longview was helpful to them, but "if I had my way I would be home right now. But that is the breaks, I guess."

Even though their families had failed them, the boys wanted letters from them and to visit them. Often I heard boys complain to each other and staff that they had received no letters or calls from their family. My field notes include many references to boys waiting by the phone or checking the mail as soon as they returned from school. Visits home were a constant preoccupation. They would ask their social workers if they could visit for a day, a weekend, a week. Sometimes such visits were possible.

After he broke with the Nixons, Nick did not have a home to visit. His father was dead, his mother in a mental hospital. There is nothing in the DCG documents about who, if anyone, Nick went to stay with on holidays and vacations. In 1964 he was visiting his sister Stacia.

For many boys, Longview was a home they could visit after they left it. Many did; Nick did. In my field notes I wrote that most boys at Longview in 1968 had not lived with Nick but knew him "from the many times he visited the farm after he left." Judy Beckler told me in 2012 that Nick visited often after he left in 1965. During my ten months at Longview, I saw and heard of many former residents, about one a week, coming back for a visit. For example, for a while Doug was dropping by the Farm for a few hours almost daily.

Longview provided some amenities for the boys: a pool, an outdoor basketball court, a baseball field, excursions and trips during all four seasons, and frequent attendance at sports events. Jimmy remembered that in 1963 a social worker took Nick and him to a baseball game in Boston and they had a great time.

They partook in all the activities common to teenagers in Walpole: dances, football games, movies, concerts, and so on. Some dated local girls, as Nick dated Emily for three years (see below). They were part of town life and were in contact with many people in Walpole. The boys at times complained that because they had to return to the Farm after school for their chores, they could not hang around the center

with their friends (exceptions were made for partaking in sports and other school activities).

How did Nick experience his four years at Longview? I have no direct knowledge, but some people did provide indirect information. Barbara, a Rowley friend, said Nick wrote her that he hated it and couldn't wait to leave. That is probably how he felt at the beginning of his stay, and surely Longview never felt like the home and family Nick may have longed for. But others told me Nick had a generally positive stay at the Farm.

David Hardy, another Rowley friend, said, *I vaguely remember him saying it was fun there.* Jimmy, who shared a room at Longview with Nick for a year, has positive memories. *It wasn't a bad experience…. I had nothing against Longview Farm.* He left in 1962 because he missed Rowley and the *traditional home environment* with the Nixons. But at Longview *we were fine*, with all the amenities mentioned earlier. Larry Richard, a high school friend, said Nick *never complained about the Farm…. He never complained about his situation…. Never complained about his plight to me.* Emily, who spent considerable time with Nick, told me Nick seemed *fairly content. I don't remember too many complaints … his experience at the Farm was pretty positive for him.* She laughed over the phone when she said Nick did complain that they did not have regular toothpaste and had to mix a powder with water to form a paste they could use. *And I remember Nick kind of going, "Why don't they give us toothpaste? Why do we have to use this tooth powder?"*

Clean teeth remained a concern for Nick. He wrote from Vietnam how important, but how difficult, it was for him to brush his teeth.

The DCG documents provide some information, and even more judgments and evaluations, on Nick's stay. Among them are five reports of "Evaluation and Treatment Conferences" on Nick, from March 1963 to November 1964. There may have been other conferences on him, but they were not included among the DCG documents given to Jimmy and Stacia.

I attended about thirty such conferences in 1967-68. In attendance were Bill Beckler and other house staff, the boy's social worker, and other social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists from the New England Home. The discussions were animated and sometimes heated.

Usually, when the treatment staff might see a boy's behavior as an indication of psychological problems, Bill would normalize it. He would often say (paraphrasing here), there is nothing wrong with these boys, their major problem is they have no family, or they have a family with problems. (Silently, I almost always agreed with Bill.)

The documents say that Nick had a difficult first year at Longview. But soon he began to control his temper and other behaviors the staff found problematic, became part of the group of boys at the Farm, and made many friends in Walpole.

A December 1961 report says Nick was "sulky and fresh" at school, he provoked fights at Longview, used "excess profanity," and "has been doing absolutely nothing at school." Things must have improved during the year. A summary report from August 1962 states: "On the whole there has been good progress during this placement. Nicky has formed good relationships with his peers and, although there has been defiance, he has adjusted well to authority figures…. In school Nicky has done low average work in the college preparatory course. This is an area in which he has had a real struggle as his anxiety is so close to the surface it has made concentration difficult. Nevertheless, he coped with this problem well enough to successfully complete his freshman year at Walpole High School."

Nick's anxiety was understandable given the insecurity and changes of his life. He struggled with it for the rest of his life, as we will see. Despite that anxiety, he made many friends in high school. It's the funny friend they remember fondly, not his anxieties. Nick probably hid them well from his friends.

The first Evaluation and Treatment report, March 1963, notes the problems that sent Nick to Longview, but is mostly quite positive and hopeful. "Advanced sense of realism; sincerity of responses; loyalty within relationships; extremely appreciative; profits by his experiences; genuine interest in people; maturity in understanding himself." It adds that he had been a "positive influence against immaturity" in the group of Longview boys. There is also a note of concern: "Hyperactivity – (find out why)." That is the entire note.

There was no significant change reported in October 1963. Nick had "many friends" and was respected and liked. There were occasional "blow-ups" but no significant temper tantrums. The positive

trend continued, as we read in the March 1964 report. For example, "more tolerant of frustrating circumstances," "ability to concentrate has grown," and "conscious desire to improve himself," "strives with determination toward maturity in himself and his social relationships." The next two reports, June and November 1964, continue in the same vein.

Included in the various evaluations and concerns are two mentions of Nick's care and concern for children. "Concerns and helps younger children" and "manifests definite empathy with kids." It is reminiscent of Nick at not quite two and a half helping a younger child to undress himself for his nap. It also looks forward to his concern for the children of Vietnam, seen in his letters in Chapter 1.

His empathy for kids may have motivated DCG and Longview to find a summer job for Nick in 1964 as a camp counselor in charge of a group of small boys. But he quit three days before camp season ended. The report does not offer any explanation that Nick or someone else may have given as to why he left. It does say that "this experience stirred up his own anxieties and inadequacies which he was not able to cope with maturely." We can only speculate that some experience at the camp, or perhaps an accumulation of experiences, evoked emotions and memories of his childhood. In a different report from June 1964, before the summer camp, we read: "If pressure becomes too great, he will run in symbolic and literal fashion." Nick ran away at other times later, as we'll see.

Everyone in town knew about Longview Farm and the "Longview kids." Some residents were weary of them. They saw them as "bad" and to be avoided. In turn, some of the boys were weary of some non-Farm students and stayed away from them.

But most Walpole residents accepted them. Some boys sometimes would visit Walpole friends in their homes and I saw some of their friends visiting them at Longview. When I began my research in September 1967, one day on my way to the Farm I picked up a hitchhiking high school student. I wrote in my field notes: "I asked him what he thought of the Longview kids. He told me they are just like any other kids he knew, except that they have had a rough life…. Most of the people in Walpole know of the Farm." Months later,

in July 1968, while I was getting a haircut in the center of town, I told the barber of my connection with Longview. "He said, it's a nice place there, they treat the boys good. He said that most boys come here for their haircuts, and they are really nice kids. Heck [he said], everyone in town knows about the Farm and the boys." Emily remembered that *there wasn't any stigma about being from the Farm…. All boys seemed well adjusted and fit into the high school very well.* Larry Richard said that Longview boys never were any trouble. *We always got along with them…. They had a lot of friends.*

At some point after the 1960s, Longview Farm stopped sending the boys to Walpole public schools and began educating them in a private school on the premises. Thus ended the practice of helping the boys lead a normal life by being integrated in the community. Larry Richard thinks the change came about because more troublesome boys now live at the farm.

Bill Beckler

Longview Farm in the 1960s was Bill's passion, commitment, and creation. For Nick, and for many other boys, Bill became a friend and father figure. It is best to begin his story by including passages from the dissertation I wrote in 1970, and I will use the present tense mostly. Bill died in March 1969, at age 49.

Bill had been the director of the Farm since 1945. His identity and his position at the Farm were intertwined. His total devotion to the place, in terms of interest, time, and involvement was notable. Below I summarize and paraphrase from a 1968 two-hour conversation with Bill.

Bill said that the boys are "real soft inside," they are not as tough as they seem, they act that way partly because they think that's how they should act, these are the images of themselves they have, and partly because they never learned any other way to behave. These kids long to be shown how to behave without getting into trouble, but they are afraid and uncertain.

I said that it seems to me the boys' needs are rather simple. They surely are, said Bill. They are uncomplicated, you need no elaborate explanations about what is wrong with these boys, they need what you and I need, the only problem being that they do not have it. They

need love, someone they can trust. There is little need for therapy, just someone committed to them who can be trusted by them. The surprise is how well they have survived considering what they went through. I feel that when we fail with a kid it's our fault, because we did not reach him, we failed to understand his needs and to get to him to meet them.

Bill's commitment to the boys is much greater than I ever thought. I asked him with how many of the old boys he keeps in contact in the course of the year; he said he hears from at least 50% of them.

I asked if he ever gets tired of being available 24 hours a day. Sure I do now and then, he told me, and when I do I take off to my cabin in the mountains, to get away from it all and relax, you need it. But you have to be committed to the boys, you have to show them you care, and be present when they need you.

He said that most boys could go home tomorrow if there was a "half-suitable" home available. When he was sick recently he sat down and tried to estimate how many could leave, and most could. These boys are normal most of the time, he said. When they misbehave it's because something outside them upsets them (he implied that this something is careless and inefficient staff and uncaring relatives). People tell me now and then that this or that boy is crazy, but I tell them he is not crazy with me, when I see him. These kids misbehave when something bothers them, and so do we all.

Bill's commitment is simple: provide the boys with as normal a life as possible, with all the opportunities children outside Longview have.

These words come from my 1968 notes. Here are some memories of Bill. Jimmy said that Bill *had a special attachment, and to all the kids, they were like his own. He was a father figure. And his kids were his kids. I remember him in that old VW bus taking us on a ski trip. Kids would pile in. Fond memories of Bill.* Stacia, who met Bill a few times and went to his funeral, said *Bill was very, very nice. I can just remember what a wonderful man he was.*

Judy Beckler talked at length about her father's philosophy and commitment to the boys. *I think long before it was seen as what kids needed, my dad really appreciated all those normal developmental moments for kids. He would have absolutely gone out of his way* to provide them. He and his staff would be at the boys' baseball games, drop them off and pick

them up. He worked hard to assure that the boys would *be in the mainstream enjoying their life like anybody else…. The day my father died he was out to dinner with kids that had been at Longview or were in "aftercare." Nobody asked him to do it. He just did it.*

Bill's life and his family's life revolved around Longview and the boys. *It was really our life within Longview. My mom and the four of us [children] were really part of the Farm. We lived on the property. We would be at the Farm at Thanksgiving. We would have gone to the football games to see Nick [and other Longview boys] play. It was my ritual, because that's what we did anyways.*

As he did with many other boys, Bill developed a close relationship with Nick. Emily told me he was a *father figure for Nick.* Stacia said that Nick *did admire him. He really did admire him.* I asked Judy Beckler how close her father was to Nick, closer than to other boys? *I think he was closer…. This more because of what certain kids need or don't need.* Football brought them close; Bill enjoyed watching it and Nick played it. After Nick left Longview they stayed in touch. *My dad stayed in touch with kids as much as they needed it or would allow, and Nick was one of these kids. I think it was mutual. Nick needed to stay in touch. But I also think he was a special kid because he knew what he needed. Some kids don't know at that age what they need.* (See Nick's letter to Bill in Chapter 6.)

Walpole High School

Nick was popular and active during high school. Next to his picture in TOPPER, their yearbook, we read:

"Nick the Greek" Roguish

"College … having fun … pet peeve: Work, dull people … Class Rep: 1, 2, 3, 4; Student Council 3, 4; Hrm. Treas. 2; Basketball 2, 3, L4; Football 3, L4; Chefs' Club 4 … Youth Center."

In his senior year, he received letters (L) for his basketball and football play. He played end on the football team. Brad Brooks, the team quarterback in 1964, said Nick was a good player. He was about six feet tall and thin framed. At the same time, he was strong and powerful (as we will see in Chapter 5). Emily and others remembered him as always well dressed.

Judy Beckler, Bill's daughter, looked back at Nick's time in Walpole. *Nick was very comfortable in the mainstream. He completely immersed*

himself in the town of Walpole…. He was well-liked, pretty charismatic, and fun to be with, interesting to talk to…. He was well liked by teachers, played sports. He was a kid who really fully assimilated into the town of Walpole and people embraced him. So I think he was a special kid.

Over forty-five years after Nick's graduation in 1965, people smiled as they told me vivid and happy memories of Nick, Walpole High School, and the early 1960s. His closest friends, other friends, and acquaintances were all glowing in their description of Nick.

Nick was very well liked. So he had many, many friends. He was bright, and smart, and fun loving. He had a good sense of humor. He could be very generous. (Emily Burnett, who dated Nick for three years)

Who didn't have a crush on him? (Linda Duffy)

All the girls thought he was so cute. (Joan Colligan)

Everybody loved him, especially the girls. Funniest guy you'd ever want to meet. A character all day long. Always fun loving. Never serious. (Bob Turco)

An amazing man. You never heard anybody say a bad word about him. He loved to laugh, loved to joke. (Kevin Groden)

Very happy, charming, very likable. (Tony Lorusso)

He was outgoing, funny in the sense that he was always upbeat. A good, good kid. I never saw him down, sad. (Dennis Nolfi)

He always would be joking and stuff like that. Telling stories or whatever. Nicky was kind of friends with everybody, he had a million friends. He was very personable. He had a very outgoing personality, always had a smile. (Larry Richard)

A magnetic personality. (Steve Kenney)

Nick was very, very cool. Very congenial, got along with people. He was popular. Very popular. Good guy. (Bob Golding)

He was so polite. He was a funny kid. Awesome. He was a giving guy. He was a nice guy. You could just walk up to him and talk to him. (Larry Kneeland, who was also at basic training with Nick)

Laid back. Infectious smile. Got along with everybody. Neat as a pin. (Florence Sundquist, one of his teachers)

Nick never left my memory. (Nancy Walsh, who graduated two years before Nick)

Nick had many friends. He was friendly with everyone, always greeting people, always smiling. Among his friends were Kevin Groden, Tony Lorusso, Bob Turco, Roger Badala, Dennis Nolfi, Larry Richard,

and David and Paul Rimavicus. They hung out together, went to dances and hockey games, and sometimes visited each other's homes. Some of them would visit Nick at the Farm. Kevin's family had an indoor basketball court and Nick would go over to play. Occasionally Nick would get permission to stay overnight at Kevin's house. Dennis said, *we always talked every day in high school…. Hanging out at different people's houses and things like that…. I have nothing but fond memories about Nick … he was always upbeat, and he never complained about his place in life, being at Longview Farm.*

Kevin added that even though Nick had many friends and was friendly with everyone he did not belong to a clique, *he was just an independent kind of guy.*

Everyone said Nick was always joking. *He was always horsing around. He was always the comedian. Not to the point of being disrespectful or anything. He saw a funny side to everything* (Doug Willey). Larry Richard remembered that during their class trip they were at a swimming pool and Nick was *up in the diving board doing crazy dives and stuff like that; he was pretty colorful.* Larry added that Nick was also serious at times; *sometimes you could see the intensity in him … in his eyes … he was concentrating on something and the fooling was aside.*

Nick certainly was bright and intelligent. Dennis Nolfi said, *I'm not sure he realized how intelligent he was and the potential he had.* I heard different stories about Nick as a student. Because he was smart, some people remember him as a good student. Others thought that despite his intelligence, he was at best an average student because he *goofed off too much* and was always *horsing around*. A copy of his high school grades showed about half C's and half D's, with one A in physical education. Larry said those were the grades of many students in the class of 1965. And in his letter of May 17, 1965, to DCG asking for financial help to attend a preparatory school after he left Walpole, Nick wrote that recently he had brought up his academic average from a 72 to a 77.

Looking back to Nick's high school years, Nick's friend Tasha Lingos, who went on to teach, said in 2011: *I'm sure he wasn't a good student. I bet he had ADHD because he could never sit still, he was always moving.* When Nick was living in Rowley, one of his doctors called Nick "hyperactive" (the record gives no explanation or details). Hyperactivity, again not explained, is also mentioned in an Evaluation and Treatment

report from Longview. When I told Stacia that Nick was described as hyperactive, she said that she herself has a little ADHD, as does one of her daughters.

Emily

Nick met Emily Burnett in the tenth grade, probably in the fall of 1962, at a dance at the Walpole Youth Center. She remembered that Nick was reluctant to ask her to dance, so he asked another girl to ask Emily if she would dance with him. In their 1965 yearbook, "Nick" is written next to her photograph. The Class Will of 1965 says Emily "leaves in the NICK of time."

In a condolence letter Emily sent to Stacia on May 14, 1968, she wrote: *As you know, Nick and I were very close all through high school, and I share in the sorrow of his loss. They were good and happy years and we had many happy times together, including a visit and dinner out with you and Killy* (Stacia's husband).

Fond memories came back to Emily when we talked. A*nd we talked by the hour on the telephone…. He would call me, and I would be on the phone and my dad would be downstairs [she laughs here] and he would say, "Emily, when are you getting off the phone?"* [What would you talk about?] *I don't remember…. And then I would call my best friend Patty and we would rehash. And of course we had our little dramas occasionally, like all high school couples do.*

They spent many afternoons together. *After school we would walk down to the public library and do homework together.* Even though Longview boys were required to return to the Farm after school to do their chores, Nick *seemed to have no trouble spending time with me…. Occasionally he would come over to my house … and my parents liked him. And occasionally I would go over to the Farm.*

Some Sundays they would go to church together. *We would sit in the balcony sometimes…. Hold hands or whatever. I can't remember.* They went to proms, class trips, dances, the movies, and sports events. A major social event in Walpole in the 1960s was going into Boston to watch high school hockey games. *<u>Everyone</u> would go in and watch them.*

Emily recalled a day in their junior year when they went window-shopping in Boston. They stopped at a jewelry store, where she admired a *pretty pendant set with white gold and little icicles coming down the top of the pearl.* Nick bought it for her. *I still have it.*

They were a steady dating couple that had *the normal dates that high school students have. When we were younger Bill Beckler was a father figure for Nick. He would pick me up, along with Nick, for dates, and then he would drop us off at the movies, or miniature golfing, things like that. And then pick us up again and take me home and go back to the Farm with Nick.*

A special day in their relationship was the time Nick invited Emily to accompany him during a visit to his sister Stacia, probably in 1964. *He wanted me to come along with him.* She suspected that Nick had not seen Stacia for some years and wanted her to provide *a little bit of support for him…. I think Nick was nervous about it. Stacia was very nice. And we were there probably a couple of hours and just chatting.* (A June 1964 Longview Farm report on Nick notes that "Nick's relationship with sister is insecure.")

In the fall of 1965, Emily went to college in Ohio. *We kind of lost touch … occasionally we would get in touch with each other,* and perhaps wrote two letters to each other. She said the three years they were together were among the happiest in Nick's life. *I just remember him being very happy.*

Nick and His Family

Nick did have contact with Stacia and Jimmy during his Walpole years. But because people cannot remember, I cannot tell how frequently he saw them. Nor do I know how often Nick saw his mother during that time. She attended Stacia's wedding, but Nick did not (see below). Stacia said that as Nick got older he went to see their mother at Metropolitan State Hospital in Waltham (about twenty miles north of Walpole and ten miles west of Boston). *Nick was the one that really wanted to see his mother. And he did. I remember that one time he came to the hospital.* A June 1964 report from Longview Farm notes that Nick "has only visited mother once, with one letter since Dec., 1963."

Jimmy and Nick were roommates during the year Jimmy was at Longview. They continued to see each other when Nick visited Rowley, and Jimmy went to Walpole to see Nick. Emily never met Jimmy, but said Nick *must have mentioned him a few times* (this memory came to her after we were talking for a while). After Stacia married Killy in 1964, they would visit Nick in Walpole. Earlier I mentioned Nick and Emily's visit with them. Hugh Forster, who lived with Nick at the

Farm, wrote Stacia on May 27, 1968: *I don't know you, but Nickie used to talk about you and your husband so much I feel as I do.*

But Nick never made it to Stacia and Killy's wedding. They had brought his tuxedo to him at Longview. *The tux was hanging. He was all ready to come to the wedding, he was going to be an usher. If you see my movies of my wedding, I was crying all the way down the aisle. It was my brother not being there.* [Q: Why didn't he make it?] *Because I was getting married and he thought he was going to lose me.* Nick may have also avoided the wedding because he feared his mother would be there. According to the November 1964 Evaluation and Treatment report on Nick, he "still remains fearful of mother with unresolved and ambivalent ties remaining."

All these years later Stacia remembered vividly how much Nick wanted a family (as did all the Longview boys I met in 1967-68). *Nick always wanted his own family. That's why he rebelled against his foster parents. And that's why he was always very rebellious.* The Nixons, Longview Farm, and Bill Beckler, try as they did, could not fulfill that longing.

Nick, like most other boys at Longview, said little or nothing to other people about his family. To some, he never talked about them; to other people, he lied, such as telling people his mother was dead. Everyone knew that Nick lived at Longview. Walpole residents all knew about the boys at the Farm. Everyone also knew, or suspected, that Nick had had an unhappy family history, but rarely knew any details. Nick did not mention his years in Rowley as a foster child, even to his closest friends. Friend after friend told me Nick's past, his problems, and his family history were closed to them. Said Kevin Groden, a good friend: *Certainly never, ever once brought up his past with me. And I bet almost everybody he spoke to would tell you the same thing. Never. Never a word.*

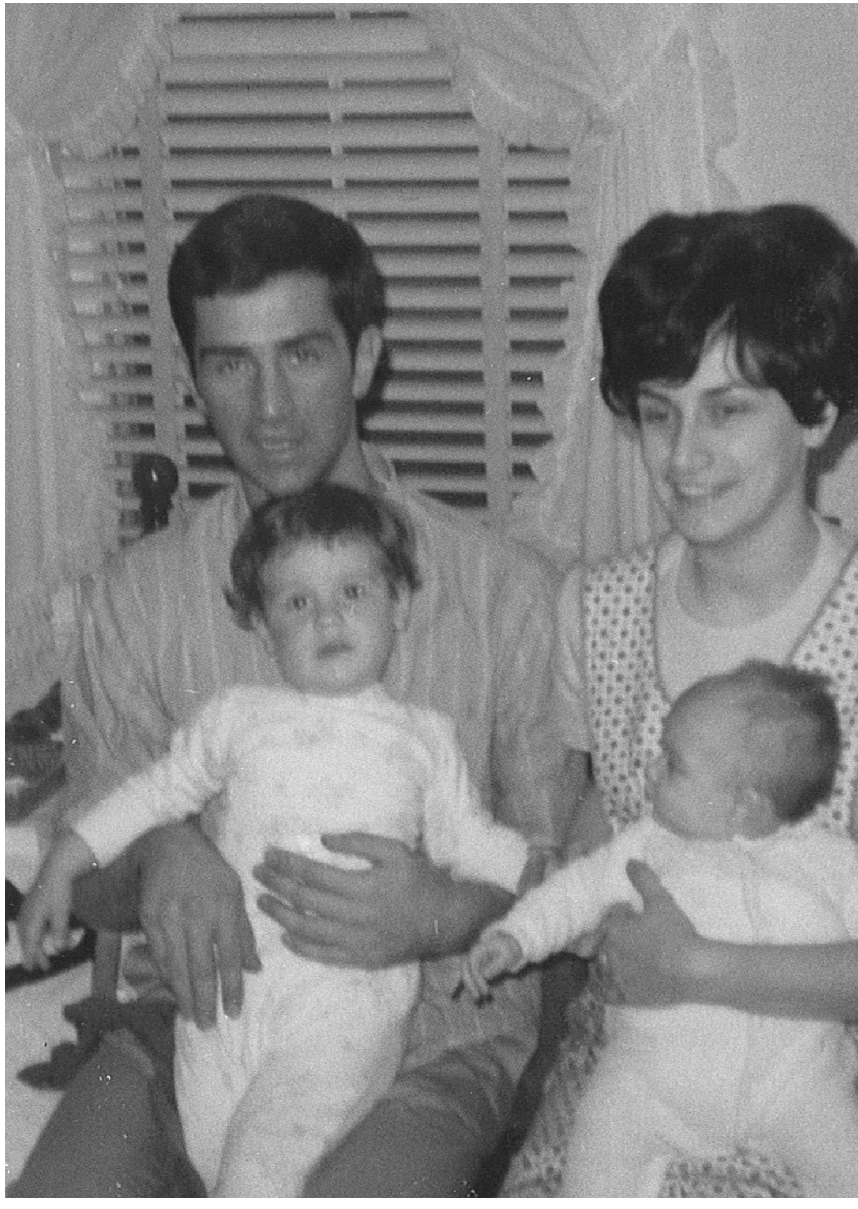
Nick was friendly, smiling, joking. But he missed his family, and he did not want to reveal the sadness and misfortune of his family history. Most of his Walpole friends learned of Nick's family history and foster home years when they talked with me, or when I sent them two updates of the research.

Comments

Even though, by 1965, the Vietnam War had been raging for some years, as we see in Bertrand Russell's book War Crimes in Vietnam, and even though some anti-war activities were happening, most Amer-

icans were unaware of the war and its severity. People in Walpole were no different. Said Emily: *When I was in high school, of course, we just didn't think about it.* [Q: Did Nick ever talk about the war?] *No. No. I don't think he did.*

Three years after graduation, Nick would die in Vietnam. But in 1965, Nick had behind him four good years in Walpole. Waiting for him were all the social changes and conflicts of the 1960s. Nick was soon to begin a new life.



1967
Nick, with Stacia and her daughters

5

Cambridge, College, and California

In 1965, Nick left Walpole, Longview Farm, Emily, and his friends. He entered the 1960s, with all their promise, problems, and conflicts. The civil rights movement had been challenging racism and racial discrimination for a decade; the anti-war movement was beginning; women's rights struggles were about to begin; radical criticisms of education as oppressive, not liberating, were spreading; cultural changes in music, dress, hair, and much more were appearing. The world was changing.

Nick's immediate plans were to live with Stacia and Killy in Peabody in the summer of 1965. A letter from the New England Home to DCG on June 15 of that year says that Nick "was discharged from Longview Farm" and placed with Stacia. His other plan in May was to attend Newman Preparatory School in Boston in September (a number of his Walpole friends, including Bob Turco, were planning to attend Newman, and did so in the fall of 1965). Nick wrote two letters on May 17. One was to Mr. Wysanski, possibly his social worker. It shows some anxiety about his future.

I understand from my sister that you spoke with her. There were some matters that were left vague. For instance, who will pay for my board to live with my sister?

If possible, I would like to have a more definite picture drawn of what is going to happen upon my departure from Longview.

The other was sent to the Boston office of DCG. He wrote that he needed to attend Newman because *insecurity, as well as other problems have kept me from accomplishing my very best work.* He then told DCG that he needed financial assistance to attend Newman, which would prepare him for college. He added that recently his academic work at Walpole High School had improved, and listed his school activities (see chapter 4).

Nick then wrote: *Finally I would add that this summer will mark the first time that I have lived with a blood relative for over sixteen years. This will certainly play an important role in pacifying my emotional tensions. Consequently the atmosphere will be a boon to my studying.* This is one of many references Nick made to his emotions.

Before I read the DCG material on Nick's plans for the summer of 1965, I asked Stacia if she knew where Nick lived that summer. *No. I don't think I had contact with him at that time.* I replied that Jimmy had told me that Nick went to live with her when he left Longview. Did he? *Not immediately*, she said. And I found nothing in the DCG records on where Nick lived during the summer of 1965, after he left Longview. We know only of his hopes and plans on May 17.

For reasons I could not find in the DCG documents, or from the interviews I conducted, Nick did not attend Newman. Instead, he attended Manter Hall School in Cambridge (see below for details). So in September 1965 Nick found himself in Harvard Square, Cambridge. There he encountered the Sixties. One of his teachers at the Hall was Dr. Glasser. (Nick never mentioned his first name, and all the people who knew Nick there could not remember it.) From Fort Sill, Oklahoma, Nick wrote Tasha Lingos about him:

I wrote to a professor at U of Mass, who was also my European History teacher at the Hall. He is a Ph.D. in Russian History, speaks it fluently, anti-Viet Nam [war], pro love and just a great guy. As early as three years ago

he admitted to smoking pot.... I have the greatest respect and admiration for him - no kidding.... He symbolizes in person all that [Bertrand] Russell feels. Super intelligent, warm, concerned with inequalities of society, aware of the value of a free education etc etc. He was active in demonstrations well before they became a pastime for bored hippies!! He also turned me on to some black market Lenny Bruce albums. (February 28, 1968.)

The yearbook of the 1965 graduating class of Walpole High School, TOPPER, includes a section entitled "The Class Will of 1965." Next to each student is a short, usually humorous phrase about the person and their future. For Nick, it says: "Nick Conaxis leaves … oh yes!" Kevin Groden, a high school friend, thinks it means *probably to go onto something big. Walpole High School was a stop in his life.* Talking about Nick's future hopes, Emily Burnett, who dated Nick for three years, said *he was looking forward to kind of spreading his wings a little bit when he got out of high school, and to going to college.*

While facing some uncertainty and insecurity over his future, Nick also could not wait to experience the world beyond Walpole. As popular as he was in high school, as many friends as he had, he was itching to be free of Walpole, Longview Farm, and high school. As he wrote in his letters from basic training (see chapter 6), he wanted to escape the social restrictions around him. He longed to learn from and experience the world outside the classroom, free of social expectations. He came to embrace fully the spirit of the Sixties to Question Authority. Nick came to question, criticize, and challenge most authorities and most traditions of the army and the society at large. The social changes that were engulfing America began to change Nick, but he was eager to change. He wrote to Bill Beckler in March 1968: *One shouldn't content himself in institutionalized learning, wholly, but garner it too from pot, the bums on the [Boston] common, the trees and just everything.*

In September 2011 I gave copies of Nick's three letters to Bill Beckler from Vietnam (see Chapter 1) and one from Fort Sill to his high school friend Larry Richard. When I saw him a few weeks later, Larry

told me that his wife and he thought *it doesn't sound like Nick.* Kevin Groden made a similar comment. Nick had changed. He had become more than the fun-loving and friendly person everyone knew in Walpole, as you will see in the following pages.

Timeline

- June 1965 – Nick graduated from high school.
- September 1965-June 1966 – Attended Manter Hall School in-Cambridge, MA. Unknown where he lived.
- Summer 1966 – Lived and worked on Cape Cod, MA.
- September 1966 – Enrolled at University of Massachusetts, Boston. He lived in an apartment in Boston with two other students.
- Late November 1966 – Nick and his roommates were evicted from their apartment for damage they caused during a party.
- Late November 1966 – Nick, together with John Gotovich and Rob VanWart, dropped out of UMass and went to California.
- Fall 1966-Winter 1967 – Nick traveled to California, Nevada, Colorado, Texas, Florida, and other states.
- Spring 1967 – He returned to the Boston area, lived with sister Stacia in Peabody, MA.
- Summer 1967 – At some point he was drafted by the army and went to basic training at Fort Jackson, SC on September 22, 1967.

The 1960s

The social, economic, political, cultural, and educational changes of the 1960s had their roots planted during the civil rights movement that began in the mid-1950s. After many years of organizing, black Americans in the South rose in protest against centuries of oppression and exploitation. An important early event was the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott. It was led by Martin Luther King, Jr. and others, but it was inspired, created, and organized by many black women. Rosa Parks and others refused to give up their seats to while people and be forced to sit in the back of public buses, and for over a year refused to ride the these buses. Eventually the buses were integrated by order of the federal courts. Many other protests followed. Many of the white and black people who were later active in the anti-war, women's, and other movements were trained and inspired by the civil rights movement.

For most Americans, the anti-war movement first became widely noticed during a protest held at the University of Wisconsin in Madison in October 1967, but people had been teaching and organizing against the war for a while. "Teach-ins" were held at many universities and colleges, where speakers examined and questioned the reasons for U.S. troops being in Vietnam, and criticized military actions that led to atrocities against Vietnamese civilians. One of the earliest teach-ins was held in Cambridge, MA in February 1965, while Nick was still in Walpole but only a few months before he came to study in Harvard Square.

Anti-war organizing and demonstrations continued and grew. In October 1967 there was a massive march on the Pentagon, while Nick was in basic training at Fort Jackson. (I found no reference to this march in Nick's letters.) In April 1968, just as Nick was going to Vietnam, hundreds of thousands of war critics assembled and protested in communities across the country. Surely Nick was aware of the turmoil around him. We'll see in Chapter 6 that he was in his own turmoil, deciding whether to proceed to Vietnam or to desert the army.

Then, on March 31, 1968, President Johnson decided not to run for re-election because of the strong opposition to the war within and outside the Democratic Party. On April 4, Martin Luther King was assassinated and the country was plunged into a deep crisis. Upheavals, protests, and anguish were widespread.

There were other social movements, spurred by and partly coinciding with the civil rights and anti-war movements. Women's liberation, gay rights, Native American, Hispanic American, and many other movements grew. All had their roots in the social climate of the 1960s, even though some did not flourish until the late 1960s and early 1970s.

There were cultural changes in almost every area of American life. Education was criticized for oppressing children, and for being unequal for blacks, women, and other groups. John Holt wrote How Children Fail, showing how schools stifled children's natural curiosity. Jonathan Kozol wrote *Death at an Early Age*, exposing the segregation and discrimination against black children and the horrible conditions they faced in Boston schools.

Sociologists and others were influenced by the books of C. Wright Mills, who argued that a small power elite was running the country for their own benefit. Many people were reading Bertrand Russell's cri-

tique of religion and the Vietnam War, books Nick read at Fort Jackson, Fort Sill, and his twelve days in Vietnam.

Marijuana spread throughout colleges and even high schools. Eventually Nick came to smoke it and to praise its virtues passionately (see later in this chapter and Chapter 6). Music was going through many changes, with new sounds and new themes in folk, rock, and other genres. Many writers questioned whether people belonged in mental hospitals and whether there is a real difference between "sanity" and "madness."

Cambridge was attracting young people from all over the Northeast. By 1970, Harvard Square had been a "long-time Mecca for the young." In the summer of 1970, thirty thousand transient youth, street people, and college students were spending time in the Square and in Boston. Many were runaways from their lower-middle-class and working-class families, hoping to escape what they saw as a sterile and suffocating life. (Quotation and information from Jeffrey Blum and Judy Smith, *Nothing Left to Lose*.)

In September 1965 Nick stepped into Harvard Square in Cambridge and the 1960s. He was eager and ready for a change. But the issues, realities, and troubles of his life came along with him; he continued to struggle with them in the next two years. Then the draft and the Vietnam War swallowed him.

Manter Hall School

I do not know when and why Nick decided to attend Manter Hall instead of Newman. According to a letter from the New England Home to DCG on June 17, 1965, the plan had been for Peabody Public Welfare (Stacia lived in Peabody) to "provide room, board, clothing, medical and transportation expenses to school" but not tuition. (I do not know whether Peabody paid those expenses when Nick attended Manter Hall.) According to Marsha Greenberg, a friend at the school, Nick lived in a group home in 1965-66. We do know from a September 13, 1965, letter that the New England Home "accepted the financial responsibility for Nick's tuition." In the application to Manter Hall Bill Beckler was listed as a reference. But I did not find out how Nick paid for his room and board while he attended Manter Hall.

Nick attended Manter Hall in 1965-66 to improve his academic record in hopes of attending college. It was a small, private, college preparatory school. Marcia Greenberg, a classmate for that year, said *lots of students came there for another year after graduating from high school.*

Manter Hall was founded in Cambridge in 1884. In 1927 it moved to a building at the corner of Mt. Auburn Street and Holyoke Street, a block off Harvard Square. At some point, the first floor was occupied by Elsie's, a famous deli-restaurant, and the upper three floors housed the classrooms. The school had no dining room, so for many students Elsie's served as a de facto dining room.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, there were about fifty-sixty students at Manter Hall each year. In 1975, there were fifty students and ten full-time teachers, allowing for small classes. It had a traditional college preparatory program of math, science, and foreign languages. Connie Duggan, who was at the school with Nick, also remembered a heavy emphasis on classic literature, such as the Bible and Homer's *Iliad*. Robert Hall, owner of the school, told the *Harvard Crimson* in 1975: "A few students are wealthy, a large percentage are middle income, and a fair percentage [15 percent] are on scholarship."

Richard Schneider, a science teacher, told the reporter that the school was especially attractive to "oddballs" and "misfits." "We have some real losers. They have no home to go to, they are looking for companionship. These are the ones who benefit the most here. Misfits come here and thrive" because of individual attention. To some degree that description fits Nick.

By 1996 Manter Hall had shrunk in size, and it closed down after it graduated just four students that year. Nina McCain, the Boston Globe reporter who wrote of its closing, said: "Those who got in and those who taught them agree that the small class and the focus on individual students was the heart and soul of Manter Hall." It was what Nick needed and received.

In letters he wrote during his military training months in 1967-68, Nick expressed fond memories of Manter Hall. He wrote Marsha Greenberg that her letter had *stimulated great nostalgia in the good old Manter Hall days. Especially the priceless English classes!?!* (March 1968). In January 1968 he wrote Tasha Lingos:

During few leisure hours I have I find time to read one of my old Manter Hall books. It is selected passages of Plato.

It was at Manter Hall that Nick probably developed a love of reading books. In his letters two years later he refers to Bertrand Russell, Nietzsche, Plato, and others. It's unclear when and where he was introduced to each of these writers, but the habit of reading and thinking about religion, philosophy, and other topics probably began at Manter Hall. Marsha Greenberg remembers many talks about books with Nick.

Manter Hall was an opening to the 1960s. It was there that Nick met Dr. Glasser, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter. He was a young historian who seemingly embraced all the major changes and values of the 1960s. Nick wrote that he was hoping upon his return from Vietnam that he would attend a small liberal arts college Glasser was planning to establish in Vermont. While Nick was struggling with the decision of whether to go to Vietnam, he was waiting for *concrete proposals* from him. Glasser also wrote a letter to the army testifying to Nick's moral character when Nick was busted for smoking pot at Fort Sill. *He was inspirational at the Hall, but only now am I realizing the true magnitude of what he stands for.* (Letter to Marsha Greenberg, March 8, 1968.)

Marsha Greenberg and Cornelius (Connie) Duggan shared memories of their Manter Hall days with Nick.

Nick and Marsha both were scholarship students. Marsha said that was *part of our bond*. Whatever financial support Nick might have been given, he could not have had much money. Connie said that Nick had two outfits – he wore jacket A or jacket B. *It didn't seem to really bother him.* It's unclear where Nick lived. Marsha said that *he definitely lived in a group home*, somewhere in the Boston area. Another male student from Manter Hall also lived in that home. In a letter he wrote Marsha in March 1968, Nick referred to *Janice, the girl I was living with on Marlborough St.* in Boston. That may have been the group home.

Forty-five years later, Marsha spoke and wrote glowingly of their friendship and of Nick. *We were really good friends. We hung out all the time. We were really good buddies.* They developed *a deep friendship between two people. I have only loving and warm memories of him.*

They took classes together and he went to her house for a visit. *He was a wonderful human being.* He was very supportive when her father died. She wrote in an email: *He came to my house and hung out with me during the week of Shiva. We were the "poor" kids at Manter Hall, the kids on scholarships and although we may have fit in, in some ways we were always on the outside looking in. I think that probably had lots to do with our bond. I know that Nick understood the devastation of losing a parent, at least in retrospect I can say that. We were poor, working class and without my father's income things were looking a bit grim. Nick was a good and solid friend. As I said before I probably loved him deeper than I understood and on [the other] hand I knew we were just friends and our relationship would not go deeper in the romantic world. He was special, loving, funny, smart, and thoughtful. I'm sure he had all the other traits of being crude and nasty but to me he was a true friend.*

As we saw, Glasser had a profound impact on Nick. Generally, Manter Hall and Cambridge were places where young people began to question and challenge social and political institutions and developed new ideas and values. Marsha said: *We both developed lots of political views in those days. I became and have been a life-long feminist and a rather left-wing person to this day.* Nick changed too. *He was really to the left.* And he shaped and changed people's lives. Marsha said he affected hers. In two emails she wrote: *He had a profound impact on me…. I was devastated when he died.*

Connie Duggan took classes with Nick and they hung out together during the day. He remembered a funny, joking, friendly, well-liked Nick. Some days they would sneak out to Harvard Square, two blocks away, for a beer at lunch time. One day they met Harry Stokes, an English teacher, and the three of them drank beer as they talked. Connie said marijuana and other drugs were not prevalent yet; drinking was still the big thing. When I asked if they ever talked about Vietnam, he said they did not, *Vietnam wasn't relevant then.*

To Marsha, Nick was the sensitive friend. To Connie, he was a crazy character. The day Connie got a totally unexpected call from me, he was laughing as he called Nick *a pirate, a buccaneer, a character, everything kids want to be but are afraid to be, not afraid of anybody.*

A few days later, during our scheduled telephone interview, Connie added similar descriptions. *He was a renegade to a certain extent. He was a very funny guy, very funny. A happy-go-lucky guy. There wasn't a vi-*

sual serious side to him. He was the class clown at times, and at other times he wasn't. Everybody liked him. They were drawn towards him. I can't think of a bad thing about him. He was just a good person. There's not that many people that you can say that about. He always made me laugh. So he was the same Nick he had been in Rowley and Walpole.

Connie related a funny incident. During study hall they were at an open window above Elsie's when they saw an organ grinder with a monkey on the sidewalk. Nick was trying to get the monkey's attention so he dropped a cup of water, or a water balloon, which got the man wet. The man then started waving his hand angrily at Nick, who dared him to come up the stairs, which the man proceeded to do. At that point Harry Stokes stood between Nick and the man, keeping them apart. Nick was bouncing around like he was going to box the guy. *Come on, come on, I'm ready for you and your monkey*, as the monkey was running around the room. *The funniest thing I ever saw. Everybody in study hall rolling around laughing. He played it to the full extent.* At some point Bob Hall, the owner of the school, came in and escorted the man down the steps.

Later in our talk Connie said: *He was a fairly bright guy. He was the kind of person you like to be around. He was always exciting. He had a charisma about him. He had a way of making people like him. You couldn't really not like Nick. If you didn't like Nick there was something wrong with you. He was funny, he was endearing. If you were in a foxhole and you wanted a guy to cover your back, you'd want it to be Nick.*

Toward the end of our talk, Connie reflected on Nick's life. Joking and clowning probably was *his way of getting recognition … maybe he kind of needed that type of thing.* He admired Nick for what he made of his life, given his background and lack of family. *There was a certain kind of admiration that a guy could come out of that kind of situation and still be walking around making sense.*

Attending Manter Hall probably improved Nick's chances of college acceptance. In a letter post-marked March 14, 1968, he wrote Tasha Lingos: *I was accepted [by Colby College] while at MH but because I dropped out 1 week early they were "forced" to renege on the acceptance.* When I emailed Marsha asking what she remembered of this event, she wrote, *It sounds somewhat familiar.* In what sense did Nick drop out – never finished some or all of his

courses? I could not find out because law allows access to the Manter Hall records only to the student who attended. The reference to Colby College here is the only one I found anywhere. (Nick was accepted by the University of Massachusetts at Boston, and did attend for two to three months in the fall of 1966, as we'll see below.)

During his year at Manter Hall, and up to September 1967 when he went to army basic training, Nick met many people and hung around various places with them. Those whom I talked with told me they knew little or nothing about his past life. To most it was news that he attended Manter Hall. No one could not tell me where Nick lived or how he supported himself. (The DCG material provided some information on these matters; see below.) It was a lifelong pattern in Nick's life that people did not know much about his past or his whereabouts. Some facts he hid, some he lied about. To almost everyone he said he was an orphan. Marsha told me she found out that Nick's mother was still living when she went to his funeral and saw flowers sent by her. Tasha said, *He always told everyone he was an orphan.* Others do not remember Nick's ever mentioning a brother or sister. And neither Stacia nor Jimmy remembered anything about Nick's attending Manter Hall.

Tasha Lingos and I debated the matter of Nick's telling people little or nothing about his life. She thinks people their age then just did not talk much about their families. For some time, she did not know he had a brother. She first met Stacia, and learned of Jimmy and their mother, when he took her to meet Stacia, *when he was home on leave one time and we went up to visit her.*

Summers on Cape Cod

At some point in the mid-1960s, Nick started going to Cape Cod, MA, in the summers, probably to work there and certainly to have fun. Stacia remembered Nick working at the Lobster Trap, a restaurant on the Cape, but she was unclear whether it was in the summer of 1965, 1966, or 1967. She and Killy went to visit him and that's when they met Tasha Lingos. Tasha herself, to whom Nick wrote many letters during his military training months, said she met him on the Cape.

There is a short, cryptic DCG entry for July 28, 1966: "Nicholas discharged from care to self – eloped." I asked a social worker who was at DCG at that time what "eloped" meant. She could not explain

what it meant in that context, it was not a word they used. Where was he when he eloped? Why did he elope?

According to Jeff Storey, Nick and he lived and worked on Cape Cod in the summer of 1966. He said they worked in the kitchen of a restaurant in Hyannis, perhaps called something like The Upper Deck. *And we lived in the back of the restaurant in a little funky cottage-like thing.* They hung out together and *it was all about having fun.* A common gathering place was the parking lot of Signor Pizza, where they would pick up women and participate in rumbles (see below). *He was a master at picking up women…. They fell for him, hook, line, and sinker. He was a good-looking dude…. He had a lot of women in his life, and it blew me away how easily he could pick up women…. His ability to pick up women was just awesome.*

Jeff remembered meeting Nick through Kevin Groden, one of Nick's Walpole friends, probably some time before the summer of 1966. Nick had a 250 Honda Scrambler motorcycle. Others have memories of Nick and his motorcycle during his two years after Walpole.

During our first short phone talk, Jeff described Nick as *sexual, physical, very powerful, way ahead of his time.* In our longer interview, he said that most of his memories of Nick were *very graphic. They're either violent or sexual.* Forty-five years later, Jeff talked about the influence Nick had on him. *I was immediately attracted to him because he was so worldly and streetwise. I was pretty naïve. I grew up sheltered, middle class, and he was very streetwise…. I can't say enough about him. He was an amazing individual. For better or worse, he molded me.*

I asked what he liked about Nick. I *loved the fact that he was a mentor towards me, that he taught me a life that I didn't know. He taught me how to pick up women and he taught me how to deal with people. He gave me more people skills.* [Was he kind?] *I think he was kind. I think he had a kind heart and I don't think his violence was a reflection of his heart deep down inside. At the time everyone was into rumbles and he happened to be good at it. I saw some kindness. He didn't mind tormenting certain people, as he did me a couple of times. But he had a pretty good heart.*

Toward the end of our talk, Jeff reflected on Nick's life. *Nick was kind of a vagrant, so to speak. He didn't really have any roots…. There wasn't the love from the parents that a lot of people get… His childhood was different than most people growing up, and it kind of made him what he was. He evolved into this streetwise [person], able to take care of himself.*

Tasha Lingos met Nick during his summer stays on Cape Cod. Over forty-five years later, the summers have blended together and it's impossible to say what year she met him. Her family spent summers on the Cape and as a teenager she and her sisters worked at the Melody Tent, a concert venue. Nearby was Signor Pizza, where she would wander when she found the shows boring. *Nick and all those bad boys hung out* around there, and they met. He met her sisters but not her parents. *My parents despised motorcycles, and he had a motorcycle … he had some pretty strange characters with whom he hung around.*

I asked Tasha, where did Nick live, how did he support himself, and what family did he have? She said that those were details people her age did not discuss, they did not matter. They were summer friends and only cared about having fun, not people's families and circumstances. *You had your summer crew and you had your winter crew…. Just like everybody down at the beach, you would say, okay, meet you at the beach tomorrow at two o'clock, you'd go down at two o'clock. What time do you have to be at work? 6:30. See you tomorrow. End of story. You would swim, you would read, we were not deep people. We didn't sit there and have philosophical discussions all day.*

Some of her memories of Nick resembled Jeff's. *He was vivacious, he was alive, he was honest. I like forthright people who don't hide anything. And he definitely had a wonderful curious mind…. He was a total flirt…. Never changed being a total flirt. He was always a flirt. Very personable. And always one for a joke. And always one of the ones to get in trouble.* Lee DeSorgher echoed Tasha: *The young ladies liked him…. He was a ladies' man.*

At the end of the summer of 1966, Nick got together with Emily one day. After high school, they had kept in touch only occasionally. She went away to college in Ohio in the fall of 1965 while he was at Manter Hall. Late in August, while she was home in Walpole for the summer, Nick *showed up at my parents' house on a motorcycle, and that is when we went down to the Cape for the afternoon … he seemed a little bit at loose ends at that point.* He was unsettled and seemed uncertain about attending college that fall. Emily also remembered Nick's mentioning a trip to California, but she was uncertain whether it had taken place or it was a future plan.

That August afternoon probably was the last time they saw each other.

Rumbles, Scuffles, and Fights

Nick was aware that he had a problem in his life. While at Fort Jackson, he wrote Stacia that he was trying to *direct my aggressive energies toward self-betterment.* (November 21, 1967.) On February 14, 1968, in a letter to Tasha, he referred to *minor traffic violations incurred when I was a rowdy bikey.*

Traces of his aggressive energies showed up during his Rowley days. Friends described him as mischievous and a prankster. In Chapter 3, I described the incident when, with his friends, Nick broke some streetlights in Rowley. In February 1960 he broke his index finger in a fight and "it is uncertain what the fight was about." Referring to his time in Walpole, Andrea DeMarco described him as a *partner in "crime."* Some Longview Farm staff said he was a troublemaker who had been involved in various pranks. Emily remembered that Nick was involved in brief *fisticuffs* with another student whom he saw as trying to take Emily away from him.

While at Longview Farm, Nick lived in a situation where a certain amount of strength and force were necessary for survival. In my dissertation about the Farm in 1967-68, I wrote an entire chapter on violence. Using many examples from my field notes, I argued that some of the tougher boys used force to dominate other boys. Also, there was no tension while the staff on duty were physically larger and stronger, but considerable tension and apprehension among boys and staff (and myself) when less physically imposing staff were on duty. In addition, there was a continual shortage of staff and that surely contributed to the tension. Finally, the November 1964 Evaluation and Treatment report includes an unexplained comment: "Leaning more to masculine aggressive attitude." (Followed immediately with "Manifests definite empathy with kids.")

It has been difficult to find out whether Nick was involved in rumbles and fights during his Manter Hall days. His friend Bob Turco, who attended Newman Preparatory in 1965-66, socialized with Nick and said he did not witness any rumbles. But he said, *I'm not surprised*, when I described to him what people told me (see below). *He was good with his fists*. Connie Duggan said: *He liked to get into scuffles…. He liked to fight. Not that he liked it, but he never backed down from a situation.* Marsha Greenberg said *not my experience with him at all.* But she went on to

add: *I could see that he was a troublemaker, he was very recalcitrant…. He was always against authority…. Didn't like anyone in power. I would describe him as a tough guy. But I would also describe him as a gentle, caring, loving soul.*

It's a good description of Nick – tough and gentle, tough and caring.

The summer of 1966 was one of fun and rumbles. Tasha provided a graphic description: S*ay the kids wanted to rumble, they used to do that back then. They'd always say, "go find Nick" and he would start it.* [Q: What do you mean by rumble?] *A group fight. A group fight. And why? Who knows. Girls didn't fight then. The boys did. So it was kind of if you ever watched the show Grease, and they had the two conflicting groups. And they just rumbled for the heck of it, basically. Whenever there were impending fights, someone would [find him] and who knows where they found him or where they knew he was because no one had cell phones. And he obviously didn't live too far away from the downtown at the beach…. I just know that whenever there was a big crowd at Signor Pizza, you were sure that he and his group of guys* would show up.

Jeff had similar memories of that summer. Nick *really knew how to fight. I never saw him lose a fight, and I saw him in a lot of fights…. Oh my God, did he know how to fight and box and move.*

Nick's fighting powers preceded the summer of 1966 and continued after that. In some ways, he became a mythical figure, and the passage of time may have enhanced his deeds and reputation. Rich VanWart and Lee DeSorgher knew Nick in the fall of 1966, when he was at UMass and they attended colleges in the Boston area.

Nick's reputation as a fighter may have preceded his meeting them. Lee said: *When I first heard of Nick he was kind of semi-legend, and he was known as Nick the Greek…. I hung out with him for a while in that time frame* (fall of 1966 and some months in the middle of 1967). He saw Nick *a bunch of times.* He would periodically run into Nick at Signor Pizza on Boylston Street. He might see him twice a week, then not see him for two months, then see him at a party. They hung out in a group that was *a loose collection of people with different levels of friendship…. Suddenly Nick would be over at your apartment with one or two people, or we would have a party and Nick would be there, or I would be over someone else's apartment and Nick would be there.* Most were in college, some were not. Lee said that Nick *did not live in Boston, but visited and stayed with friends, both male and female.*

Lee said that Nick was *funny, aggressive, with a great sense of humor … a ladies' man who loved to fight… He was fast as lightning…. He used to go into Signor Pizza and he would pick the biggest guys in there, and he would pick these monsters and go up to their table with a yo-yo and wing their yo-yo across their table to aggravate them. And they would go outside, and Nick would be dancing around the sidewalk tattooing these people, fast as lightning, very fast.* [Did he ever get beat up?] *I don't know. I never saw him. I'm sure he did. I never saw him because he was so fast. He boxed. Long arms. Big knuckles, big fists. But he wasn't that big, but he was fast as lightning. So these guys would rush in at him and he would be whacking them in the face with jabs and stuff. Those kinds of fights don't last that long….* [Did he hurt another person badly that you saw?] *It wasn't malicious, no. No. It wasn't like he beat them to a pulp. No. He wasn't malicious at all. But he loved Mohammed Ali and he was just like mimicking him.*

Rich VanWart also knew Nick at about the same time Lee did. He couldn't remember if he ever saw Nick in action, perhaps he did, he said. But his memory of Nick's exploits was quite sharp, similar to Lee's. In an email he described Nick as *this gangly character in a slouchy trench coat and unkempt preppy attire.* During our interview he said: *He was quite physically expressive. He liked to move and snake around with his body movements. People were getting high in those days, smoking marijuana for the first time, and I think he sort of enjoyed kind of playing with people in that altered state of being high…. I remember hearing that he had won some awards for [boxing], Golden Gloves or whatever kinds of awards that they give to people who have distinguished themselves in boxing at some level.*

I asked many people if they remembered Nick boxing in a ring, but no one did. This may be part of Nick's enhanced reputation.

Rich also remembered hearing of another of Nick's exploits. He would walk into a restaurant like Hayes Bickford on Boylston Street, and *a bunch of people would be in there late at night getting a snack after partying or whatever, or maybe they had some studying to do … and he would pull this so-called walnut where he would feign going into some kind of a weird kind of neurological fit, and so he was about to have a seizure or something, and he would start wobbling around and then kind of throw himself against the big glass windows of Hayes Bickford, and sort of have some kind of convulsive-looking episode that would attract a lot of attention, and all of his friends would then run out of the restaurant and escape. They would grit and git.*

[They wouldn't pay?] *That's right.* (Nick did have at least two convulsive episodes as a child; see Chapter 3.)

Kevin Groden, his high school friend, also remembered Nick as a great fighter. *He was able to take care of himself. He had fists twice the size of a normal person's fists. If he hit you with a roundhouse you knew it…. He was quick on his feet. I don't think he was ever afraid of any situation he was in. He always handled himself well. He was also kind.* (We'll see that Nick was afraid when he thought of going to Vietnam, and when he was in Vietnam.) At another time, Kevin added that *Nick was not a violent person…. I would never say that.*

After the interviews with Lee, Rich, and Kevin, I had some questions about Nick's exploits as a fighter. The fights seemed violent to me. I sent all three an email asking about his "attacks":

"Did Nick ever say why he did them, either explicitly or implicitly? Did any of you ever ask him? Did anyone else present ever try to stop him, or ask him why he was doing them? How did you then, and how do you now, interpret them? What did they mean? What was Nick trying to communicate? What did they mean to him?"

All three objected to my use of "attacks" as the word to describe what Nick did. Here are their responses.

Lee said in an email (printed here in its entirety and exactly as he wrote it):

Not sure why you're using the word "attacks," like Nick was preying on small defenseless people, which is certainly not what I meant … Nick liked to box and was very good at it and he had a reputation, at least among the "guys" as being pretty tough and not one to be messed with … any time I witnessed a "fight" it was always against larger individuals than himself and in those Boston situations, perhaps all involved had been drinking … and it wasn't like he was beating someone to a pulp, these "fights" were over fairly quickly and everyone went back to their business…. In a way, Nick was "showing off" and when you're that age, it all seemed quite normal … so, please don't misconstrue what I said, but what I said has a ring of truth to it … thanks Alex.

Rich wrote (I print only relevant parts of the email):

These impressive displays became so "storied" and remarkable among our cohort, that they took on a "folkloric" character, and were certainly so colorful that the imagery of Nick's entertaining the group with his "sport" on the side-

walks of our Back Bay haunts, like Boylston Street, took on a life of their own in our group's culture.

I would suggest that your use of the word "attacks" may be inadvertently misleading – I would think that your readers could misconstrue what you're describing in this way. "Attack" evokes, for me, the notion that some outside force or agent is acting upon someone. Or that something "comes over" a person, like a seizure, or an anxiety or panic episode.

I had the impression that Nick did these things as entertainment, or "sport" for his companions to enjoy or marvel at. But I was not close enough to have heard from Nick, nor did I ever hear from others, any insights or interpretations of his deeper motivations prompting these episodes.

Kevin told me that he would never say Nick was a violent person.

What do these memories and comments of Nick's pugilistic prowess tell us about him? Lee, Rich, and Kevin said that Nick was not a malicious, violent person. They do not remember Nick hurting anyone badly, and they think he was never arrested for any of these fights. Marsha Greenberg and others remember him as a kind, thoughtful, supportive friend. His letters from Fort Jackson, Fort Sill, and Vietnam reveal similar qualities of kindness and friendship (as we'll see in the next two chapters).

Yet, he did purposely instigate some of these fights and did hit hard those who responded to his teasing. There were a*ggressive energies* in Nick, as he came to understand and write himself. They co-existed with the funny, friendly, and kind person he was. In time he would have probably tamed his aggressive energies, but they did exist and they did concern him.

A comment he wrote to Tasha Lingos on November 21, 1967, may offer an insight on his motives. It may partly refer to himself. *Teenagers today survive (happily?) without the love and affection they deserve. They become hardened to the cold facts of life. But believe me the hard guy, the one that nothing bothers, doesn't let things bother him. He lives a life of apathy and indifference expecting nothing therefore never disappointed.*

Nick had turned twenty the previous August. It may be he was talking about his own earlier life, and it might also be that his fights were his attempts to show others he was a "hard guy."

College, California, Out West, and Florida

It may be an indication of Nick's nomadic existence that no one I spoke with could tell me with certainty that Nick had attended college. Some thought he might have, some remembered that Nick had talked about college, and some thought he had not. Not even Jeff Storey knew, even though they had just lived together on Cape Cod. Stacia and Jimmy did not know, although Jimmy said that perhaps Nick had gone to UMass. Only Emily seemed certain: *I know that he was in college for a little while…. One of the bigger colleges in Boston.* It was not until January 2012 that I learned Nick had definitely enrolled at UMass in September 1966.

No one I spoke with knew where Nick lived or how he supported himself in the fall of 1966. Tasha Lingos said she visited Nick at some places where he was staying but could not say if *his name was on any of the leases … back then if you needed a place to stay people gave you a place to stay…. People just crashed in friends' places* those days.

DCG reports do say that they paid Nick's $15 rent (and probably tuition, but nothing is said about that). Despite being discharged from DCG in July, soon after Nick was again supported by DCG. A summary of the period from November 1 to 17 states: "Nicholas is age 19 and presently a freshman at U. of Mass. the Boston school. He lives in his own apartment at 19 Brighton Ave. Boston and the state has an arrangement with Hamilton Realty for the rent. Nick works part-time for a Deli and is able to make enough for food and other expenses.

"On 11/17 I took Nick shopping and bought him: a sport coat for $19.75, 2 pairs of slacks $6.50, 3 shirts Dress $13.50, 1 pair of socks$1.50. I stressed with Nick the importance of keeping in school and also the fact that he has received many breaks and that if he goes up again the state will release him."

That last line probably means that Nick had been in some trouble and DCG would no longer pay his bills if he were to be in trouble again.

Days later Nick did get in trouble. On November 29, Hamilton Realty called and told DCG that Nick and his roommates were evicted for damaging the property during a party that took place sometime between November 17 and 29. Also on November 29, "Nick Conaxis discharged from care to Army. Free." Free he was, but dropping out of

college soon became Nick's ticket to the army and Vietnam. Probably as required by law then, DCG informed the U.S. Army that Nick was no longer attending college, and he thus became eligible for the draft.

In "Sunny California" Mary McCaslin wrote:
All you people
You come to California
You think you might find heaven
Didn't anybody try to warn ya?

Nick dropped out of college probably sometime at the end of November. He never completed any courses. Rich VanWart told me that his brother Rob, John Gotovich, and Nick dropped out *halfway into the first semester of freshman year* and headed for California, as many young people did in the sixties. Gotovich said, *We are heading for California, why don't you come, and cut loose and we'll have a good time.* Rich's parents were freaking out that Rob left school.

In mid-December of 1966 Nick was in California. Nick's social worker "received a letter from Mr. Conaxis with a Los Angeles postmark. Mr. Conaxis is presently living in an apartment with the following address: c/o Chris A. [last name was deleted], 5042 Escobedo Drive, Woodland Hills, California." In an email Tasha wrote: *When they left for California, Nick remarked "we are splitting for the coast!!!" A common phrase back then.*

(The last two entries of Nick's DCG record, each two lines, report his death in Vietnam on May 5, 1968.)

I asked Kevin Groden if Nick said why he went to California. *Nope. It was just a very adventurous kind of thing to do, as far as I was concerned.* Tasha Lingos thought the trip was an expression of Nick's essential nature. *He wanted to do his learning in the external world, which is why at such a young age [19] they jumped in a car and went to California.*

I found hardly any information about that trip. John Gotovich and Rob VanWart died a few years before I began the research in May 2011. The contemporary evidence is limited to a few post cards Nick sent Tasha Lingos that she saved, and one long letter he wrote from Florida (printed below). Rich had a few memories. They would stay in a place and skip out without paying rent. Rich wrote in an email: *I*

think I recall Rob talking about how they wound up in a place in Van Nuys for a while, and they pulled "a destructo," i.e., they trashed the place, punctuated by a can of beans heated on the stove to explode, as they made their exit. They may have led a nomadic life. About a year later, Nick thanked Tasha for writing him, *even when I was in California and as transient as a gypsy*. Tasha remembered that Nick spent part of the winter in Tahoe, Nevada, and that he stayed in Reno for some days with a friend of a friend of her family.

After California, Nick traveled to Nevada, Colorado, and other states. I could not find if he went alone or with the other two. His long trip from Colorado to Florida was a solo experience.

The postcards offer very limited information. For one, the postmarks have faded on most cards by now. One card, from Stateline, Nevada, is clearly marked: December 17, 1966. *Dear Tasha. Am at ski resort bordering Reno, Nevada and California. Am having fun. Moved from Southern Cal. 30 miles from Squaw Valley. Love, Nick.*

The other two have no visible dates.

From Olympic Village in Squaw Valley, CA, he wrote:

Dear Tasha, I will write a longer letter later. I have a job as a busboy hafbrau. Love it. Meet many people. Please write. Would love to hear from you. Love Nick. He added a note on the side: *$150 a month, room & board, free skiing, skating, etc.* In a letter he wrote Tasha from Fort Jackson, Nick spoke of *fond memories of Squaw Valley*.

The other card said: *Dear Tasha, Decided on a change. Am now skiing "Aspen" in Colorado. Love Nick*

The long letter came from Florida. Postmarked February 17, 1967, from Tallahassee, it recounts a long journey he took through many states. It is evidence of Nick's spirit and curiosity. It foreshadows the difficult year ahead of him.

Dear Tasha,

Due to the fact that I cannot recollect the last time I wrote was, this letter may be somewhat redundant. However, I finally made it to Colorado, and promptly skied Arap-

ahoe Basin and some obscure ski area named Vail. Then readily proceeded to Aspen. Skiing was just unbelievable. In fact in comparison to Squaw one would have to say both Vail and Aspen were 10 times as good. Aside from skiing I spent some time in Denver and had a delightful time.

Then news of Mardi gras broke forth. Although fain to leave the beautiful Rockies, I at once set out alone for Louisiana. "So what" you say. However thumbing with 50 cents sometimes creates unforeseen complications. Bravely, I edged forward, literally. I had a most difficult time thumbing. However my travels brought me through such points of interest as N. Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida. Oh, I'm sorry, yes I'm in Tallahassee Florida at Florida State University visiting a friend. Steve Sykes!! Perhaps that doesn't ring a bell.

Anyway let me regress a bit and touch upon some highlights (if I strain I may find some) of my journey. I left Denver and not so promptly arrived in Raton, New Mexico. Great! But where to from there? After about a second of careful thought I decided to head for Amarillo Texas. A move I was to regret. Arriving there at 2:30 A.M. with the temperature hovering a comfortable 15 degrees, I tried thumbing. Finally (no, I didn't get a ride) at 4:30 A.M. I decided to sleep. I unrolled my trusty sleeping bag and fell in to a not so deep sleep amid the freshly fallen snow flakes. I chose to sleep outside a tow equipment co. A wise choice. At 8:00 A.M. I was woken up and invited in to enjoy a warm stove and hot coffee. After extending heartfelt thanks, I was off.

Off my rocker for even attempting to thumb in Texas. Briefly: the weather in Northern Texas didn't behoove thumbing and rides were as scarce as houses were on the endless reaches of prairies. However I did get a ride with

a truck just outside of Amarillo to Longview, a distance of better than 800 miles. Also during this time he bought me meals and one night lodging. All told it took me 2½ days to cross Texas.

From Longview I proceed to Shreveport, LA where after 3 hours I got a ride in another large trailer truck. This one had a sleeping compartment, in which, upon invitation of the driver, I slept for 8 hours. I woke up in New Orleans 3 A.M. And due to the degree of familiarity with New Orleans I at once became completely lost!! Finally at 5 A.M. I contacted a friend in a local bar. I don't know if it was my breath but the next day he decided to go to Mexico. I would have but I lacked funds. You probably wonder why that should have hindered me? So do I.

Anyway I stayed in New Orleans, with plans to meet him in El Paso Texas within a week. I stayed in New Orleans just that long. It was and I'm sure still is an amazing town. It is an interesting marriage of old and new. The famous French quarter is very rustic but also very artistic. Artists are in abundance, attesting to the abundance of subjects, ranging from a famous cathedral to beautiful parks and buildings. Then there is the famous Bourbon Street. A street unparalleled by streets like Beacon [in Boston], Sunset Boulevard L.A. or others. It is a wild array of strip joints, jazz bars, art galleries, fine French restaurants and girls. Some of the more famous bars include the "Famous Door," "Al Hirt's," "Pat O'Brien's" and numerous jazz joints. All in all it was an invigorating combination of old and new.

Then I left, somewhat distraught at the thought of thumbing. However I was lucky enough to get a ride from Orleans to Pensacola Florida. Only 156 miles from Tallahassee I felt at ease and proceeded to call Steve. "Be there

in 3 hours at the most." 7 hours later I made it!! For the records it was 4 A.M.

Well that brings you up to date. Now for the future. My immediate plans call for a trip via thumb to Boston, Massachusetts. I hear it is really wild. My stay will be short as I will have to return to San Jose California for a draft physical. I plan to thumb back out, and stay with a friend in Fremont California until I have taken my physical. Then I plan to resume skiing, return to the Cape, and then pursue my intellectual endeavors with some degree of maturity, now that I have got some of my impetuousness out of me!! Sounds good.

Well Tasha enough about myself. [Here Nick talks about getting to see Tasha.]... I plan to be in Boston before the weekend of the 24th of February of course!! However I plan to stop in DC and may possibly get waylaid. But certainly as of now I hope to see bean-town before the 24th. Well Tasha as we say in Germany Auf Wiedersehen!! Be a good girl!!

Love Nick

At the end of the letter Nick drew a line to show his trip across the U.S.

Back to Massachusetts

When did Nick come back to Boston? In his February 17, 1967, letter he tells Tasha he hopes to see her by February 24, adding that plans might change. Judging by a May 10, 1967, letter Jimmy wrote Stacia (see below), he was in the Boston area before May. That is all I have been able to establish. Did he take the draft physical in California? And why would he take it there? No answers.

His high school friend Kevin Groden said that when Nick came back from his long trip, he c*hanged everybody's life… He came back on a motorcycle with a bag of pot. Way ahead of everybody…. That led to my friends getting high and eventually me getting high.*

Nick also came back changed in other ways. Tasha said: *I know when he came back from California he was reading Bertrand Russell.* She was certain one of the books was a 700-page collection of his many writings, *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell.* I read it when it came out in 1961. Russell had a profound influence on me, as it had on Nick, as he wrote a number of times in his letters from military training. In "Why I'm not a Christian" Russell explains why he was an agnostic. It led many of us to criticize and question religion, as Nick did.

Where did Nick live when he returned from his trip? Stacia said he came to live with her, her husband, and her two small children. Her 11 Dustin Avenue, Peabody, MA address is listed on some of Nick's military forms, including the May 13, 1968, report of his death. She said he lived with them for about six months and they became friends. He would sometimes babysit their children, and there are photographs of Nick holding them. She said that Tasha wrote her, *Nick loves living with you, and he complains about baby-sitting, but I know he loves it.* Stacia thought it included the summer of 1967 and recalled him commuting to a job to and from Cape Cod, about 100 miles away. He enjoyed living with them and he became close to his family. *Oh, he loved living with me. It was great. It was no problem. My children loved him…. I have movies of him at my daughter's christening, and he was Greek dancing. He wanted to be Greek. He didn't have that, but he knew he was Greek, and he enjoyed that.* (Recall the rejection of his Greek name while he lived in Rowley.)

Stacia reminisced that Nick was full of energy. He was crazy, she said. He ended up with mononucleosis *when he lived with me. I nursed him. And I had a bed upstairs.* [You kept it?] *It was my spare room. That was the bed linens I bought for him when he came to live with us. And I still have them.* (From early childhood to his days in military training in 1967, Nick had a tendency to infection and illness.)

Jeff Storey said that in the summer and fall of 1967 he rented an apartment and Nick would come to stay with him a few days. *He would come and crash pretty much.* Jeff told me that Nick led a rootless and nomadic life. He would *disappear and reappear out of nowhere…. Pizza places and fights stand out in my mind* during this period of Nick's life.

A letter Jimmy wrote to Stacia on May 10, 1967 also attests to Nick's restlessness and troubled mind during this period. *I think I told you I received a letter from Nick. He sounded troubled and depressed, and told*

me he didn't have any ambitions or goals in life anymore. I think he's feeling sorry for himself – but just might straighten up one of these days. He also told me that at the time he had just gotten off a six day binge, on grass, pills, etc., meaning he's been taking narcotics, pep pills, heroin, and if he doesn't slow down, he could get in a lot of trouble.

Jimmy told me that during a 1967 military leave he was walking with Nick on a Boston street. As they were passing a parked car, Nick broke off its radio antenna. Jimmy asked him why he did, and Nick said, I just felt like it.

On July 12, Jimmy wrote Stacia that he had not heard from Nick, adding that if he did not register for college, the army would get him. By August 23, the army had gotten Nick. *Maria told me Nick got drafted – I sure hope the service straightens him up.* On September 2, he wrote: *So Nick has to report this month? I sure hope he makes it. They won't fool around with him in the service. You're either in or out.*

Nick did make it through military training – barely. His struggles, and his questioning of army training and the war, are richly documented in the forty letters he wrote to Stacia, Tasha Lingos, and Marsha Greenberg from Fort Jackson, SC and Fort Sill, OK (see next chapter). He may have written more letters, which may or may not have been saved.

Comments

In the two years since he had left Longview Farm and Walpole in the spring of 1965, Nick had traveled a long way, in miles, geography, and experiences. He continued to be the funny, lovable, kind, mischievous person he always was. But he had seen much of America, and had read and thought about issues he had not confronted before. He left Manter Hall one week short of completion and had dropped out of college without finishing any courses, so he was drafted into the military. When he left for Fort Jackson in September 1967, he was about to face his greatest crisis. During this profound challenge in his life, however, Nick read widely, thought critically, and engaged in honest self-reflection about some of his actions.

When we visited Nick's grave in November 2011, Stacia reflected that Nick did a lot of living during his twenty years and nine months on this earth. Looking at this chapter of his life, he packed much of that living during these twenty-seven months. It was an intense time,

full of discoveries, new ideas, travel, and new places and people. He was a drifter for some of this period. People did not know or could not remember where he had lived.

A few things stand out. Manter Hall had a profound influence on him. Glasser introduced him to the 1960s. Nick was considered a hilarious and friendly man to Connie Duggan and others, and a sensitive and true friend to Marsha Greenberg.

By all accounts, he was able to attract women easily.

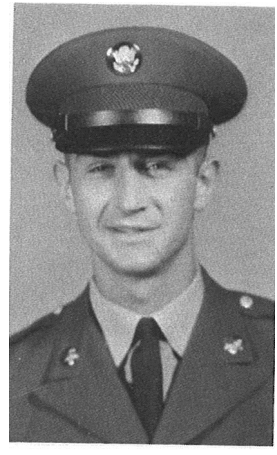
He entered college but decided it was not for him, at least at that point in his life. With two friends he took off for the lure and romance of California, as did many young people in the 1960s. He did not stay long, it seems, for reasons I did not discover. His postcards to Tasha are too brief, and his long letter to her came at the end of his trip and offers no clues as to why he left.

He then took off for Nevada, Colorado, Texas, and points east. He left Boulder with fifty cents in his pocket. The Florida letter is a testament to his adventurous spirit and his writing ability. He had hopes of becoming a writer.

His return to Massachusetts proved no solution to his troubled mind, and his failure to register for classes, together with the recruiting demands of the Vietnam War, sealed his fate. He was drafted.

His "aggressive energies" were the most troubling and puzzling aspect of these two years. I present what people told me. They insisted that despite these fights Nick was not a violent man. I cannot explain these rumbles and fights.

Nick was troubled and lost when he left Boston for Fort Jackson in September 1967. He was joking and carrying out pranks on his way to military training, but he was anxious and unsure of his future. Still, he managed to write insightful, self-critical, and moving letters, and he made scathing comments about military training and the Vietnam War.



1967
Nick, basic training, Fort Jackson

6

Fort Jackson and Fort Sill

Jimmy had written Stacia that he hoped Nick would make it at military training and in the army. Nick had the same hope. He wrote Stacia and Killy a postcard on September 28, 1967: *Am looking forward with apprehension for physical and mental discipline and restraint. May like it after all. Love Nick.*

He expressed the same hopes in a letter to Tasha on September 25.

Jimmy had a similar memory of Nick's hopes. *So 1967, just before his basic, I got a little letter from him where he told me he didn't really like the pomp and circumstance of the Army, but he was going up to put up with it.*

Nick's apprehension soon proved prophetic. He became sharply critical of military training, and he barely endured military life. Disillusion set in. Tasha said: *As soon as he got there he realized that it was a mistake and he hated basic training.*

Timeline, September 1967 to April 1968

Most dates below are those of the postmarks on the letters.

- September 22 – Nick left by train from South Station, Boston. Arrived at Fort Jackson, SC, the next day.
- November 13 – Received orders for Advanced Individual

Training at Fort Sill, OK.

- December 6 – Received orders to report to Fort Sill on December 8.
- December 10 – At Fort Sill.
- December 17 – On leave in Massachusetts; spent Christmas day with Stacia.
- February 7 – Received orders for Vietnam.
- Early February – Busted for marijuana use, orders for Vietnam delayed until after clearance of the charges.
- February 21 – Wrote letter to the army defending his "moral character."
- March 14 – Last letter from Fort Sill; drug investigation over, to receive orders for Vietnam in a few days.
- Late March – Went to Massachusetts on leave for about a month.
- April 23 – Arrived in Vietnam.

South Station to Fort Jackson

On September 22, Nick and Kevin Groden took a bus from Franklin, MA, (site of the area draft board) to South Station train, Boston. From there they took the train to Fort Jackson, SC. On the same train with them was Larry Kneeland from Walpole High School, class of 1966, who had known Nick. About ten friends were at the station to support them and see them off.

Larry has fond memories of that trip with Nick. When they met at the station, *we sat down and started talking, talking, talking. And before we knew it we were on the train and we just talked, talked. We had a lot of fun. He was so fun on the train.* He described a prank they pulled. *The train made a stop and we went into a bar and we drank, and he went and got girls up the street and we didn't do anything, we just had a lot of fun. And then we had a few little beers and we started doing something with the pillow cases … ripping them apart and throwing them out the window. And stuff was going out the window and it came through the conductor because he had the door open, and he came right through all the train. We had a lot of fun.*

Kevin smiled as he recollected the same story on a warm July afternoon at a bar in Newburyport, MA.

They paid a price when they arrived at Fort Jackson. Larry again:

They made us do a police call, you had to pick up papers, anything on the ground. You know, at nighttime with flashlights. And we are looking at the ground with a flashlight, and this is like two o'clock in the morning. They continued to pay a price. *And here we are, all new, and they did a number on us. And they made us take a test at ten o'clock in the morning, and nobody was bright-eyes.*

Nick was his merry old self on the train, despite his apprehensions about the Army, Fort Jackson, and Vietnam. He continued his merry-making with his friends while at basic training, while in his letters he expressed strong and sharp criticisms of the army and the war. His actions tell one story, his letters another, different one. They are equal parts of Nick. He was funny and serious.

Surviving Basic Training

Eugene Alexander and Larry Kneeland were at Fort Jackson with Nick. (I found no one who was at Fort Sill with him.) Eugene wrote the following story about Nick, printed here in its entirety.

"CRAZY"

There was a lot of running in basic training. The first thing in the morning we would run 2 miles before breakfast. Also, as we marched back and forth to training at some point the "double time" order (start running) would be given. The sergeants and particularly the 1st sgt who made it clear that he "hated y'se Yankees" would be upset if someone couldn't keep up and dropped out of formation. One of the trainees was an asthmatic who had a hard time keeping up. As he dropped out one day, the 1St sgt got in his face and started yelling at him. Nicky dropped out of formation and ran back to them. "Leave him alone" he yelled at the 1st sergeant. We were all shocked and couldn't hear much else as we were ordered to keep running. But Nicky kept yelling at him.

Nicky refused to run back to the company and walked back to the barracks with the other trainee. When we got back, many of us gave him our support. Some smiled and shook their heads, others shook his hand. A few voiced what was the prevailing sentiment – "wow, you're crazy, Conaxis." The crazy Conaxis nickname kind of stuck, but was never said with a bad meaning. Nicky didn't mind and enjoyed the nickname as he was proud of how he earned it. He got punishment for what he did. I think extra KP (kitchen police) and his pass was pulled for 2 or 3 weeks. But Nick didn't mind much and took it in stride.

This happened about half way through basic and everyone already liked Nick. He was always laughing and joking around about the absurdities of basic and the Army. His kind and cheery demeanor was a big help in getting us through basic. Now, he was even more liked and very well respected. I am proud to say that Nicky was a fairly close friend. Also, I feel honored to have known him and shared the pleasure of his company. Rest well, brave friend.

In a book with the photographs of all the men who were at Fort Jackson with him, Nick signed Eugene's picture "Crazy Conaxis." Larry was in a different platoon and did not witness the incident, but he told me that it sounds very much like Nick.

I came across Eugene in a comment he wrote in the website www.footnote.com (now Fold 3). *To my good friend from basic – Nicky – I just found out* [about his death]. *You were a class act and I'm so sorry you couldn't live a longer life. I know you are in a better place – at peace & with a big smile on your face!! Rest in Peace, brave friend.* When I reached him by phone, Eugene's first words about Nick were *he got us through basic training* with his jokes.

In an earlier letter, he said Nick was *very friendly and personable. Though there were "groups" of friends, Nicky was friendly and kind to everyone. He was a really funny guy. He would laugh and joke all the time about the absurdity of the army and basic. His laughter and good nature did a lot to make some of us feel better. Basic was better for me and many others due to Nicky.* Basic training was *like a big joke and he laughed and took everything in stride.*

Like Eugene, Larry has fond memories of Nick at Fort Jackson. He said: *Just being around him, he'll act up, he'll do something crazy. He'll make a joke or something, he would be standing around and starts talking and people would listen. I mean he was awesome. And anything, like a fight or anything, he would break up, he would have nothing to do with it. No, no, you don't do that, that's crazy. No. Come on, let's go here. That is the way he was…. He was an honest guy.*

Larry told a story indicative of the times. He tried to get out of the Army by pretending to fail a test but was caught. They were given a hearing test and he pretended not to hear the tester, and explained that he was a truck driver and had *a split eardrum… I turned my back, and I'm walking down and all of a sudden he yells out, "hey Larry." And I turned around.*

To pass the time, they often played poker and sometimes they went off base to relax. Larry speaking again: *Like I said, at night-time we would get together, go up [to a little store nearby] and have a few drinks, it wasn't beer or anything, it was soda. We had to get up at five or six or whatever it was. But it was always hanging out. And it was something that we were told not to do and we did it.* As we were talking at a donut shop in Walpole, Larry remembered that they were often hungry, so sometimes they would attend a local evangelical church and stay after services for the donuts.

In his letters Nick often talked about Vietnam. (Eugene and Larry did not know that Nick wrote these letters.) I asked them if Vietnam came up in their talks. Larry said: *No. Nobody ever talked about it.* Eugene wrote: *For whatever reasons most of us didn't speak of the war.* Larry did remember that during their last week at Fort Jackson Nick was getting worried. To reassure him, Larry said, *Don't worry. We'll be all right. We'll go to Germany* (to a U.S. military base there). It may have been a rare public revelation of Nick's troubled mind.

We now turn to Nick's letters.

Introduction to the Letters

We should keep in mind that Nick was only twenty when he wrote the letters from military training and Vietnam. Like young people always, and especially during the turmoil of the 1960s and the Vietnam War, he was searching for answers to life's eternal problems, he was exploring new ideas, he was confronting possible death. As I think of my own youth a few years earlier, I recall my own doubts and anxieties. Nick's life and letters, like those of millions of others, are both an expression and a creation of the 1960s. Question Authority was Nick's philosophy, and that of the Sixties.

Nick rarely dated his letters. The dates below are those that appear on the envelope postmarks, unless otherwise indicated. Also, almost all his letters were written in one long paragraph, so for the reader's convenience I created paragraph breaks. I corrected the few spelling errors I found. Otherwise, everything is as Nick wrote it, notably his frequent multiple use of exclamation points and question marks, at times combining them. I also did not change some words not found in the dictionary if the meaning and usage are obvious.

It is quite likely that at least some of Nick's letters were read by the army. Thus, the candor of his letters is a sign of bravery, challenge, or foolishness. In the 1960s and 1970s the FBI, the CIA, and other government agencies intercepted and read many people's letters, as Senate investigations in the middle 1970s showed. It's likely that the army also read letters sent by soldiers, at least selectively. There are clues to such a practice in two of Nick's letters. He wrote on December 4 (his date): *Due to my carelessness, a letter, which wasn't exactly middle of the road conservatism, was read by the first sergeant. Consequently the topic of the cadet's conversation of late concerns that radical, Conaxis. Some things are better left unsaid, especially in the military*. As you will see, Nick wrote scathing denunciations of military life, described occasions when he was smoking marijuana, and was critical of the war and the government. Almost every letter he wrote included material the army could use to discipline and prosecute him, as they eventually did for smoking marijuana.

I have forty-one letters Nick wrote from Fort Jackson and Fort Sill: Nine to his sister Stacia, twenty-seven to his friend Tasha Lingos, four to his friend Marsha Greenberg, and one to Bill Beckler. Except for Bill, the others were young women: Tasha and Marsha in their late teens, Stacia twenty-five.

Writing and receiving letters were essential to keeping up Nick's spirits, to surviving the *robot-like* routine of basic training. He criticized the discipline of military training, the war in Vietnam, and social conditions in the U.S. in general. He defended the smoking of marijuana, talked about authors he read, and gave advice to friends. He was unburdening his soul and keeping sane. The letters reflect his emotional state and struggle to survive. (Joking with his friends also enabled him to survive, as we saw.)

Toward the end of his Fort Sill stay, Nick was exhausted. On March 7, 1968, he told Stacia that he was typing his thoughts, and added, *My shrink would be eager to examine it for physic [psychic] symbolism and the such!!* This is the only reference to a psychiatrist in his letters. A week later, March 14, he wrote his last letters from Fort Sill. To Stacia he said: *Have been reading exten-*

sively experiencing occasional depressions but generally everything is fine. To Tasha he sent a darker comment: *Boy I can hardly write. My mind just isn't with it. I did feel obliged to write though.… I swear my mind isn't functioning. It's been a taxing week. And believe me military weeks are really taxing. With or without extraneous complications.*

Before we read the letters, here is a summary of the topics, concerns, and reflections found throughout them. Some letters are printed in their entirety, and I include excerpts from most of the others.

1. First and foremost is Nick's relentless, detailed, and unequivocal critique of life in military training. Here I insert a parenthetical comment. In 1970, Fred Wiseman, a noted documentary filmmaker, produced *Basic Training*, a film many of us saw in the early 1970s. Wiseman's portrait of what happens to young men during that period is foretold in Nick's letters (other soldiers' letters also, certainly). Zipporah.com, Wiseman's website, includes the following comment from *Variety*: "Wiseman uncovers human conditions in inhuman situations… In the marching, the hand-to-hand combat, the loss of identity, Wiseman, without narration, conveys the humor and sadness of the situation. He not only imparts the essence of military basic training, he latches on to young men thrust into maturity, some before their time. It is a gripping experience."
   Robots is a word Nick wrote many times. *During a normal day your every action becomes robot-like.* The men were stripped of their identity and humanity and turned into non-thinking machines. He wrote Marsha: *The Army has a crippling grip on your every action. How tragically ironic that while fighting for "freedom" you are forced to sacrifice these very freedoms.… I am subjugated physically but mentally I proceed virtually unscathed.* (March 8, 1968.)
   He was also critical of the war and of America. *The war serves only to disgrace the United States and break*

down the strength and morale of the Nation. (To Tasha, November 13.) Four months later, on March 8, he told Stacia that while the U.S. was fighting a meaningless war, Russia was prospering. America was not a Great Society. *The charges of "war-mongers," "imperialists," etc aren't as unfounded as we are made to believe.* (Bertrand Russell may have one source for these statements.)

2. Critical as he was of military training, Nick also showed some concern for and satisfaction in his performance as a trainee. There are at least eleven references to grades and tests in his letters. For example, on January 8, while he was stoned and about to discuss Zen, he wrote Tasha: *Had my third test today - 88, now my average is only 92 (91).*
3. Nick often wrote about books he was reading. Books and the issues they explored were one way for Nick to insulate his mind from the insanity around him. He read his copy of passages from Plato from his Manter Hall days. He also read the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and the British philosopher Bertrand Russell, urging Marsha and Tasha to read them. He seemed especially attracted to Russell, an early critic of the Vietnam War who conducted an unofficial trial of President Johnson as a war criminal. Russell was also an agnostic and critic of Christianity and religion in general.

   Nick referred often to Russell's book *Why I'm Not a Christian.* I read Russell's essays on religion and many other topics in 1961, when I was twenty and a college sophomore. Nick was about that age when he read Russell. I can sense his excitement for Russell's writings, an excitement I had experienced a few years earlier. I still remember how I felt when I read Russell's argument that made me an agnostic since 1961: If we argue that God created the universe, who created God?

   In some letters, Nick criticized religion for preventing people from thinking for themselves. Indeed, a consistent ideal for Nick was being able to think for oneself. He referred to Plato's belief that the unexamined life is not worth living.

   In a few places Nick quoted or paraphrased Shakespeare from

memory. He also read and wrote about Zen. He wrote Tasha: *I finally finished my book on Zen and am ready to delve into some other fascinating subject. Any suggestions?* (February 12.)

4. Nick listened to music often, judging from his many references to it. He liked groups popular in the sixties, like the Beatles, the Grateful Dead, and others. He said that music helped him relax; at times he could not fall asleep until he listened to music. *I purchased Surrealistic Pillow and Grateful Dead, which serve as a moderate contact high.* (To Tasha, December 4.) But, as in other areas of his life, Nick was open to exploring new things. While at Fort Jackson he began listening to soul music and liking it. He also wondered whether he might like classical and other music.
5. Some of Nick's letters were long and meandering philosophical reflections. He wrote about communism, Russia, religion, altruism, procrastination, the study of Zen, and much else. His comment to Bill Beckler illustrates his expanding views: *One shouldn't content himself in institutionalized learning wholly, but garner it too from pot, the bums on the [Boston] Common, the trees and just everything.* (Early March 1968.)
6. Nick probably discovered marijuana during his California trip. His letters from Fort Jackson do not mention it, but letters from Fort Sill contain some references to pot. They begin early. A letter to Tasha opens with, *I'm in the process of getting high!! The grass is of an excellent style.* Later in the same letter he says, I'm still very stoned. (January 8, 1968.) He talked about the benefits of marijuana, seeing it as a *supplement to life,* not a substitute, and he did not see it as an escape from life. He wondered if Keats, Shelly, and other poets had turned on to pot. He was against hard drugs but had great praise for marijuana and LSD. (To Marsha, March 8, 168.)
He was busted in early February 1968. *The Army is out of control. I got busted for pot again* [I found no men-

tion of an earlier bust] *and am hurtin' for certain… Got orders for Nam but they are being held pending court-martial proceedings.* It seems that he was not court-martialed but he was investigated in some fashion that eventually gave him the security clearance necessary to be sent to Vietnam. While awaiting a decision, Nick was pessimistic. *I'm still hoping for a clearance but it doesn't look too promising. After all I am a drug addict!!* (To Tasha, March 7, 1968.) To clear himself, he asked for letters from Glasser at Manter Hall and from others attesting to his good moral character. He very much wanted to avoid the *stigma* of a dishonorable discharge from the army.

The investigation delayed his Vietnam tour by about two months. It's quite likely that Nick would have been discharged were it not for the Vietnam War and the military's decision to send about 200,000 more troops in response to the Tet offensive by the Vietcong in early 1968. Nick and many others would not have been drafted were it not for that decision, or, if drafted, would have been discharged for drug use and other offenses.

7. Writing and receiving letters were very essential for Nick's well-being and mental health. He wrote Tasha: *Just receiving a letter alleviates my depression… Thank you for writing so diligently. Your letters are appreciated and enjoyed.* At the end of most letters he wrote *Please write.*
8. Sometimes Nick offered advice, notably to Tasha, who began college just as Nick went to Fort Jackson in September 1967. Mostly he advised her to get enough rest and not participate in too many activities. There is almost a parental tone to his advice.
9. An indication of his mental condition, of his uncertain and troubled mind, are the many times he offered apologies at the end of letters. *Tasha, take this lightly, I'm just being stupid.* After advising Tasha to get enough sleep, he wrote: *But you better not listen to me, I'm just a numb-*

skulled G.I.!! I would have to be numbskulled to allow myself into this life.

10. Nick was also self-critical as he looked at his past. He came to understand his weaknesses. For example, he realized he had set low standards for himself and had failed to work diligently.

The six months of military training were very trying for Nick, as they probably were for most soldiers. He was living in an oppressive environment. He dreaded the prospect of going to Vietnam, which seemed inevitable. He was busted for smoking marijuana and faced the prospect of a dishonorable discharge. His future after Vietnam seemed equally uncertain.

But in the midst of the insanity around him, Nick was reading, thinking, and exploring new ideas. He managed to be funny, entertaining the other soldiers and enabling them to survive military training. He was also kind and caring. He stood up for a suffering soldier and was punished for it. And at the end of his time at Fort Sill, he wrote Marsha: *Thank you for the money. I gave it to this friend who needed it more .*

The Letters

To Stacia

Postmarked October 28, 1967, from Columbia, SC.

Dear Stacia,

It's about time!! Army life is as basic as our training. I am assuming robot-like motions therefore facilitating accepting the rigorous regimentation. I have successfully completed four weeks after a somewhat shaky first one. I am adapting much better than I had imagined however I cannot resolve myself to the communistic way of life. Paid by the government, living with 100s of other discontented individuals, etc. isn't my idea of freedom.

We are trained to react sharply to the harsh commands of the D.I. [drill instructor]. It is amazing to see

the transformation in a person upon entering the army. He loses identity and a sense of dignity. He assumes the role of a masochist torturing mind and body in delightfully monotonous cadence!! 1-2-3-4!!

You will also be happy to learn that I have a 97% chance of going to NAM. The war seems only too real while tactical training amidst pictures of "Charlie" positioned ominously around the course. Also hard to visualize having to use our M-14, shoulder fired, gas operated, magazine loaded, 7.62 millimeter, light weight US Army issued rifle. Regardless our last week was concerned expressly with gaining proficiency in the operation of this said weapon.

The money you will be receiving from me in form of bonds, etc. please use to pay for my excise tax and any other outstanding debts!! You will be receiving more information on the bond later.

The food isn't bad (at least 3 times a day, I am very healthy). I miss civilization. I may have my first weekend pass this week. A girl from Boston is flying down. Oh before I forget. If you hear any news about Jim's whereabouts write immediately. Also forward his address! Say hi to everyone and insure [assure] them I am doing fine. Say hi to Laurie [Stacia's baby daughter]!! Send a picture if you can! Write!!

Love Nick!!

Postmarked November 18, 1967, from Columbia, SC.

Dear Sis,

As always my impetuousness eventually ends up in regret. Please accept my apologies for my rashness. I was depressed and somewhat lonely. I do appreciate the burden-

some task of being a housewife. Stacia write if you have time, I'll understand.

I'm anxiously awaiting transferal to [Fort Sill] Oklahoma. It will eliminate a state I haven't wanted and serve to broaden my concept of the American Indian.

Army life continues. I find myself developing goals which allow army life to assume uninhibited progress as opposed to the conscious adjustment I experienced before. In this way I direct my aggressive energies toward self-betterment, interacting with but not deterred by the Army.

Not much more to say. The pictures of Laurie were especially cute. Thanks. Regards to Killy & the X's [Killy's relatives, the Xerras family]. I will forward my new address upon arrival.

Love Nick "G.I. Greek"

Postmarked January 5, 1968, from Lawton, OK.

Happy New Year!!

Dear Sis,

I hope everything is fine and that it was a boy. Please write and let me know your health status and that of the baby. My life is the same monotonous grind. Not much more to say except happy new year and regards to all.

Love Nick

Post scribto - please write soon

and also thank you for everything you did over the holidays! [Nick visited them during his Christmas leave.]

Postmarked January 29, 1968, from Lawton, OK.

Dear Stacia, Killy, Laurie and Joyce

Congratulations and love to my new niece. I'm happy that the baby is healthy but you failed to tell me how you were. I trust you're AOK. I will graduate the 15th of Febru-

ary and from there get a 3 week leave before I proceed to either Viet Nam (most likely) or Korea. I have a 93 average to date with a huge test tomorrow. If I do well I will breeze through the remainder of the course.

I'm somewhat mad at the prospect of Nam. Since I've been in I got 2 weeks for Christmas, will get 3 more and then overseas for a year leaving all I love and covet. This war is getting ridiculous, I can't claim any devout patriotism therefore am reluctant to go. This Korean crisis could cause some very serious complications. I do prefer Nam to Korea however. The cycle before us all had orders to Nam, but half of them were changed to Korea. I'll have to wait and see. I'm on guard now so will have to close. Will keep you posted!!

Love Nick

Postmarked February 7, 1968, from Lawton, OK.

Dear Stacia,

Greetings to my favorite sister!! I'm happy to hear that you are enjoying relatively good health. I got my orders for Viet Nam!! We graduate in a week, have a week of training, and I expect I may be held for new orders. I was going Airborne but injured my knee so instead of going to Georgia for training I'll go directly to Nam after leave. Leave will probably be 2 wks. and I may need a place to stay for part of that time. I should be home some time near the end of February. I still have a 94 average with 2 tests this week and the final Monday.

This weekend I went to Dallas! Wow 25,000 girls at a Hairdresser's Convention. I met a beautiful girl who I intend to see again. Remind me to show you her picture when I get home. She owns her own salon, 21, blonde, liberal and just great all around. I will tell you all about my

adventures later. This weekend I'm going to see another girl in Dallas. She has her own apartment!!

Generally I am experiencing good spirits coupled with apprehension about Nam. I hope the current escalation marks the start of a decline in the fighting by the time I get there. I'll contact you before I get home!!

Love Nick

Postmarked February 23, 1968, from Lawton, OK.

Almost expectedly there have been some developments that are serving to unnerve me. There was an investigation into alleged pot smoking in the barracks and naturally I am involved. My implication is uncertain except that I was named as an offender. What this entails isn't as obvious or as physical as one might imagine. Not only am I not receiving a security clearance but I will have to be retrained in another MOS [military occupation specialty]. This means another two months in this stinking place.

Also I am being hassled from all angles. I am at the point where I could care less about the Army. It lacks compassion and trainees are treated like animals. I am seriously considering claiming I am a communist or anything to get out of this. I can't begin to tell you what goes on here. Also I have some strong thoughts on the Viet Nam War. But I can't say anything or I'll be locked up. Where is our supposed innate freedom of speech?

The Army has too much to say about how I act and I can't stand it. I swear when I get out I'll write a book which contains all the inhumanity the Army practices. I have so many cases that would seem unbelievable that it would take years to tell. There is nothing glorious about serving the U.S. in a war that means nothing but death for soldiers

who are drafted against their will. You would be amazed at the discontent among all the kids here. I'm sure you don't know why I feel like I do, but some day I will explain it all.

Don't expect that I am shirking responsibility, because it is much more than that. Physically anyone can withstand two years in the service. But mentally or with good conscience it is much harder to withstand. Before you make any judgments let me present my whole case, I'm sure you will also find the Army to be anything but humane and the Viet Nam War atrocious.

Regards to all. I will be in touch. Don't worry and please reserve any thoughts until I can give you the whole story.

Love Nick

Postmarked March 14, 1968, from Lawton, OK.

Dear Stacia,

Still here, orders cancelled pending security clearance. No complications regarding the investigation concerning the grass, court martial proceedings were held for two guys - therefore ending it. Boring as hell here, I just sit and read all day, occasionally I have a detail.

If you can will you forward $10 until payday? I don't have a cent, and I have to do laundry among other things, also if you can will you send some stamps!?! In your next letter tell Jim to write, he owes me one. I may still see him on my way to Nam or if I don't get a clearance and have to retrain on the guns, will see him in the states. Have been reading extensively, experiencing occasional depressions but generally everything is fine. How are the girls, yourself and Killy? I trust everyone is in good health. I hope so. Must close Stac. Be good.

Love Nck

PS. Regards to everyone

To Tasha Lingos

Postmarked September 25, 1967, from Columbia, SC.

Dear Tasha,

I'm in the Army! I'm sorry I missed you before I went in. Although Army isn't exactly my act I am looking forward to the self discipline, something which I have only achieved for short periods of time. Then only to assure myself and others of my worth. This could be the biggest boon of my life in as much as prolonged discipline will carry over when I return to the civilized world. This in turn would help me realize my potential especially in academic endeavors. This will also be an especially big step in the direction of maturity. But other than this the Army stinks! Don't go in.

This is just a note to let you know where I am. I will write again when I get my permanent address.

Love Nick

PS My next letter will be much more interesting.

Postmarked October 6, 1967, from Columbia, SC.

Received your letter today and was very happy to hear from you…

Army life is one of isolation unlike anything I have ever experienced. I have been depressed for the last couple of days and have drawn definite opinions of military life. I see it as communistic. First communal living with 100s of other discontented guys. Paid by the federal government (socialism). Inability to voice opinions and lack of identity. Oral demonstrations are discouraged by utilizing harsh punishment as a deterrent.… You are stripped of human dignity by being called "boy", "yo-yo," etc

And upon a more discerning look one becomes aware of brainwashing. How else can a man with a mind and

will of his own be made to react like a plastic man by simply being ordered to perform a task no matter how unreasonable. These are all questions passed off by the military as part of your duty. Your duty to who? For the interest and protection of the freedom you enjoy as an American. Is the draft freedom? Is it necessary? Yes we need men for Viet Nam! But… Is Viet Nam necessary? All questions to be considered.… Love Nick

Postmarked October 11, 1967, from Columbia, SC.

Dear Tasha,

I received your letter today. Don't worry about cheering me up. Actually just receiving a letter alleviates my depression.

[The rest of the letter tells of some medical shots they received, of his missing Boston and the Red Sox, and of his boring daily routine.]

Postmarked October 17, 1967, from Columbia, SC.

Dear Tasha,

Thank you for your letter. You are as steady as Ozzie and Harriet.…

You expressed concern in the severity of the Army. As you suggested it is indeed getting easier. This is attributed to the fact that I am more at ease. I am gaining confidence in my ability to withstand basic, while at the same time gaining the confidence of my platoon sergeant and my fellow G.I.s. I am making friends and in certain cases involving myself in their problems. This alleviates the burden on them and in turn detours my train of thought from my personal problems.

All in all things are looking up. Aside from becoming more robot-like I am more proficient in bayonet, pugil [?] fighting and drill and ceremony. I am shaping into

a model G.I. Something I have always wanted to be!! We enjoyed post privileges this weekend. We had our choice of the beer hall, movies, or bowling alley. I chose to sleep!!...

Love Nick

Postmarked October 23, 1967, from Columbia, SC.

Dear Tasha,

... As usual I'm remaining in the company area. Being from Boston I feel inadequate, unable to cope with such rowdiness. Whether at the bowling alley or the movies the action is so fast as to completely confound me. Therefore I cower back to the safety and warmth of the quaint barracks.

I am listening to soul music down here. It's really great.... Before my taste was for freak sounds. Completely ignorant of soul music I wonder what else I am missing in music....

Sadly all too many people fail to develop true potential, and exercise innate initiative due to a stifling environment. The panacea for this universal illness is simple. Travel. Travel and one experiences different music, people, thoughts, climates, etc. Only after sampling everything can a person be certain of what he wants.... Generally if a person is born a Catholic he or she remains one for a lifetime. Some attend church occasionally, some with fanatical regularity. But both attend because it is part of a way of life almost as automatic as getting up.... to be an atheist it takes much more thought than that expanded by our devout Catholics, Protestants, etc. An atheist has to take individual initiative to answer questions of religion whereas the others have it laid out for them...

Unless the war becomes history before February I could contribute to the annals of history. I have a 97% chance of going. The exact month I finish A.I.T. [advanced in-

dividual training] the U.S. has a commitment to send 200,000 men to Nam. The thought of Nam takes the appearance of reality when we learn about tactical training with pictures of Viet Cong positioned ominously around the course. We get first-hand information from returning personnel that the war is quite real. In fact no sooner than the plane touches down in Nam and you become a target for sniper fire.

It's no wonder we pay close attention to seemingly purposeless movements designed to enhance your chance of living. We learn to crawl under wire, walk at night, under fire etc etc. Knowing I'm probably going to Nam I want to know anything that will in any way help me to return unmaimed.…

Postmarked October 28, 1967, from Columbia, SC.

…. Right now in Echo Company there is an easily discernable cloud of apprehension casting ominous shadows over the area!!…

Postmarked November 6, 1967, from Columbia, SC.

Dear Tasha,

I'm in the hospital recovering from URI [upper respiratory infection]. In essence it is a severe cold, but complicated cases can result in spinal meningitis.…

We fired record fire yesterday to determine how much we gained from our instruction on marksmanship. I ended up "sharpshooter," five points too few for "expert." However close only counts in dancing and horseshoes. In the complete company there were 25 experts, 101 sharpshooters, and the rest were marksmen or below. Although I am in the majority I personally believe that you are either expert or nothing. Everyone had the same training, there-

fore equal opportunity to make it. To content oneself in second best is unfair to the person.…

All too often throughout certain endeavors both academic and others I was apt to set standards which were attainable with minimum of effort. As I look back this seems cowardly in as much as I was afraid to discipline myself.…

Love Nick

Written November 10, postmarked November 13, 1967, from Columbia, SC.

Dear Tasha,

… I received my orders for A.I.T. I eluded the greedy group of infantry and find myself in Artillery. I will be in fire directory control. A relatively selective field. In essence I simply assume responsibility for the projectiles reaching their destination. By receiving and considering pertinent data from the front I calculate and ultimately give the order to "Fire" and rain havoc on "Charlie." I will be between the lines, but prone to mortar attack, guerilla attacks, etc. I pray if wounded I am not maimed. I would prefer death. At any rate a tour of Viet Nam is unavoidable, and I am already mentally prepared.…

Tasha it is time for an appraisal of our great society. Amid unparalleled racism and poverty funds are taken from these programs to aid a war to save face. People starve on our homeland while men die for a goal that has no basis.…

Nick goes on to argue that while the U.S. is wasting money and lives Russia and China benefit by using their resources to advance their society. The war wastes American resources and threatens our freedoms.

Dated by Nick, November 21, 1967, from Fort Jackson, SC. Another meandering letter covering many topics.

Dear Tasha,

Just wondering why you haven't written?!?...

I'm in the hospital again with a relapse of URI...

As basic draws to an inexorable close, I face the prospect of graduation with mixed emotions. Happy to have successfully completed the prescribed course of basic, yet sad to leave those that helped me make it. "I get by with a little help from my friends." It is heartening to reflect upon the collective confrontation of the ordeal of basic by such an extraordinary bunch of guys....

.... I await anxiously for the maturity that will enable me to give of myself. I must first find myself. At present I must content myself in listening, and an occasional suggestion. It is a feeling of futility, alleviated only after a realistic evaluation of one's own limitations....

Teenagers today survive (happily?) without the love and affection they deserve. They become hardened to the cold facts of life. But believe me the hard guy, the one that nothing bothers, doesn't let things bother him. He lives a life of apathy and indifference expecting nothing, therefore never disappointed....

Nick was twenty when he wrote the last paragraph. He had just left his teenage years. It may be that he was reflecting upon some of his recent experiences and actions, the image he projected as a tough guy in the rumbles and fights reported in chapter 5.

Postmarked November 29, 1967, from Columbia, SC.

Dear Tasha,

... Ft Jackson Army captain is being court-martialed for participating in a demonstration against U.S. policy in Viet Nam. And I felt that everyone was gung-ho. I'm really quite sympathetic with his plight but in my present

position could not extend any help. What happens to our freedoms when we serve our country? Ridiculous.

Dated December 4, 1967, from Fort Jackson, SC. This is a passage from page 1 of a six-page letter.

Dear Tasha,

Received your letter today. The last two days have been turn down. There is simply too much time to think, or as Jefferson Airplane contend too many days left "unstoned." The pressures of late have been responsible for several outbursts that don't behoove my status here. On top of this obvious insubordination, due to my carelessness, a letter, which wasn't exactly middle of the road conservatism, was read by the first sergeant. Consequently the topic of the cadet's conversation of late concerns that radical, Conaxis. Some things are better left unsaid, especially in the military!!...

Postmarked January 5, 1968, from Lawton, OK. It's the first letter to Tasha from Fort Sill, OK.

Dear Tasha,

... I would have to be drafted when I was just starting to become individually independent and self-sustaining. This is definitely a period of regression. Oft people see the Army as a medium for directing youth without goals or ambitions. It certainly does direct you, straight into total dependence on conformity as a way of life. Thank God I was able to at least find out what life is all about. I sympathize with these kids who enlist and expect that this is the way life is and content themselves with this sickening existence. When I become a congressman I will certainly propose legislation to abolish the draft. Meanwhile I will have to content myself with my futile cry.

Tasha, this letter is a total disaster, because I am unable to write while relaxed. (I'm not supposed to be writing while on guard.) I will wait for your next letter.

Love Nick

Postmarked January 6, 1968, from Lawton, OK.

Dear Tasha,

Although I am not especially motivated in the direction of composition, I have an inexcusable urge to write you a letter.... I have an inspection and also K.P.!! I wish I were able to procure some of that deadly weed (grass) in time to help me through the day....

Today was spent studying the duties of the forward observer in artillery. Aside from the fact that in Nam their expected life span is 8 seconds, it is a very interesting job. Of course while on the topic of life span, I took liberty to forward a query regarding the life span of the fire director for artillery. The answer was a quite ambiguous, "pretty long."... Actually fatality rate among artillery men overall is only 3%....

Life is a walking shadow, a poor player who struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing. Shakespeare.... it so aptly describes Army life, although quite inadvertently I'm sure....

Love Nick

The postmark has faded. It is January 8 or 18, 1968, from Lawton, OK.

Dear Tasha,

I'm in the process of getting stoned!! The grass is of an excellent style....

My latest interest is the study of Zen. Actual participation isn't probable, because the essence of Zen is personal

experience garnered over a number of years.... Of particular interest to me is the individualism needed for attainment of "Satori" [sudden enlightenment]. [Nick goes on to discuss and explain Zen. At one point towards the end he writes] *I'm still very stoned.*

With Love ~~Buddha~~ [with a line across the middle of Buddha]
Nick

Postmarked January 13, 1968, from Lawton, OK.

Dear Tasha,

Received your letter today. The stationery was tremendous!!...

Five days a week we have eight hours of class and four on Sat. During what few leisure hours I have I find time to read one of my old Manter Hall books. It is selected passages of Plato. I am concerning myself, primarily, with his doctrines on education and politics....

This Ft. is hurting for worthwhile reading. The P.X. caters to perverts and the library offers little in line of paperbacks. This could necessitate a trip downtown. Oh, speaking of town, Lawton has a head shop. I have yet to see it but would be interested to inspect it!!...

Love Nick

Postmarked February 6, 1968, from Lawton, OK.

Dear Tasha,

Apologies for my not so prompt return. I've been caught up in studies. We got our orders. The whole platoon is going to Nam. I'm supposed to go to [no place is given] *for Airborne training but am not particularly anxious to get another haircut and also three additional weeks of harassment. In all probability I will forget it and just proceed to Nam with the rest of the guys.*

I spent an especially enjoyable weekend in Dallas, which conveniently, was the scene of a national hairdressers' convention!! Only 25,000 beautiful girls.

The only excitement here was the furor arising from a controversial growth on my upper lip!! I just got word today, to shave. I was becoming quite distinguished looking. Only one more week of classes then a week of training for Vietnam, a 2 or three week leave and off to the jungle. Make sure I see you before I leave!! There really isn't much more to say. Your next letter should be your last. I'll contact you when I get to the bean-town!!

With love Nick

Postmarked February 12, 1968, from Lawton, OK. The stamped date has faded, with the 2 visible but not the number before it. I assume it is 12 from the context of other letters Nick wrote before and after this letter.

Dear Tasha,

Greetings!! I received your very nice letter today. In the interim from my last letter there have been some rather monumental developments. There was a major bust and naturally I am in the midst of what is proving to be an all too thorough investigation. Some super uncool kid gave the "man" the unfounded idea that I knew something about drugs!!...

I'm not certain of my exact implication, but do know that I will be held over until something is done. There is very little happening except the presence of an ominous cloud of paranoia that at present seems to be unnerving the old pro!! The hassling has affected my desire to excel and subsequently my average was affected. I went from a 94 to a 90 in two tests. The final is Monday, then we start Viet Nam training.

Your inquiry about the duty in Nam. 1 long year!! One year in a combat zone where death lurks ominously, sometimes disguised as a 10 year old kid. The war is getting very real, as I'm sure you have read. A friend's brother wrote from an air field in Da Nang and said the fighting has been escalated to frightening proportions. So frightening in fact as to necessitate living in a fox hole for four straight days. I was reading an article about the marines in the Northern provinces of Nam and how their very existence is built on an unbelievable fear of imminent death…

This bust is assuming or receiving attention similar to that of the Christine Keeler scandal. I am looked at in complete distain by a bunch of uncool reactionaries who doggedly cling to their antiquated ideals. The ludicrouscy of most servicemen is beyond belief. What ignorance, that allows these people to ignore what is proving to be the most rebellious and progressive generation of kids that the United States has bred. I don't expect that they should be proponents of drugs or free love, but certainly they should be aware of this trend and be able to appraise it "for what it's worth."

Tasha, the only thing the Army has left me is my mind and this was with reluctance. I thank God for the ability to at least be able to think how I want. You wouldn't believe the means the Army has to back one up against the wall. I pray for the strength to withstand the obvious inequities because fighting it means almost certain social suicide. They just have too many holds on my life. I often contemplate being a man and bearing the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," but Tasha I don't have it. I'll have to content myself with deriving satisfaction (sadistic) at knowing the personal torment that these ignorant bastards necessarily feel…

In our present society where the word freedom is as commonplace as the cars we drive, a man pioneering for true freedom is looked on as a radical. But Tasha, America is a far cry from what it stands for in the minds of the people who content themselves in their self-complacency. There are gross inequities in our present form of government especially pertaining to our supposed innate freedom of speech. Do you know what would happen if I said what I thought in the Army. Stockade. What happens to "rebellious" Russians - Siberia. Is there a difference? Not at all. I'm frustrated. Enough…

With love Nick

Dated February 14, 1968, from Fort Sill, OK.

Dear Tasha,

Happy Valentine's Day!!...

I'm still being investigated for alleged pot smoking, which is entailing an investigation into my past record. Other than a previous arrest for being in the presence of grass, I have a very reputable record aside from minor traffic violations incurred when I was a rowdy bikey. They suspect that I didn't list everything, which would constitute fraudulent enlistment and subsequently a dishonorable discharge. I'd give anything to get out but presently am not prepared to bear such a stigma that this would necessarily impose…

[Nick cites a law here] *smoking marijuana regardless of who is in possession carries the same implication and punishment as actual possession!! Therefore maximum penalty which I am currently, at least remotely, subject to is 5 years in jail and a discharge! Wow what a frightening thought.*

Let's change the subject. [Nick then relates an argument he had with someone on religion, where he used Bertrand Russell's writings for his side.]

We graduate officially tomorrow!! Big deal, I'm so unhappy with the Army as to have lost all ambition and sense of patriotism…

Love Nick

Postmarked February 19, 1968, from Lawton, OK.

Dear Tasha,

This is my fourth and final attempt at composing a somewhat intelligible letter. You can't imagine how futile all previous efforts have been. It's comparable to the helplessness of knowing a name but having it "caught in the tip of your tongue."

I met a friend from Boston last night and got quite high "with a little help." It was quite an interesting high, as it enabled me to analyze myself critically and guess what. For once I think I'm happy with myself. I can now derive pleasure in spite of an environment which doesn't especially promote peace of mind. It was enlightening. Nothing like Satori but rather like finding myself in the crowd and realizing I had the ability to pursue a separate route in spite of seeming insurmountable social pressures. For this reason the Army is finally in the proper perspective. It is like a rock in the path that deters one momentarily until he is able to devise an alternate route…

Another sad moment draws inexorably closer. Again I have to sever myself from new found friends. But again I leave with new ideas and a still greater understanding of the greatest enigma of all - Man and what makes him tick. I see bad and good, but it is all good because it is experience. Also through others I am able to avoid pitfalls that they have fallen victim to. And I can only hope that in some way I have left something in the way of guidance to the others. I know I'm not making any sense… I have to close, I just can't put on paper what I want to say. Maybe in the future.

Love, Nick

Postmarked February 21, 1968, from Lawton, OK.

My dear Tasha,

I can't neglect to comment on your out of sight letter. Initially, thank you for purchasing [Bertrand Russell's] "Why I'm not a Christian." I'm sure you will reap satisfactory rewards as a subsequent of such a brave and wise decision!!...

We completed Viet Nam training today although I won't be proceeding with the others. They are hassling me about a security clearance and are proposing that I get trained in a new field (probably a cannon cogger) which would mean at least 2 more months here!! The guns would insult my intelligence as well as being unfair.

I wrote an essay defending my moral character, citing reasons that I should receive said clearance, as well as striking out against the ignorance in which this whole thing is being dealt. I told them that if they placed so much emphasis on my record as negligible as it is, that at least I deserved to have it dissected and evaluated to determine how it could possibly effect "moral character." I'm sure if they gave it an honest consideration they will find that I am of high moral character and certainly not a risk....

We got a new battery commander who is a super nice guy. He could very well give me the help I need, but if not it is heartening to know that someone in the Army has some cools. Not much more news. Please write. I will, again, keep you posted.

Love (With A military accent) Nick

Postmarked February 28, 1968, from Lawton, OK.

Dear Tasha,

... I am experiencing a slight recession but should re-

sume my old form shortly. I have been doing a lot of writing and thinking lately. I wrote to a professor at U of Mass [Glasser] who was also my European History teacher at the Hall…

I am arriving at the point where I have to decide whether "it is more noble to bear the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" or to voice my discontent and get out. I am hoping for some concrete proposals from Mr. Glasser … and from there will pursue a course that will bring me peace of mind…

Love Nick

Postmarked March 7, 1968, from Lawton, OK.

Dear Tasha,

… Recently (the last two days) I have been especially and noticeably "off". To find relief from the boring life of a "holdover," I sought asylum in the supply room. There I found two real humans dressed as soldiers, but still very much humans. One is the supply sergeant and the other a very interesting Italian immigrant. He was drafted from his teaching post after four months in the states!! He is reluctant to voice his obvious dissent and only after my gaining his confidence did he produce a multitude of underground publications including The Village Voice, Ramparts, Evergreen, Avant Garde, Cheetah, etc. He's quite a character but obviously intimidated by the awesome power of the military. Today he conversed with his embassy and they said there was very little chance of getting out. You can imagine the incentive he has to fight for the United States!!

I have been utilizing the typewriter to "write" what I have been thinking. It was this spontaneous thing, resulting in some rather amazing thoughts. It was something

that can't be accomplished merely by writing longhand, the thoughts just seemed to flow, inexorably, from head to the keys. Understandably some of it was nonsense, but some other was good. My shrink would be eager to examine it for physic [psychic] symbolism and the such!!

I read another book, today. The reading was easy. The book, "Turned On," was about last year's death of a young girl in N.Y. from an overdose of heroin.… [Nick goes on to distinguish heroin from marijuana, abuse of drugs from safe use.] *I am a proponent for everyone turning on at least once.… You would be awed at the sensitivity to music, people and aestheticisms that is a result of grass. People who don't know call this "escaping reality" and in a sense while stoned you aren't aware of reality, but you retain this appreciation and are able to see the same beauty "straight."…* [Nick continues the discussion of the book and drugs for another long page.]

I'll probably be here another couple of months!! What a down!! I'm still hoping for a clearance but it doesn't look too promising. After all I am a drug addict!! Please write.

Love Nick

Postmarked March 14, 1968, from Lawton, OK. It's Nick's last letter to Tasha from Fort Sill.

Dear Tasha,

… It's been a turndown week. Fifty hours of instruction on precision registration, class A inspection, guard duty, and a tremendously hard test Monday. After four tests I still have a 93 average but I'm afraid it's destined to fall somewhat Monday.… Monday … we will receive our orders!! It is inevitable.……

Tasha thank you for writing so diligently! Your letters are appreciated and enjoyed. I only wish I had more time to write more entertaining letters.…

My mind is occupied with thoughts of Nam.... Although I am resolved [resigned] to that inevitable prospect I can't admit to any great patriotism. I will have enough money saved for a new ... bike and the G.I. bill will help me through school. I'm seriously considering Colby College. I was accepted while at Manter Hall but because I dropped out 1 week early they were "forced" to renege on the acceptance. I'm certain that this small liberal arts college (coed) will be conducive to my particular (peculiar?) academic needs....

I swear my mind isn't functioning. It's been a taxing week and believe me military weeks are really taxing. With or without extraneous complications. I will close for now. Please write!!

With Love "Nick"

To Marsha Greenberg

Marsha Greenberg could not determine the date of the following letter from Nick. It was written around March 1, 1968, from Fort Sill, OK. It is a long and meandering letter, and I include only some passages here to give a sense of his reading, worries, and reflections.

After mentioning various goals in life, Nick discusses altruism.

Dear Marsha,

....Being nice and bringing any degree of happiness into someone's life can and should be as natural as eating. Sadly, it is a special sort [who] is able to escape the confines of his own ego to sacrifice for others....

[Sartre] believes that as our actions and current opportunities were determined by previous generations, so too, will our actions affect future generations. For this reason he sees every action as setting a precedent, therefore with due concern for posterity our every action should be accompanied by the same anguish of an officer leading

men into battle. We have the same responsibility. In this way we can justify our existence, regardless of the seemingly commonness of our actions. We don't have to write great books, or erect great monuments as proof....

Today I read some poetry from a book from that was given to me by a friend. Most of it was "Romantic" and surprisingly, laden with allusions to flower power, etc. I wonder if these guys (Keats, Shelly) turned on. Perhaps. After all drugs aren't as novel as we might expect.... If people stop and place drugs in their proper perspective they would be able to see [them] merely as a supplement to life not a substitute....

Today I got caught for a mess hall detail. The drill sergeant said 1 hour, the mess sergeant extended it 3 more and the cook still another. The mess sergeant told me I could leave at 3 thirty but wasn't there to verify it so I did the only fair thing, I refused to work. The cook started hassling me and I told him to get laid. This provoked him into bringing me to the first sergeant who was duly informed of my insubordination. I recounted the story and after great deliberation (1 second) was sent back to the mess hall to serve out my sentence. Just a shining example of the fairness throughout the Army....

Love & kisses Nick

Postmarked March 1, 1968, Fort Sill, OK.

Dear Marsha ...

If I get my clearance I'll go over [to Vietnam] as a fire direction personnel - it is interesting and stimulating. I finished 3rd in the class (60) but would have been 2nd if I wasn't hassled over the grass incident. I just said fuck it and dropped from a 94 to an 85 in a week (2 tests). I'll tell you about the course later. It's really wild and is a great responsibility because we are the brains of the artillery.

We have to determine from Forward observers, corrections in elevation, site, Quadrant, fuze, charge, deflection, range, H.B. correction, deflection connection, 2/s, 100/R, adjusted time, meteorological corrections, corrections for wear of the Howitzers, etc etc etc. Then we forward this in the form of a fire order for the guns and rain a devastating barrage of projectiles on ????....

Postmarked March 8, 1968, Fort Sill, OK.

Dear Marsha,

....My present implication with Marijuana entails some far reaching effects. Currently they are refusing me a security clearance which means I will have to retrain in some other field. This means eight more weeks in this hole. My primary concern however is the stigma that ensues from such a decision. For that reason I went to great length to defend my moral character in an essay that will be forwarded up through the echelons. I stated that if given the consideration I deserve it would be determined that I was of good moral character and certainly not a security risk. I based my case on the fact that if my civil offenses, which are negligible, are being used to place such a stigma on me that it should be dissected for a scrutinizing evaluation. I told them that where the determination of one's moral character or inner mien is concerned it is ridiculous to pass judgment without first talking with people qualified to evaluate me as a person. Not a criminal record that naturally is unable to differentiate between degrees of involvement or actual participation in said crimes. This in mind I forwarded several names from which the Army has to determine their integrity etc. Among them was ... Mr. Glasser [Nick's teacher a Manter Hall school in Cambridge]....

[Mr. Glasser] was inspirational at the Hall, but only now am I realizing the true magnitude of what he stands for. Subsequently I too find courage to be myself, retaining my identity in an Army that tries relentlessly to strip you of all identity. Marsha I have my mind and at all costs will protect it from the Army. I am subjugated physically but mentally I proceed virtually unscathed.…

From the beginning I have been concerned with the inhumanity encountered in the military but now find it quite intolerable. How sad to see a human reacting robot like, triggered by the harsh command of the ignorant bastard we endearingly christen "sarge." No person should be subjected to such an irrational being. But fight it! Impossible. The Army has a crippling grip on your every action. How tragically ironic that while fighting for "freedom" you are forced to sacrifice these very freedoms. Our duty, an honour? Fuck them. I am convinced that it is less admirable to submit to this, than it is admirable to serve this country. People say what's two years? I say two minutes is too long to be deprived of supposedly innate freedoms guaranteed to us by our antiquated constitution.…

I'm not so convinced that this is such a great society. The charges of "War mongers," "imperialists," etc aren't as unfounded as we are made to believe.…

I want an education that is <u>mine</u>. The Army has made me realize the value of an education and some reading of free-thought philosophies, especially and primarily Bertrand Russell. I will be content only after I am sure that what I say isn't influenced by the same dogmas that are reeking havoc on the minds of the young. If you get a chance read "Why I am not a Christian" [by] Bertrand Russell. It is an eye-opening book. It points out what ig-

norance can and does do to potentially great nations. He cites the ludicrousness of such beliefs as the holiness of a cow, anti-birth control, etc.

I have done some reading since I got in, ranging from Plato, Zen Buddhism, Sartre (existentialism), "Free thought philosophy" etc etc and am conscious of my insignificance but also determined to garner a meaningful education. I believe that traveling, meeting people, confronting new ideas, situations and customs are just as important as reading a thousand books…

I relax by listening to different records. I freak to the Doors and the Fudge. I have the Beatles, Airplane, Stones etc etc There is so much in today's music, that it's not too hard to conceive of music as a friend. I'm sure I am making no sense so I'll terminate that little dissertation. However I would like very much to someday have a nice talk with you in hope of clarifying and arranging logically the many thoughts and moods I have experienced in the last two years…

With Love

"Nick" "Rogue" "Nickie"

PS sorry if this letter is messy but it is in hopes that maybe you won't be able to decipher this lunacy!!

Why Did Nick Not Avoid Vietnam?

It is a question I cannot answer. As I dig deeper into his life and letters, it is almost haunting me. Given all his criticisms of the war, the comments he wrote about the likelihood of injury or death in Vietnam, the widely spreading opposition to the war everywhere in the U.S. in the 1960s, the thousands of soldiers going to Canada and Europe to avoid the draft or desert the military, the hundreds of thousands deserting within the U.S., it seemed inevitable that Nick should have and would have avoided Vietnam.

His doubts about fighting in Vietnam were many and repeated.

This war is getting ridiculous. I can't claim any devout patriotism therefore am reluctant to go. (Tasha, January 29, 1968.)

I have some strong thoughts about the Viet Nam War. But I can't say anything or I'll be locked up. He thought the war was *atrocious.* (Stacia, February 25, 1968.)

Just as Nick was agonizing over his impending tour of Vietnam, opposition to the war was becoming intense, especially after the Tet offensive early in 1968. Thousands of young men decided against going to Vietnam. "While 20,000 men deserted after serving full tours in Vietnam, a far greater number left the military during the training process. There were roughly 500,000 deserters during the Vietnam War." About 50,000 people, almost half of them women, crossed the border into Canada. Some of the women left the U.S. to express their opposition to the war; most accompanied husbands and boyfriends. (Appy, *Patriots,* pp. 95, 334, 340.)

Probably millions of people and families argued and agonized over this issue. Larry Kneeland said he was against the war and wanted to avoid Vietnam. *I didn't want to go. Nick didn't want to go. Nobody really wanted to go.* His father talked him out of avoiding Vietnam because he was a World War II veteran. Many considered going to Canada but they feared the consequences and could not find the courage to leave their country. Others did go to Canada. They had deep moral, political, and philosophical objections to the war; they were afraid to die; they were caught up in anti-war feelings. (See Appy, *Patriots.*)

Many families were torn apart over this issue during the war. Some parents and families disowned their children who went to Canada and never spoke to them again. Others supported them in their decision. Gloria Emerson tells the story of the Perrins, whose son chose Canada. They still felt as if they had lost a child. Many of their friends avoided them, others wrote them nasty letters accusing them and their son of disloyalty. (*Winners and Losers*, pp. 125-132.)

The agonizing decision of whether to desert that Nick faced was a common experience for millions of young men and their families and friends. Most of Nick's friends did not know of his opposition to the war. Many knew him before Nick went to military training, before

his opposition became strong. But even Kevin Groden, who saw Nick during the last month before Nick left for Vietnam, told me, *I saw nothing in Nick that showed me that he had any conscientious objections to what he was about to do,* adding that he did not understand the letters Nick wrote from Vietnam.

Nick's agony over military service and Vietnam began when he received his draft notice sometime in the middle of 1967. Judy Beckler recalled the time Nick came to see Bill, her father. Nick was *terrified to go. He came to see my dad when he got the draft notice. And he was terrified…. He came to see my dad to tell him that he was drafted, or maybe he called him and came up to see him and they spent some time together just talking through what he was gonna do. And he was trying to deal both with the shock of being drafted as well as was there any way that he could not go. And he was terrified. That's what I remember my dad talking about, that he was so terrified to go.* Judy could not remember if her father used "terrified" to describe Nick, but she was certain that was the emotion Nick felt.

I asked Judy what her father may have advised Nick to do, and what options Nick thought he had. *I would imagine him saying to Nick "tough it out, what else are you gonna do, you've been drafted, you need to go."… I don't know what Nick was thinking about, going to Canada, or….* She added that her father was a World War II veteran. He had been rejected for military service for poor eyesight, but he insisted on serving and eventually was accepted as an intelligence officer. Later, in an email, she wrote: *As you know Nick's death shook my dad deeply and even though he didn't live to see the full-blown opposition I think his convictions re: service to country were shaken and in question as well…. Nothing like WWII.* (Bill died in 1969.)

His brother Jimmy met Nick in Boston in 1967 after Nick had received the draft notice. He thinks it was he, not Nick, who raised the possibility of Canada. He had no idea if Nick had thought of it before, adding, *He didn't tell me that was his thinking…. My memory is he said he wasn't gonna go to Canada.* His sister Stacia said that Nick *didn't want to go. He really went back and forth. He had mixed emotions … he did have mixed emotions. Going to Canada.* In a later talk, after I had told Stacia what Judy Beckler had told me, she said Nick *went back and forth … he didn't know what to do.* Even though he seemed to have contemplated going to Canada, he ultimately rejected it.

Months later, as his days at Fort Sill were ending and his Vietnam tour seemed imminent, Nick was still struggling to find a way out of Vietnam. His letters and my field notes from Longview Farm provide some contemporary evidence. He wrote Tasha: *I am at the point where all is needed is some encouragement to sever myself from this atrocity…. I am hoping for some concrete proposals from Mr. Glasser (teacher) and from there will pursue a course that will bring me peace of mind.* (February 28, 1968.) I did not find what, if anything, Glasser wrote to Nick.

Nick continued looking for advice from Bill Beckler. There are two items in my field notes relating to Nick's search. On March 2, 1968, my wife and I were at a dinner at a house next to Longview Farm, where Hans, the assistant director, lived. Hans commented that Bill was too accommodating with the boys, present and past residents. He "told us of a $48 bill BB has from collect calls from a boy who was at the farm, is now in the Army in Arizona [Oklahoma], soon to go to Vietnam; he is anxious and calls BB often. It's too much, said Hans." (There is no name in the field notes, but from all the evidence I have now, it's likely that Hans was referring to Nick.)

The field note entry for May 22, 1968, the day after Nick's funeral, clearly is about him.

"Bill did not come to the [weekly staff] meeting. I heard it said that he is feeling very poorly because of Nick Conaxis' death, was really shook up at the funeral. So he was at home today. I asked Ed [a senior staff member] and Hans about it, and here is what both of them told me. It seems that Nick did not want to go in the army (rather, was unsure about it), and it was Bill who talked him into going. Then when he learned he would soon be shipped to Vietnam, he wanted to desert. He called Bill – collect, said Hans, one call alone being $20 – many times, and Bill once more talked him out of what he wanted to do. He told him to do his patriotic duty, not to desert, etc. So Nick went, afraid as he was going. Ten [twelve] days after he arrived in Vietnam he got killed. So Bill feels very guilty about it, feels responsible. He feels even worse for just before he left for Vietnam, Nick had begun to form a close relationship with some members of his family; he had 'found' his family, is the way Hans put it. Hans told us that he would talk to Bill later in the day. Those who were at the funeral told me that he broke down every time he saw the coffin."

Forty-four years later, in 2012, I asked Bill's daughter Judy what her father recommended to Nick. *I don't know what he said…. I'm actually hoping that he wasn't too hard on Nick, like, "get over it, you need to do it, how we gonna help you do it." But I know that he was worried about him because he was so afraid.*

The field notes report what I was told in 1968. Now that I have talked to many others and have read Nick's letters, it seems clear that Bill advised Nick to do his patriotic duty and go to Vietnam. They had arguments over this issue, arguments similar to those in millions of homes in the U.S. I think Bill's stand played a role in Nick's decision but it was not the deciding factor. Nick ultimately chose Vietnam over desertion for his own reasons. He wanted to avoid the stigma of an undesirable discharge from the army, as he wrote. His letters report his struggles to clear his name and his "moral character" in order to receive security clearance. Despite his scathing and detailed denunciations of military training and the war, I think Nick was afraid of desertion.

Throughout his life, Nick made his own decisions, rash and harmful as some may seem to us now. He dropped out of Manter Hall a week before graduation and he left UMass before the end of the semester. If Nick had convinced himself that he should have stayed out of the military and Vietnam, he would have done so.

Something stopped him short of that decision. Something Nick might have been unable to explain. Certainly it is something I cannot explain. It may have been a fear of starting life all over again in Canada, of becoming rootless again. He had had so much turmoil in his life that he may have found it difficult to contemplate cutting himself off from friends and family. And being a deserter within the U.S., with the obvious need to hide from the government, would have been no more appealing.

A Letter to Bill

Sometime in the spring of 1968, probably in March before he left Fort Sill, Nick wrote a long letter to Bill Beckler. It came after an argument they had, but I cannot tell if that argument had taken place in person or by phone, or if Nick was responding to a letter from Bill. Nick was defending his developing philosophy of life.

Today

Dear Bill,

Expectedly - your logic and presentation were infallible. Your "earthy" (?) analogies never fail to be understood for its intended purport. But like yourself I am entitled to my opinion. (Thank God we live in America!!) I honestly feel that your condemnation of "pot" is unfair and unrealistic. I am of course concerned with this condemnation where it's applicable to me. You feel that it is a rationalization, an escape and what's more an impediment to the attainment of my intended goals. Quite simply, attainment of my goal, as you referred to it, is most emphatically not impeded in any way by pot or any other escape mechanism. Obviously you think quite the contrary, but you can not honestly say because you aren't even vaguely familiar with the amount I smoke or what dictates when I smoke.

If it doesn't sound too hippie - my primary goal, presently, in life is to do what I want when I want to do it, a life void of obstructing regulations, which most times are imposed by a society which adheres dogmatically to superstitions and antiquated moral codes, and to be able to be myself in spite of these people that expect me to adhere to these rules of society, a society as uncertain as myself and thousands of others.

There is no stabilizing factor. Love? Money? I believe that it is reasonable and legal to lead a life of uninhibited progress, a life interacting with but not deterred by our "Great Society." You may see this as cowardice or irresponsible. Well if it's irresponsible - damn responsibility. It is easy to evaluate the meaning and value of individualism, where or in an organization that suppresses it with clock-like effectiveness. It's the same value Russians attri-

bute to the freedom derived and enjoyed in a democracy. The difference is that, in spite of unfair stigma and ensuing ignominy, I can be an individual.

For this reason I have brought education into a similar perspective. It should and will be "mine." It won't be an education that has been attained, and even intact from generations hundreds of years gone. Education isn't necessarily what reactionaries may consider "proper" for a good red blooded American boy. If it were we would still be condemning birth control, burning witches, believing in the sacredness of a cow, having intercourse and a baby, reading "approved" literature. Thank God someone realized that they were being deprived. For these reasons one shouldn't content himself in institutionalized learning, wholly, but garner it too from pot, the bums on the common, the trees and just everything.

Bill believe me I am not obsessed with or possessed by pot smoking or for that matter anything else. And if it were an escape mechanism I would be "stoned" perpetually to escape the gross "reality" of this Army. People naturally expect that by mere experimentation today's youth are wallowing in an inescapable hell. This isn't true!! But to prove them wrong one must finish college, buy his new Cadillac or through ingenuity make his million.

You unfairly accused me of concerning myself with my personal and carnal pleasures rather than living. You're right Bill, I haven't got a couple thousand saved, or false security built on a materialistic and plastic foundation to substantiate my worth and to indicate the degree of my initiative or responsibility. I am responsible to myself not the Joneses or the bank or anyone else. You call this rationalization or denial or inability to face reality, I call it being myself, honesty, courage anything else that

is opposite of society's standards. This may sound like I am dropping out but quite the contrary I am dropping in.

I'm going to stop because this letter isn't able to express my full feelings or the origination and ultimate purport. However I feel that you should know, making a presentation at great length, of my feelings [is] something that must be done.

One feeling that will never be misunderstood or misinterpreted is my respect and admiration for you. Conflicting ideals could never mitigate the tremendous esteem I hold you in. And believe me you make sense, but you must realize that may be in spite of your insights and experience I and everyone else is different and that being yourself isn't or shouldn't be thought to be abnormal. Take this letter for what it's worth until I am able to fill in the pieces, then tell me I'm on the wrong road, and if you can substantiate that claim, I'm ready to "adjust." But please don't misinterpret what I am saying or make any judgments until I can give you a complete synopsis of thoughts that have transpired for sometime now.

As far as sharing or not sharing my letters, I can understand this disappointment. I'm sorry. Also I won't involve anyone else or in any way destroy the "face" you have achieved after so many years hard work at Longview.

I am almost tempted to destroy this letter for fear that you'll fail to grasp the intended purport, but if you do I hope to clarify this when I talk to you.

Regards to all.

Nick

Bill - DO WAIT before you judge this letter. It is impossible to say everything in a letter and even more difficult to convey feelings and expression.

Reading this letter in July 2012 brought me back to the 1960s. It shows so well the conflict between generations, the struggle to make sense of one's changing values, the wish to challenge one's elders but not alienate them, and so much else. Nick respected Bill and appreciated his friendship and help, but he also wanted to be true to who he was becoming. He continued their relationship, as we see in the three letters he sent Bill from Vietnam. In a less painful way, I felt somewhat the same conflict with Bill that Nick did – and I still respect and admire him.

April 1968

Nick came home from Fort Sill for about a month's leave before arriving in Vietnam on April 23, 1968. That year, and especially that spring, was a turbulent period in a turbulent decade.

On January 31, the Vietcong and North Vietnamese forces launched a surprise attack and were able to enter a number of cities. There were heavy casualties on both sides. Even though the enemy forces were eventually pushed out of the cities and suffered many casualties, their ability to penetrate cities was a shock for the U.S. military and the American public. It marked a major turning point in the war. The anti-war movement escalated its protests, even as President Johnson decided to send more troops to Vietnam. Nick's assignment to Vietnam was a result of that decision.

The anti-war protesters within the Democratic Party became more active, including Senator Eugene McCarthy, who ran against President Johnson in Democratic primaries. Largely because of that opposition, Johnson announced on March 31 that he would not run for reelection.

Four days later, on April 4, Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis, TN, creating more protests and tension in the country. Also in April, hundreds of thousands protested against the war in demonstrations across the country. We do not know what Nick thought about these events, but surely he was aware of them. He refers to demonstrators in one of his Vietnam letters.

He had written about the war while at Fort Sill. On February 7, he told Stacia: *Generally I am experiencing good spirits coupled with apprehension about Nam. I hope the current escalation marks the start of a decline in the fighting by*

the time I get there. A few days later, February 12, he wrote Tasha that the war had escalated, soldiers live in foxholes for days, and there is *an unbelievable fear of imminent death.* And in his last letter to Tasha from Fort Sill on March 14, he said that his mind was so troubled he could hardly write.

During his military leave in the Boston area, just before he went to Vietnam, he was seeing friends and family. According to Kevin Groden, Nick was involved in more fights. I asked how many. *I don't know. Sometimes these stories seem to multiply … certainly three.* In the first, Nick jumped in to join the fight. He instigated the second. Kevin could not remember Nick's role in the third.

Taming his a*ggressive energies* was incomplete.

Comments

On August 6, 1967, just before he entered military life, Nick turned twenty. At the same age, six years earlier, I was a college sophomore at Clark University in Worcester, MA, reading Bertrand Russell, as Nick was to do later. Many of us in the 1960s were exploring issues of religion, politics, identity, music, the meaning of life, just as Nick was doing in his forty letters from September 1967 to March 1968. Since we were in college, we were exempt from military service and the war, at least for a few years.

Nick was not. The looming Vietnam War was becoming more real for him as the months wore on. Basic and advanced training were oppressive and insane for Nick, even as he seemed proud of some military skills he had acquired. His letters did not discuss his past, his insecurities and anxieties, but surely they were with him daily. Yet despite the heavy burdens on his mind, he was still the funny and joking Nick to his friends. He then went on to be a thoughtful and kind man during his twelve days in Vietnam. His letters from Vietnam shine with keen observations, kind acts, and honest fear.

7

"Many a Young Boy Who Won't Come Back"

Long before he went to Vietnam, Nick was thinking about the day he would arrive there. On November 16, 1967, he wrote Tasha from Fort Jackson that a Vietnam tour was unavoidable and *I am already mentally prepared… I pray if wounded I am not maimed. I would prefer death.*

A note. According to Gloria Emerson, soldiers in Vietnam avoided the word "death." "No one used the words 'die' and 'death.' A man was hit, not wounded. If he was killed, they said wasted or blown away. He bought it, or he bought the farm. He was greased or lit up. Death was the Max. Each year the language of the soldiers changed a little as the new bunch came in." (*Winners and Losers,* p. 64.)

A few days after he arrived in Vietnam, on May 1, Nick wrote Stacia: *Friday I go by convoy to my unit, my chief worry will be mortars and rockets but I plan to keep my head down. It's very real over here and I must admit I'm scared shit. I hope this year flies.*

Scared shit is the most direct and plain admission of fear found in all of Nick's letters.

The Trip to Vietnam

Nick took off for Vietnam probably not knowing anyone on the plane. Unlike in any other war, by 1966 soldiers were flying alone to Vietnam, "not as units but as individual replacements, completely unaware of where in Vietnam they would be fighting, with whom, and, in many cases, why. Of the Vietnamese they knew nothing. They sat next to strangers on an air-conditioned ride to a war half a globe away." (Appy, *Patriots,* p. 101.)

I found no one who was with Nick on his plane over. Appy did talk with Helen Tennant Hegelheimer, who was a stewardess on many military flights to and from Vietnam in 1966 and 1967. Some thirty years later, she recalled the experience for Appy:

"Going over, there were usually two legs – Travis Air Force Base to Japan, and Japan to Vietnam. From California to Japan the troops did a lot of letter writing. Guys would ask me, 'Is this a good letter? If you received this, would you wait for me?' At first I read the letters, but they really pulled at your heart, so after a while I would just pretend to read them and say they were perfect….

"[Boys in the Green Berets or Airborne Ranges] were boys destined for combat and they had been told in training what their expected mortality rate was. I remember an air force Blue Beret actually told me they were trained to die. He didn't expect to ever go home….

"I never said 'good-bye' or 'good luck.' I would shake their hand, look them in the eye, smile, and say, 'See you later.' Sometimes I'd say, 'See you in twelve months.' They really wanted somebody to look at them. At the top of the ramp was the world, at the bottom of the ramp was the war. I saw eyes full of fear, some with real terror. And maybe this sounds crazy, but I saw death in some of their eyes. At that moment, at the top of the ramp, I was their wife, their sister, their girlfriend, and for those troops who had no one else – and there were many – I was their mother. That was the most important thing I've ever done….

"I don't think there was one of us who did not want to keep them on the plane. That's why some of the girls were back in the bathroom crying. They couldn't stand to watch them leave. We were very aware we were sending them to war and that some would never come back.

Therein lies the guilt. I've spent a lot of time wondering if instead of distracting them I should have warned them. I've been assured by veterans that there was nothing I could have said….

"The first thing we'd ask when we arrived in Vietnam is, 'Are we talking troops out?' If you took a hundred and sixty-five men in and a hundred and sixty-five out, you really could fool yourself into believing they were all coming home. But in '66 and '67 the war was escalating so we often left Vietnam with an empty plane….

"I remember clearly thinking, these guys are not going home to their girlfriend and that '55 Chevy they had been working on. Their youth was gone and it showed. You absolutely saw a different look in their eyes on the way home….

"These boys grew up the same way I did in the fifties. We attended church, we understood right from wrong. I believe they did things in Vietnam that were totally against everything they were brought up with and I'm not really talking about the killing. I'm thinking about those other things that happen to young men in a war – drinking, and maybe drugs, and contact with girls. So they weren't just afraid of swearing in front of their mothers; they were afraid their mothers would be able to tell everything they had done in Vietnam. I think this was a big reason why so many veterans just shut down and wouldn't talk about the war to anyone except someone else that had been there." (Appy, *Patriots,* pp. 107-110.)

Life in Vietnam

Nick opened his letter to Stacia expressing elation that he had taken a shower and was clean. Vietnam is a tropical country and felt hot and smelly to American combat soldiers, whose wishes were for simple things: "mail, an occasional hot meal,… showers, rest, and beer," and music and other diversions. (Appy, *Working-Class War*, pp. 207, 237.) Smoking pot was among the diversions. It was common and fairly open, especially in the base camps. Various surveys showed that 50 to 60 percent of the American troops in Vietnam smoked marijuana. A. J. Langguth, an American reporter, told Appy: "G.I.s had peace signs on their helmets and smoked pot quite overtly."

Soldiers also looked forward to rest and recreation leaves. Nick, looking ahead, wrote Tasha from Fort Sill on March 14, 1958: *While*

in Nam we get two R&R's (rest and relax) and we are flown by the military to either Hawaii, Philippines, Australia, Thailand, Japan, etc for six days. I will certainly take advantage of this and foresee it as a prelude to further journeys.

More Letters from Vietnam

When I tell people I am writing a story of Nick's life, they ask why, since I never met Nick. I say, it is the three letters he wrote to Bill Beckler. Then they ask, what about those letters? Three things stood out when I first read them in October 1968, and they still stand out: his sharing of food and other items with the children; his comment that the Vietnamese people needed social workers, not soldiers; and his critique of the war. For Marsha Greenberg, the letters were a*bout how ridiculous the war is, and what is he doing there, and these poor people, and he can't make sense of it.*

Reading the letters to Bill Beckler again, plus those he wrote Stacia, Tasha, and Marsha, the three themes still stand out. Below is a summary of all the letters Nick wrote from Vietnam.

I was given seventeen letters and two postcards that Nick wrote. All but two close with *please write* or similar words. He wrote Marsha: *I can't overemphasize the value of mail.* It is a great sadness to everyone who wrote Nick that he received none of their letters. They were returned to them, unopened. Nick did not live long enough in Vietnam to get them. He wrote Tasha: *Time goes by slowly and apparently mail is as slow*. Judy Beckler wrote Nick a letter hoping he would find it waiting for him when he landed in Vietnam. *The letter that I wrote came back right after he died.*

Emerson wrote: "There were always soldiers who found it hard to write home; it required too much concentration, it was too hard to explain what was happening or not happening, they did not know how to say it." (*Winners and Losers,* p. 63). Nick wrote and wrote, apparently daily. It is impressive that even though he was terrified he found the strength to write. He was sensitive to the people and places around him. His letters include the following themes.

1. He made a number of observations about the Vietnamese people and their land. He was saddened by their poverty and the destruction of their land's beauty.
2. He expressed both confidence in his ability to leave Vietnam alive and a fear that he would be killed.
3. He often referred to the trying living conditions the soldiers were facing, especially the lack of showers.
4. He wished he had attended college and not dropped out as he did, so he would not have to be in Vietnam. College students, most of them from the middle and upper classes, were not drafted while in school. After college, they used the draft and military systems to get easier, non-combat positions, or to avoid military service altogether through various exemptions. According to Appy and others, 75-80 percent of the American soldiers in Vietnam were working-class men. (For one exception, see Steven Kenney's story below. For more details and discussion, see Chapter 9.)
5. He wrote all four people about his attachment to and sharing with the children around U.S. military bases.

Before we read some more of Nick's letters, let us look at how two people reacted to the letters to Bill Beckler after they read the copies I had sent them. Kevin Groden said he did not understand them. He had had no indication that Nick was reluctant to go to Vietnam. He thought Nick was ready to go and saw the war as an adventure. He was i*mpressed with how articulate the letters were [but] that was not the Nick that I was in contact with at that time.* Emily Burnett thought they reflected the Nick she had known, such as his generosity to the children, and that they are an accurate reflection of Nick.

Nick wrote his letters to the four people at about the same time. Many thoughts, some verbatim, are the same in letters to all four. To avoid repetition, below I print the letters he wrote Stacia and a few passages from the letters to Tasha and Marsha.

Letters to Stacia

Postmarked April 26, 1968.

Dear Stacia,

Arrived at 3 A.M. today amid a drenching rain. Ev-

eryone is oblivious of it, with an unconscious knowledge that it is better than the usual oppressive heat. I am at Cam Rayn Bay waiting assignment to a unit. I must say it lacks the comfort of home, although it is better than I had anticipated. No hot water, canned milk and outhouses will take a while to get accustomed to.

The War still seems far away as this is the most secure part of the country. There is an easy atmosphere with little emphasis on military courtesy. Civilians work around the base and there is American music on a military station nearby. This area is mountainous with of course the bay. I wear jungle fatigues as the temperature is 85 in spite of a cooling rain. There is an air of apprehension around as everyone waits to go to respective units.

I miss everyone and hope to hell this year flies. The flight over was cool, we stopped in Tokyo, Japan but couldn't go to the city. When I can I am going to invest in a camera as I am certain in spite of the war there is still some beauty here. The magazine I bought at the airport is classified as subversive thus not allowed. Ridiculous. Not too much news as I am still feeling my way around. Regards to everyone.

Much love
Nick

Postmarked May 1, 1968.

Hi Sis,

I'm at Pleiku and the war becomes a stark reality of piercing fear and unmitigated discomfort. Showers are a coveted luxury and my whole body is rotting except for my teeth. I'm writing to give you my permanent address (on envelope). Write when possible. My love to everyone.

Nick

Postmarked May 1, 1968.

Dear Stacia,

I had to write and tell you the good news. I'm clean!! Honest!! It was my first shower in over a week and it felt like heaven. It was unbelievable, great, fantastic, wonderful, etc. I got my assignment today, I'm with a field artillery unit near Doc Tau. The area is quite active since the Tet offensive and I expect to be firing missions continually.

Today at Pleiku 2 M.P.s got ambushed and killed. One had only four days left in Nam. Friday I go by convoy to my unit, my chief worry will be motors [mortars] and rockets but I plan to keep my head down. It's very real over here and I must admit I'm scared shit. I hope this year flies.

Love Nick

(over)

Give my love to Laurie and Joyce and everyone else.

If postmarks are at all parallel to the dates Nick wrote, this is his last letter to Stacia from Vietnam. It is postmarked May 3, 1968. In this letter, we see that Nick did not receive any of the letters written to him.

Dear Sister,

It's a hell but pay day somehow alleviates some of the pains. I go to my unit tomorrow (Dak To) by a truck convoy. Today a sergeant got his foot blown off by a mine on what was expected to be a practice patrol. The monsoon has officially started and it is unbelievable. Still looking forward to mail. On special occasions I would appreciate canned fruit, etc., towlettes, Koolaide, pictures of the babies, etc.

My love

Nick

P.S. Next month I will send more than $200 home and

should average about $160-$170 every month until I get promoted then it will be over $200. I will save at least $1500. Tell Jim to write.

If I made a mistake on these orders let me know correct procedure.

To Tasha Lingos

Most of what Nick wrote to Tasha is contained also in the letters to Bill Beckler printed in Chapter 1, and to his sister and Marsha Greenberg. I chose a few passages that appear different or reinforce important matters Nick covered.

Postmarked April 25, 1968.

I'm certain that no-one not directly involved can appreciate the fear and most of all the discomfort. No mortal should be subjected to it. My mention of all this isn't to provoke sympathy for me because I don't deserve it. I'm still alive with all my limbs.

Dated April 27, 1968.

I am learning to sleep anywhere, as at times it [sleep] is very rare. I'm living out of my duffel bag which makes it difficult to stay clean.

Postmarked May 1, 1968.

The topography is fantastically beautiful. How sad it had to be sullied by war.... Civilians work at the base and I spent nearly an hour watching them work almost mechanically.

Postmarked May 1, 1968.

I got my orders and am at Doc toe (phonetically) quite an active area. I'm somewhat afraid but am hoping for the best. [He wrote Stacia that he was scared shit.]

To Marsha Greenberg

Nick wrote Marsha three letters from Vietnam. Mostly they cover the same concerns and observations as those he wrote to Bill Beckler (see Chapter 1), to his sister Stacia, and to Tasha Lingos. He ends the letters to Marsha with *Please write; Again I can't over emphasize the value of mail; Please write.*

The following is a passage from one of the letters, probably the last he wrote Marsha. There is no postmark or date.

This is Greekie from the wilds of Viet Nam. Tomorrow I proceed by convoy to Dak To which is in the Central Highlands precariously close to the Cambodian border. They [Vietcong] are preparing for an offensive similar to the Tet, to commemorate Ho Chi Minh's birthday later this month.... I will be in the field for the duration of my stay and will probably be an animal by the time I get back to civilization.

May 5, 1968

Some of Nick's friends said they were surprised he was killed. Jeff Storey is one: *I really didn't think Vietnam would end his life.* His fights and rumbles must have created a mythical image of an indestructible man. The first time we talked, Kevin Groden imagined a scenario that if Nick were about to be executed he would manage to free himself and kill the executioner.

There are somewhat differing versions of how Nick was killed. The Army's "Report of Casualty" is brief: "Died 5 May 1968 in Vietnam from gunshot wound received during hostile ground action." Jon Aldridge, who served in the same area in Vietnam with the same unit but at a later date, posted a slightly longer version on the website of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund: "Nicholas Conaxis was one of four members of the 6th Bn, 29th Field Artillery, 4th Inf Div who were killed during an ambush while on a vehicle recovery mission. The others killed were John Knorr, Lynley Rash & Samuel Watkins."

Another website, www.army.togetherweserved.com reports more deaths at the place where Nick was killed: "On 05 May 1968 a convoy was ambushed on Highway 14 about 8 kilometers south of Kontum City. At least eight, and by one account nineteen, soldiers died in the fighting." It then lists the nineteen men, Nick among them. SP4 John W. Eckell was another, and it was his name that showed up when I searched the Internet under Nick's name. I emailed Denise Kincaid, the website administrator, asking if she knew whether four, eight, or nineteen American soldiers had died during that ambush or fight. She wrote on July 18, 2011: *I would imagine the information that was placed on the profile was obtained off the Internet and we would have no way to verify which story is the most accurate. If the unit the soldier was in has an association they might have historical records of these battles.*

There is a somewhat longer and official explanation of what happened on May 5. John Lingos,Tasha Lingos's father, wrote the commanding officer *with the concern that Nick hadn't been properly trained, but this captain says that he had the regular training.* (Tasha Lingos to Stacia, June 10, 1968.) Armando Lujan, Captain, Artillery, replied on May 26 and assured Dr. Lingos that Nick had indeed received proper training, and went on to say: "Nicholas was a member of our resupply convoy which went to Dak To on 5 May. He was riding in the bed of a 2 ½ -Ton truck with eight other replacements. This is the normal way in which we transport personnel, both replacements and others, forward.

"At 9:15 AM in the morning, the convoy was ambushed by a sizeable enemy force south of Kontum City. The heavy volume of enemy fire precluded Nicholas or the other replacements from leaving the truck. At 10:30 AM, Nicholas was mortally wounded in the head by small arms fire."

Lujan also wrote a letter to Jimmy on June 9. The relevant passage reads slightly different from the May 26 letter: "On this date, Nicholas was a member of our regular resupply convoy that goes to our forward area at Dak To. At 9:15 the convoy was ambushed by a sizeable enemy force south of Kontum. The heavy volume of enemy fire precluded Nicholas from leaving his truck. While returning enemy fire, Nicholas was mortally wounded in the head by small arms fire." In this version, Nick, and probably other soldiers, did return enemy fire.

I sent Jon Aldridge an email on March 11, 2012, summarizing the information above and asking him if he could explain the discrepancy in the numbers killed. He responded the same day:

This incident happened before I was in the unit and the info I have is from what I've been told. I believe the 4 members from the 6th Bn 29th Arty were together on a vehicle recovery mission. They were all part of the motor pool section. They may have been part of a larger convoy that included several different units. If the convoy was ambushed by a large enemy unit, then it is probable Conaxis was killed by small arms fired along with the other 3 guys from the 6/29th. It is also possible that the confusion about the number killed is from the number of US units involved. If there were more killed than just the 4 from the 6/29th, then it is certain there were other units involved. When I was in the unit, most resupply missions were almost completely operated by our battalion along with some security forces (usually MPs). As I recall the 4th Inf Div (of which the 6th Bn 29th Arty was a part) had several types of units with guys killed that day in the same area.

I was able to find Captain Lujan. We communicated by email and I sent him copies of the two letters above, plus a photo of Nick from basic training. On March 24, 2012, he emailed:

The picture didn't do much for me but the two letters were extremely helpful to refresh my memory.

As the letter to Dr. Lingos states, Nicholas joined the battalion as a new soldier on May 3d. On May 5th he was on his way to join the battery at our forward deployed fire base on a hill top in the tri-border area near Dak To. As you may surmise, I never met Nicholas and have no direct knowledge of the details surrounding the ambush of the convoy he was in.

There was no administrative capability at the fire base. Consequently, the letters were written on my behalf back at battalion headquarters then forwarded to me for signature as his immediate commanding officer. This was standard procedure under the circumstances of the war.

We had a friendly phone conversation the next day but he was unable to provide any more information about May 5 or Nick. He did refer me to Max Wells, who may have been in the same unit with Nick. After two talks with him, and after I sent him Nick's basic training photo and the two letters to Lujan, Max also could not recall meeting Nick or knowing anything more about the events of May 5. Norbert Brauner was another Vietnam veteran who served in the same general area and at about the same time Nick did. He also said he never met Nick.

Knowing nothing about military training and battles, I can make no judgment on what actually happened on May 5. The essential facts from the preceding accounts remain that there was a convoy with Nick in it, they were ambushed, and Nick was killed by small arms fire. Many of the people I talked with thought the official story is wrong or incomplete. No one had any specific information and based their comments on general suspicions. Larry Kneeland, Nick's friend from Fort Jackson who later served in Vietnam, suspected friendly fire. *I heard that he was killed by friendly fire.* He repeated *Yes, I heard friendly fire.* Jimmy told me *I heard the ambush story…. But you never know.* The majority of American soldiers were "killed by ambush, by enemy booby traps and mines, or by their own side's bombs, shells, or bullets ('friendly fire')." A 1968 study concluded that 15-20 percent of deaths were by friendly fire. (Appy, *Working-Class War,* pp. 8, 185.)

People remembered various stories about May 5. Lee DeSorgher said: *I remember I heard that he was in 'Nam for two weeks, sitting on the back of a truck and lit up a marijuana joint and got shot in the head. That is what I heard. Now, whether that is true or not, I don't know.* Jeff Storey had heard that Nick *had acted up, which doesn't surprise me, in his outfit and because of his actions … the commander decided to put him on point.* "On point" meant that Nick was the first person in the patrol and would have been most exposed to enemy fire. Larry Kneeland told a related story. *They say if you are going to get it, you are going to get it in the first couple of weeks you are there, or you are going to get it at the end of your tour. And that is when most of the people died, get shot, they get too cocky.*

In death, Nick remains a colorful and mythical figure. Parts of each of these stories may be true. They all fit perceptions and memories of Nick.

Walpole and Longview Farm, May 1968

After Nick was killed, the news *spread kind of like wildfire as soon as it happened* (Larry Richard). In 1968, three other men from Walpole were also killed in Vietnam. All four names are listed on a memorial stone at the Walpole town common. The others were Richard "Charlie" Drake, Paul Fitzgibbons, and Brian Collins. Nick's last name on the memorial is Konaxis, with a K instead of the C. I have been unable to find out who changed the spelling, and why. The town is working to correct it. Ironically, Nick's last name would be spelled with a *K* in Greek.

Tee Verrochi, a 1969 graduate of Walpole High, told me that when he and his friends were sophomores and juniors, they were eager to enlist in the military upon graduation to fight communism in Vietnam. When the four bodies came home in 1968 they changed their minds.

Bob Golding was also affected by Nick's death. *After Nick got zapped, I figured if Nick gets zapped, man, I'm not going to be in the infantry, I'm not going to let them draft me.* He enlisted, joined the Army engineers, and when he was sent to Vietnam he avoided combat. He served an extra year in the military, but he thought it was worth it.

David Stacy, a 1969 Walpole High graduate, sent a letter to the Walpole Times relating to the four deaths in 1968. *I have always believed that as the Vietnam War progressed, it was the growing number of young men from small towns like Walpole coming home to be buried that turned public opinion against the war and hastened its end.* (I was given an undated photocopy of this letter.)

Steven Kenney, who went to high school with Nick, heard about my research and emailed me the following story. *This past Memorial Day [2011] I was a guest speaker at the observance. I spoke about the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and how that sacrifice is spread and shared throughout America. I talked of two individuals who went to Walpole H.S. and how they lived their lives before becoming American casualties in Vietnam. The two individuals I talked about on that day were Nick Conaxis and Richard Charlie Drake Jr. Two young men who came from different backgrounds. Nick had nothing and Charlie was full of promise. Nick was the ideal candidate for selective service and Charlie had a four-year scholarship to Stonehill College and an academic draft deferment. Charlie couldn't accept the fact that young Americans less fortunate than him were being called upon to sacrifice. In 1967 Charlie dropped out of college and enlisted in the Marines. He was KIA [killed in action] during the Tet offensive.*

Walpole in the 1960s was primarily a working-class and lower-middle-class community. Longview Farm boys were entirely from the working class. In addition to Nick, two other former residents served in Vietnam. I wrote in my field notes that on December 20, 1967, during a Christmas party a the Farm, Bill Beckler "told us of 2 ex-farm boys now in Vietnam, who wrote him, saying they knew why they were there. So Bill asked us to think of them, dying for freedom and making it possible for us to be here tonight. I was a captive

audience and could not say anything." Earlier in the month, I wrote: "Today, Monday the 4th, I saw a picture of a soldier, with a rifle in his hand, in the squatting position. Below it the name Joe Wilmot, in Vietnam, and with an address in California. He is a boy who only recently left the farm, and is now in Vietnam in the medical corps. The note asked boys to write him. Bill and Ed told the kids, at various time, to please write Joe."

Another former Farm resident who was in the military in 1968 came to visit for a few days in August 1968, on his way to Vietnam. And two then current resident boys were entering the military in June and October 1968. In the 1960s, despite the draft for all men, the military and the Vietnam War were largely staffed by working-class men. Longview Farm boys were part of that reality.

Nick, Longview Farm, and Walpole were parts of a drama played throughout America in the 1960s. Young men from small towns and urban neighborhoods, from the working class and some from the middle class, were caught in a story they did not create. Many of them ended their lives in a place they had never known existed when they were growing up.

May 20 and 21, 1968

On May 5 Stacia had a dream.

So I woke up and I said to Killy, I had the weirdest dream … but never put my mind to Nick. It was the craziest thing, there were revolving doors, like you would be going, and the doors would be revolving, there was a pair of boots. [Killy says here, *I remember her telling me this.*] *There were Army boots. And then the door went around and there were teeth. And I always remember my mother saying "teeth are not good when you dream teeth." And then I just kind of snapped out of it and I said it was just weird. And I told you how Nick was a fanatic about his teeth…. So when we ever got the knock on the door, I said, "oh, my God," I said, "it was a warning," but I never put two and two together. There were the boots and there were the teeth. So that was not good. And I'll never forget the dream. It is like it was yesterday.*

In October 2012, after she read about Stacia's dream, Tasha emailed me a dream she had. *The night before my parents drove to Boston to tell me about Nick's murder (also May 5th), I dreamt about a split door (an upper and lower portion). When the upper part of the door swung open, there*

was a pair of false teeth staring at me. Initially, I thought of the Cheshire Cat with his big grin; however, when I recounted it to some friends, they told me that teeth foretold death. Consequently, when I heard the dreadful news the next day, I knew it was a sign. To this day, I consider Nick my "Guardian Angel."

Killy recalled May 6 when the Army men came to tell them of Nick's death. *The day after he got killed, I was going to work, so it was seven o'clock in the morning. I'm pulling around the corner, this was from the house I lived in, and all of a sudden I see a police car come up the street, and stop in front of my house. And I saw an Army guy come out. And I stopped the car in the middle of the road and I said, "What happened?" And he said, "Does Nick Conaxis live here?" And I said, "Yeah, he does." And he said, "I'm sorry, he was killed in action." And I said, "Jesus, he just left, he was killed already?" And my father was alive at the time. And my father was a wonderful, wonderful man and he never swore, and he goes, "Goddamn Army, the boy just left and he is dead already?" He was just disgusted, you know. And from there it was just waiting time for him to come home.*

It's unclear when Stacia and Jimmy told Ourania, their mother, of Nick's death. In 1968 she was an inpatient at Metropolitan State Hospital in Waltham. Jimmy remembered that they did not tell her at that time, thinking *it would be more harmful than good*, but did tell her eventually. Stacia said that Ourania was told of Nick's death when it happened, but she never talked about it and refused to deal with it.

Jimmy heard about Nick on May 7 or 8, the day after his own birthday. He was released from the air force (*mustered out immediately*) a month early so he could attend the funeral. He had hoped to accompany Nick home, since many caskets were flown out from Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines, where Jimmy was stationed, but Nick's body was flown out from elsewhere.

I do not know when people at Longview Farm heard about Nick. My field notes for May 6 and May 8 have no mention of the news. The notes for May 9, however, begin with the news.

"Today was a sad day at the farm. Niki Conaxis, a young man who was at the farm till about 3 years ago, died in Vietnam this week. Bill was rather close to him, he wrote to Bill often. I was told by some boys that Bill and his wife were so saddened that they cried for a long time this morning. Not only the boys invest in the farm and the staff there, but the staff invest in the boys. Dennis told me about it after I had

heard about it. We talked for a minute. You really don't think about the war and what it means until something like this happens, he said, till someone you know dies there."

The wake was May 20 and the funeral May 21. Many people attended both. Stacia said: *A lot of people. A lot of people. In fact, I have all cards. I have a list of all the people. Everybody from the city had come, all of our friends, relatives from Watertown. Everybody from Watertown did come, all of our friends here.*

Many of Nick's friends attended, as did boys living at Longview Farm in May 1968 and some former residents. I wrote in the field notes on May 20 that Nick's death "has really shaken them up, they are all very sad and serious and planning to go to the wake to pay their last respects."

Bill and Mary Beckler were the first to sign the guest book at the funeral home on May 20. The boys told me that Bill was sobbing and he would break down every time he went by the casket. He kept crying the next day at the funeral. After the funeral he was out of work for two weeks. His son's death could not have grieved him more. Jimmy said that *Bill really took it hard*. I asked Bill's daughter Judy how Nick's death affected her father. She could not remember specifically. *I know that it was a terrible loss…. He was worried about us [his children] and worried [about] the kids at the farm, in terms of the impact on them, on their already heavy lives.*

The funeral service took place on May 21 at Saint Vasilios Greek Orthodox Church in Peabody. Bob Golding remembered a *crystal clear day*, the weather was wonderful. About 150 to 200 people came. There was a military detachment of bearers, as well as a firing squad and honor guard of honorary bearers from Fort Devens, MA. At some point there was a twenty-one gun salute.

Stacia's memories of that day are mostly a blur. *It was a blur. I couldn't even look at him. I never looked at him in the casket because they said the bullet was right there, and I just couldn't bring myself to do that. And they had the cover. And it was just very, very emotional. It was not good.* Barbara, his friend from Rowley, said that the funeral was *the most excruciating experience of my life…. I was blown away by how he looked that I didn't see anybody,* other people at the funeral. Bob Turco, his high school friend, said it was *pretty sad and gruesome*; you could see the bullet hole on his head. Otherwise,

he said, *it's hard to remember details.* Others who attended also said they could remember few or no details from that day. Bob Golding was deeply shaken by the experience. *I don't go to funerals any more.* He added that three other people he knew were killed in Vietnam.

Judy Beckler remembered the twenty-one gun salute, and *I remember probably sobbing through the entire funeral. I remember Stacia being just a beautiful woman of such grace and such sadness, such sadness, about Nick…. I felt I could just have buckled at the knees…. For us it was "this is just awful, this is terrifying." Before we know it he's gone.*

Marsha Greenberg and Tasha Lingos, to whom Nick wrote so many letters, were strong opponents of the war and they were shocked by the military atmosphere at the funeral, especially the military uniform Nick wore. Marsha: *Oh, my God. All I remember is that it was a military funeral and it seemed so ridiculous given where he stood with the war. But that's the only thing I can remember. That guns went off and it just seemed all so ridiculous. And I remember that after that, months later, I went back to the cemetery to try to go to his grave. I have a vague memory of that.* Otherwise, the whole day *is a big blur to me.*

Some people who attended said Tasha wore black to the funeral. She said: *It was the worst thing I've ever seen. And the fact that they had an open coffin and they put him in a military uniform, and shot guns off, it was the most disgusting thing I had ever been to. I didn't go to funerals after that.* Like others, Tasha could remember nothing else from that day.

Forty-three years later, most details have escaped people's memories, but all remember their emotions. Most were young people, living through a tumultuous and controversial period in American history. For many it was the first funeral they had attended. I could hear the sadness and the shock as they struggled to remember the day.

Stacia saved everything from that day and the days and weeks that followed. She let me make copies of everything.

There is a guest book from the wake and the funeral, signed by people who attended. There are letters from relatives and friends who could not attend, some in Greek. There are cards and letters of condolence from many people. One, dated May 27, 1968, came from Hugh Forster, who had lived with Nick at Longview Farm. The words "death" or "killed" are not used.

Dear Stacia,

Just received word of Nickie and wanted to let you know that Nickie was my friend and I shall really miss him. Nick may have mentioned me to you before Stacia. My name is Huge Forster, I'm in the Air Force and now stationed in England.

I lived with Nick at Longview in Walpole, we went to school together, played sports and even dated the same girls. Don't know you but Nickie used to talk about you and your husband so much I feel as I do.

There is not much for me to say Stacia as I know how you feel now. Hope you will get over things without too much discomfort.

Well, I wanted to tell you how sorry I was to hear this bad news and that Nickie was close to me and will always be.

Your friend Hugh.

Letters came from many others:

The chief officers from the New England Home for Little Wanderers, which operated Longview Farm;

The Walpole Board of Selectmen;

A Walpole Cub Scout group;

Governors, senators, congressmen, and other officials;

The secretary of the army;

And others.

There is a list of fifty-seven people who sent contributions to the New England Home in Nick's memory.

The army sent an "Honorable Service" citation.

And there is a posthumous award from the government of South Vietnam.

In addition to being listed on the Vietnam Wall in Washington, Nick's name is also on memorial walls in Worcester, MA (for Massachusetts residents killed in Vietnam), Peabody, Rowley, and Walpole.

Comment

Among the many letters, cards, and other items, Stacia received a list of Nick's personal effects.

"Inventory of Effects

1 Massachusetts drivers license

1 DA Form 2139-1
1 Inf book
10 Pictures
2 US MO Receipts
1 SS card
1 TWA Airline club card
1 Eastern Youth Fare ID Card
1 Address books
1 VN Phrase books
2 Writing tablets
3 Paperback books
1 Book of Poems
4 Washcloths
3 Towels
12 Socks
1 Safety razor
1 Pair glasses with case
1 Gold cross with chain
1 Water pistol"

What would Nick be doing with a water pistol in Vietnam? Did he playfully chase the Vietnamese children he befriended? I imagine that he did, that he remained funny and serious to the end, playing with children who may have reminded him of his own childhood. Forever Nick.

8

Forever Nick, Forever Twenty

By now you know all I could find out about Nick. You have probably formed your own views of his life and death. Along the way I have offered brief observations and comments about his life, but mostly I presented what Stacia, Jimmy, and his friends told me about Nick; what various social workers reported about him during his many years as a ward of the state of Massachusetts; and above all, what Nick wrote in his letters. You read his critiques of military life and the war; his developing thoughts about politics, religion, and much else; his growing understanding of his past life and himself; and his hopes to overcome the fears and anxieties that beset him. You read about the funny and friendly Nick people knew. In his letters you met the serious and struggling young man.

In this closing chapter I will review what I see as the major issues in Nick's life. But what matters most are your own thoughts and conclusions about Nick. What will remain with you are the thoughts, emotions, and memories that were evoked and awakened by Nick's life and this book.

Unfinished Lives

Millions of young people lose their lives in wars (millions more are wounded and suffer for the rest of their lives). Family and friends are left behind mourning their deaths. We wonder what they might have become had they lived.

After Jimmy read the four letters Nick wrote to Bill Beckler from Vietnam (which I had sent him), he wrote in an email in September 2011 that Nick *liked to think outside the box, was mature beyond his years, and was not afraid to question authority. And with such prolific vocabulary and the amazing ability to pen such thought-provoking sentiments of current world events of the time and the people he cared for, one can only imagine where his life would have taken him.*

A little later, Nick's friend Marsha Greenberg speculated in an email that *had war not taken his life I think he would have eventually gotten himself together and done great things in the world.*

Nick told some people that he hoped to become a writer. His letters show he had the talent for writing. But he might have become a teacher, social worker, photographer, lawyer, engineer, carpenter, mechanic, cook, factory worker. No matter what futures young people who die in wars leave behind, all their deaths are tragic and diminish all of us. Friends and family mourn them for years. In our memories they remain forever young.

A Life of Fear, a Life of Fun

Nick's letters include reflections about his emotions, weaknesses, and hopes for improvement. In his earliest letter that I found (May 17, 1965) he was asking DCG for assistance to attend Newman Preparatory School in Boston. Toward the end he wrote he was looking forward to living with Stacia: *This summer will mark the first time that I have lived with a relative for over sixteen years. This will certainly play an important role in pacifying my emotional tensions.* (Nick obviously meant "relative" other than Jimmy.)

During his twenty years Nick showed many emotions and characteristics. Fears, anxieties, tensions, and insecurities coexisted with fun, friendliness, joking, and helping others. When he was two, social workers described him as charming, playful, funny, likeable, and mis-

chievous. He remained that way for the rest of his life. But he was also beset by fears and insecurities because of the family he lost and the uncertainties of his living situation for most of his life.

Nick was smiling, kind, sexy, aggressive, open to new ideas, angry, afraid, brave, thoughtful, and anxious. He was a prankster and a character all day long and loved to have fun. Throughout his life he was always looking for attention and acceptance, from his early school days to the pillow incident on the train to Fort Jackson. But insecurity and fears never left him. So for all his life he showed many and differing emotions and characteristics.

Family and Abandonment

Jimmy talked about Nick's having a sense of abandonment. It seems to have begun early and never left Nick. The many foster homes from the age of one, the fear of being taken away from the Nixon home during the years that DCG looked for a Greek family, the anxiety caused by the Nixons' inability to adopt the boys, the removal from Rowley and the move to Longview Farm, the break of ties with the Nixons, all created emotional turmoil and kept alive fears of abandonment.

A letter to Tasha on November 21, 1967, includes a passage that may refer to Nick's experiences and emotions. *Teenagers today survive (happily?) without the love and affection they deserve. They become hardened to the cold facts of life.* For him, the cold facts were his fears of abandonment and insecurity.

A short summary of Nick's family life may help us understand the emotional turmoil and struggles of his life.

By the time Nick was one, his father was in a sanitarium because of TB. His mother was in a mental hospital, Stacia was in a sanitarium, and Jimmy and he were living in various homes for stays of a few weeks or months. His father died when Nick was two. His mother came out of the mental hospital for about two years, during which time she saw her sons for what seemed painful and confusing visits at their foster home. She was then hospitalized for the rest of her life and it's unclear when they saw her again. (See Chapters 3 and 4.)

It took many years before Jimmy and Nick saw Stacia with any regularity. It seems likely they saw her only once in the 1950s. Visits

with Stacia began in the 1960s but it's unclear how frequent they were. Emily, Nick's high school girlfriend, remembered a 1964 visit to Stacia with Nick. Emily thinks he asked her to come along for moral support. His letter to DCG in May 1965 shows that Nick had had limited contact with family and was looking forward to living with Stacia in the summer of 1965. (I did not find out whether he did, but I believe he did not. It remains unknown where he lived.)

According to DCG, Nick had very few visits with his mother in the 1960s. He told most of his friends that his mother was dead, that he was an orphan. Otherwise, Nick rarely talked about his past, his family, or his foster homes. His friends who talked with me found out about his past during our conversations. They will learn the details of his early life when they read this book.

Nick's anxiety, fears, insecurity, and anger may have caused him to run away from and avoid various transition events in his life.

David Hardy thinks Nick did not attend a small middle-school graduation party with their friends.

In order to avoid seeing the Nixons because he had cut ties with them, Nick did not attend Jimmy's high school graduation.

He did not attend Stacia's wedding. Perhaps he wanted to avoid seeing his mother, or, as Stacia believes, he was afraid he was losing Stacia.

In the summer of 1964, according to DCG records, he left his job as a camp counselor for young boys because the experience had "stirred up his own anxieties." Anxieties about his own childhood?

He left Manter Hall a week short of finishing the year, and he wrote that that action cost him a scholarship to Colby College.

He dropped out during his first semester at the University of Massachusetts– Boston at the end of November, never completing any courses. Was it because he and his roommates were evicted from their apartment? The spirit of the 1960s and the lure of California? Some other emotion and hope?

Question Authority: The Spirit of the Sixties

Nick came of age in the 1960s. He became a teenager on August 6, 1960. He was already questioning and challenging authority. Long hair in boys became a symbol of the questioning spirit. In late 1961, Nick was barred from visiting the Nixon home until he cut his hair. He had begun his search for new meanings and values in his life.

In many ways, Nick's actions were similar to the actions of millions of others that shaped the 1960s, just as the 1960s were influencing his life. His views were also affected after he entered Manter Hall School in Cambridge in September 1965. Letters he wrote from military training attest to the influence of Glasser, his teacher (see Chapters 5 and 6). Time and again he criticized social conformity, the Vietnam War, and military life and training. Marsha Greenberg said that Nick *was always against authority…. Didn't like anyone in power.* Perhaps the best example was the time Nick stood up to his sergeant at Fort Jackson to defend a fellow soldier.

Of course, millions of other young people in the 1960s faced the same struggles with authority, the same search for meaning in their lives. Nick had the extra burdens of his past, of being in military training, and the looming trip to Vietnam. Many young men faced struggles of their own, like Nick. But others were safe in colleges avoiding or delaying the draft, or finding safer assignments if they did go to Vietnam.

Beyond Fears of Abandonment

The achievement and wonder of Nick's life is that he lived with persistent emotional tensions, with feelings of abandonment, with insecurity and anxiety, yet he was able to smile, have good friends and fun, care about people, and eventually develop a curious and critical mind. Tasha said: *He was vivacious, he was alive, he was honest…. He had a wonderful, curious mind.* He developed an incisive critique of conformity, the military, the Vietnam War. He helped friends and cared deeply about children all his life.

I listen to Judy Beckler telling me three times how *terrified* Nick was when he was notified that he was drafted by the Army. I read his letter to Stacia that he was *scared shit* to be in Vietnam. And I marvel at his ability to be kind to Vietnamese children, to write such sensitive letters, to reflect that Vietnam needed social workers not soldiers. During the last year I have written many similar comments to myself. I am continually impressed by his letters and by all of his life.

When I first talked with Nick's friend Kevin Groden, he described Nick as an *amazing* and fearless man. I think Nick was even more amazing because even though he lived with anxiety, insecurity, fear, and some anger all his life, he was able to laugh, joke, and have fun. All of

his friends who spoke with me delighted in telling me that he brought fun and laughter into their lives. Nick was kind to others, befriended children, criticized social conformity and the Vietnam War, and wrote insightful and self-reflective letters. He was an amazing man.

When he died, Nick was still finding and creating himself, with a long journey ahead, with many struggles to wage. His was an unfinished life, a work in progress. Nick understood this. Reflecting on helping others and his search for meaning in life, he wrote Tasha on November 21, 1967:

The mountain is high, but as I ascend it I await anxiously for the maturity that will enable me to give of myself. At present I must content myself in listening, and an occasional suggestion. It is a feeling of futility, alleviated only after a realistic evaluation of one's own limitations.

Despite your problems, Nick, you enriched many people's lives. You have been with me since that October 1968 day when I first read your letters to Bill Beckler. I never knew the funny side of you that made so many people laugh. Your friends remember you for the joy you brought into their lives, for helping them survive military life, for being you. They helped me appreciate that side of you. But the Nick I have known since 1968, and I now know more deeply, is the caring Nick, the questioning Nick, the one who stood up to authority, the critic of the Vietnam War, the man who sought to overcome his anxiety and insecurity and wrote such caring and loving letters.

So, Nick, wherever you are, you will always be twenty. I'm sure you are joking, laughing, being a character all day long, caring for children, reading Bertrand Russell, and still trying to make sense of life. If there is some kind of existence after this one, I hope we meet and share stories. If not, it has been a privilege and a joy to be with you all these years, to get to know you, finally.

So long, Nick.

This is the end of Nick's story. You may now want to read the
Epilogue, an update of Nick's family and friends;
Appendix A, my views and reflections on the Vietnam War;
Appendix B, the story of how I wrote this book.

Epilogue:
The People Left Behind

Some of you may wonder what happened to Nick's family and friends after his death. Below are a few words about his family and some of his friends.

Ourania, Stacia, and Jimmy

As you read in earlier chapters, Ourania was hospitalized for the second time in 1951 or 1952 and spent the rest of her life in institutions, mostly at the Metropolitan State Hospital in Waltham. Toward the end of her life she lived at Westboro State Hospital for a period and then moved to a nursing home, where she died. She was buried next to Nick in Peabody, and on the gravestone are the dates March 14, 1913, to June 17, 1994.

Stacia would visit her regularly, often weekly, and Jimmy would also see her when he came east for visits. She would periodically come out for short stays with Stacia. People who saw her during her visits outside the hospital told me that she seemed normal to them. They thought she had become accustomed to living in institutions, and that perhaps she thought she might be a burden to her children if she came out. Jimmy said: *She just became acclimated to life in an institution. She*

couldn't function outside of the hospital. Always looked forward to going back to the hospital, she was working in the kitchen or whatever.

I often wonder about her life, thoughts, emotions, and memories during her many years at Met State.

Stacia grew up in Watertown, MA, a few miles from Waltham. She graduated from Watertown High School in 1961 (she attended their fiftieth reunion in 2011), and married Achilles (Killy) Xerras in 1964. They settled down in Peabody, MA. Killy has had a barbershop for over fifty years, and since 1982 Stacia has run Stacia's Place, a small restaurant next to the barbershop. They have three children – Laurie (Ourania), Joyce, and Gregory – and nine grandchildren. Joyce named one of her sons Nicholas. When I saw him in Stacia's restaurant one day, he resembled Nick in his physical appearance.

When we stood in front of Nick's and Ourania's graves one day in November 2011, she told me she thinks about Nick every day. The research for and writing of this book surely intensified her memories.

Jimmy wrote the following account of his life.

I remember that day in May of 1968 as if it was yesterday. I was stationed at Clark Air Force Base, Philippine Islands. I was told to report to the First Sergeant's office. He proceeded to tell me that he had been informed that my brother Nick had been killed in Vietnam on the 5th of May. I was stunned for I knew Nicky was in Vietnam only a few days or soon to arrive. Little did I know at the time that Nick had only been in the country for only 12 days. The First Sergeant told me that I would be processed out immediately and I remember telling him this was a hell of a way to finish my enlistment as I had roughly 30 days to go.

That fifteen-hour flight back home was a long one. The time waiting for Nicky to come home and his funeral service to commence seemed like an eternity. I remember lots of people paying their respects, but faces became blurred. Nicky touched a lot of people the short time he was here. Many from Rowley showed up.

Nicky and I spent our formative years in Rowley arriving in 1955 with our foster parents Sam and Maria Nixon. Good friendships were formed. Nicky being 15 months younger had his friends and I mine. Those friendships endure today. And though Nicky is gone, people still remember his time growing up

in Rowley. I like to think those years from 1955 to 1961 were the best. Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts, vacation bible school, YMCA swimming lessons, camping overnight in New Hampshire and Maine, and swimming down at the Landing were some of our activities. Nicky and I had many good times together along with sibling rivalries that are part of growing up.

Nicky and I moved to Walpole, MA in 1961 for the school year. I returned to Rowley in 1962 with Nicky deciding to stay in Walpole. I finished Newburyport High School, in Newburyport, MA, in 1964. I enlisted in the U.S. Air Force in June 1964 and was discharged in May 1968.

Upon returning to the U.S., I graduated from Columbia School of Broadcasting in Boston, MA. I did a short stint in radio at WNPB in Newburyport. I moved to Everett, WA in 1969 where I reside with my wife Marjorie. Our son Kris also lives in Everett with his wife Rachel and son Hayden. I'm currently retired having spent 28 years as a teamster truck driver, and another 9 years as an HVAC service technician (heating and air conditioning). Marge and I enjoy visits to our condo in Sun City, AZ. My hobbies include golf and Karaoke.

I often wonder where Nicky's life would have taken him if he had made it back.

Friends

Tasha continued to actively oppose the war after Nick died. Because she felt so deeply against the war, and to avoid paying taxes that were funding it, she left the U.S. to live in Switzerland when she graduated from college in 1971. While living there she taught in an orphanage.

She returned to the U.S. after five years and settled down in Utah because, she said, it reminded her of Switzerland. She is a retired teacher and has a daughter.

For several years she visited Nick's grave on Memorial Day.

Tasha wrote the following comments for her update:

All too infrequently, we meet someone who touches our mind, our soul, our heart, and who become unforgettable. I was fortunate, to have had an encounter with an amazing young man who overcame a difficult childhood, only to be murdered by our own country in a senseless war in Vietnam.

Those of you who knew Nick Conaxis, understand what great potential was inside this enigma, and what a terrible waste of a vibrant person this was.

Nick was always willing to share: endless escapades, creative discussions, serious endeavors, road trips, and myriads of other adventures.

His complex mind challenged many of us, and led him to study intense philosophers whose works he aspired to follow.

Nick is my Guardian Angel, and I hope he is in a wonderful place enjoying the life which was taken so early and tragically.

Loveth Forever ----- Tasha

Marsha Greenberg, Nick's friend at Manter Hall, said: *I was devastated when he died…. He had a very profound impact on me.* She wrote the following account of her life after Nick's death. It's printed here as she wrote it, in the third person.

Marsha Greenberg went on to receive a master's degree and run her own organizational consulting firm. She taught for 12 years on the faculty of Antioch New England Graduate School. She married Steve Schuit in 1983 and has two sons, Aaron and Jacob, and two grandchildren, Abraham and Zoe.

Her life has been filled with political activism. She remains a life-long feminist fighting for women's rights all over the world. She has been against every war this country has engaged in and continues to fight for the rights of the disenfranchised. She is on the board of Equality Maine, an organization that support rights for gay and lesbian citizens and is fighting for marriage equality in Maine. She has also served on the board of the Maine Women's Fund and has recently started a non-profit called Women Standing Together to help launch women entrepreneurs in Maine.

Marsha has lived on an island off the coast of Maine for the past 26 years and intends to be politically involved until the end of her life. Her relationship with Nick and his death have stayed with her throughout her life and she is for ever grateful for their friendship.

His Rowley friends told me they have remembered Nick all their lives. Lee Stevens said: *I spent a lot of time with Nick…. It did a lot of damage to my mental health when he died in Vietnam. I was torn up when Nick died. I mean I was torn up when <u>each</u> of them* [other friends] *died* [in Vietnam].

David Hardy was another close Rowley friend. *I think of him all the time. Right out of the clear blue…. He always pops into my head. Yeah. He was a great guy.* He added that Nick is *worthy* of a book.

His many Walpole friends all told me that Nick has never left their memories.

Kevin Groden, when we first talked in late June 2011, had been looking in vain for Nick's grave in Rowley (Nick is buried in Peabody). He went on to say that he had never shared with anyone his feelings about Nick and his death. He said hat's why he called me when someone read him my letter to the *Walpole Times*. And talk about Nick we did, three times. We also exchanged several emails.

Tony Lorusso told me he had *thought about Nick through the years. I smile when I hear his name.* He added that he was a little choked up when his wife called him to read him the letter I had sent to the *Walpole Times* looking for people who had known Nick.

Virginia Porter, a classmate who took a class with Nick, wrote two remembrances of Nick on an Internet website (see Chapter 1). In an email she said that she visits Washington sometimes, and each time she does she places flowers and an American flag next to his name on the Vietnam Memorial Wall.

Jeff Storey, who lived and worked with Nick on Cape Cod in the summer of 1966, said *I've actually had dreams where I've run into him later in life. He was still the same.*

Bill Beckler was deeply touched by Nick's death (see Chapter 7). He died ten months after Nick died.

Everyone who knew Nick remembers him, everyone was touched by his death, and everyone has happy memories of their days with Nick. He is still very much with them.

My life has also been deeply touched by Nick and changed forever, especially since December 2011. See Appendix B.

Appendix A
Vietnam—Stories and Memories

The war was waged on Vietnamese soil. North and South Vietnamese soldiers and Vietcong were killed. North and South Vietnamese civilians were killed by bombs dropped from planes, by fighting on the ground, and by the destruction of villages. Estimates are that three million Vietnamese lost their lives during the Vietnam War. Three million. "Had the United States lost the same portion of its population, the Vietnam Memorial would list the names of 8 million Americans." (Appy, *Working-Class War*, p. 17.)

Even more millions of Vietnamese were wounded. There were about 10 million refugees during those years as about half of Vietnam's hamlets were demolished. During a 1976 meeting the Vietnamese minister of health said that 7.6 million tons of bombs were dropped on North Vietnam during the war—more than three times the bombs dropped during all of World War II. (Data taken from Emerson, *Winners and Losers;* Appy, *Working-Class War* and *Patriots.*)

In addition, millions who survived physically suffered from wounds to their souls and minds—again, many more Vietnamese than Americans.

This is not the place to present a history of the Vietnam War. But in my search to understand Nick's military experience and death, I

needed to read a few books that might give me a sense of the war years, might remind me of my own thoughts and actions forty to fifty years ago, might teach me some realities I never knew while the war and the demonstrations against the war raged on. The four books below were my education.

I first read Jerry Lembcke's *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (1998). Lembcke, a Vietnam veteran, argues that the anti-war movement did not attack and criticize American soldiers who fought the war. Indeed, the movement, and especially Vietnam Veterans Against the War, helped soldiers and veterans in many ways.

Gloria Emerson's *Winners and Losers: Battles, Retreats, Gains, Losses, and Ruins from the Vietnam War* (1976) was emotionally exhausting to read. Emerson was a reporter for the *New York Times* in Vietnam for about two years. After she returned to the U.S., she traveled and spoke in many places and interviewed many veterans and their families. She also discussed her own experiences in Vietnam. As you will see below, she uncovered many psychic wounds and deep pains endured by Vietnamese and Americans who fought in Vietnam, and by their families. It took me a month to finish the book. It was a hard experience. I could read only for about an hour before I needed to stop. The killings, the atrocities, the utter devastation of people and land in Vietnam, the lingering wounds and pains of Americans and Vietnamese, made for harsh and stressful reading.

Christian Appy's *Patriots: The Vietnam War* Remembered from All Sides is an oral history of the war. Decades after it ended, Vietnamese and Americans recounted their experiences, reflections, and emotions during and after the war. I came to appreciate how the war devastated Vietnam, and see that experience through Vietnamese eyes. Americans tell of the widespread toll the war took on American lives, bodies, and psyches. Appy closes the book with a succinct and vivid summary of that terrible era in Vietnamese and American histories.

"These voices have called forth a time when millions of people in several countries felt war had become a near-permanent condition; when every day, for more than a decade, parents said good-bye to children who would never return; when teenagers learned to kill as a patriotic duty; when people of all ages crouched in holes and tunnels as bombs

and artillery exploded above or around them; when soldiers drenched in sweat and beyond exhaustion searched for an enemy, families argued about the nature of the war and how to respond to it, toxic chemicals fell like rain from the skies, peasants saw their homes go up in flames, citizens stood in defiant opposition to their government, prisoners endured unimaginable forms of interrogation and torture, commanders moved troops on military maps, doctors and nurses treated bodies full of metal, leaders insisted the fighting must continue, and reporters filed dispatches about battles no one would remember but the survivors." (Pp. 536-537.)

Appy's earlier book, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*, amply documents the experiences of American soldiers while they were in Vietnam. Most of those soldiers came from working-class families in urban neighborhoods and small towns. Nick was one of those working-class young men who lost their lives. In his six months of military training and twelve days in Vietnam, Nick sensed the tragedy around him. That was the message I understood when I read his letters in the fall of 1968, and it moved me and deepened my anger and opposition to the war.

In 1966, I was twenty-five, married with no children, and a graduate student in sociology at Brandeis University in Waltham, MA. In the spring I received a notice to report for a physical. I reported to Cambridge City Hall early on a Monday morning, on crutches, as I had sprained my right foot playing baseball a few days earlier. The other men began razzing me, suspecting a ruse to escape Vietnam. A woman from the army told me "we don't take cripples" and suggested I return in a month.

I did. We were taken to a military base south of Boston that I cannot remember. As I recall, I was not nervous because since the age of four I had had an arthritic right ankle that caused the area to swell, leading to frequent aches and limited physical activity. The doctor looked at my ankle, an X-ray of my ankle and, I think, a doctor's letter I had brought with me. He concluded that I had lost a third of the motion in my ankle and declared me 1Y. I understood that classification to mean that I would only be called to serve in case of a national emergency. I don't remember asking what constituted such an emergency or who would declare it.

Looking back I don't remember ever debating what I would do if I were drafted. I don't recall hearing or participating in any discussion of going to Canada or otherwise refusing to serve in the military. Try as I have recently, no such memory appears. I think I was convinced my ankle was my escape from the military and Vietnam. What would I have done if I were drafted? Probably I would have endured agonizing days and weeks of indecision, doubts, and anxiety – as Nick did, as millions did in the Sixties.

As I continued my graduate studies and began teaching at Quinnipiac College (now University) in September 1968, I joined anti-war demonstrations, usually taking overnight buses to Washington from Boston and New Haven, CT. I read Nick's letters in the fall of 1968, and his death and letters only strengthened my resolve to oppose the war. As the years went on and I became involved in teaching and raising children, my anti-war activities continued but at a diminished level. (For the rest of the story, see Appendix B.)

Working-Class War

Nick wrote from Vietnam that he wished he had stayed in college so he wouldn't have to be in Vietnam. Like millions of other young men, he was drafted because he was not in college. Having no jobs and no prospects, some high school graduates hoped the military would provide some direction and structure in their lives. Ed Johnson from Dorchester, a working-class neighborhood in Boston, said, "Cause once you get out of high school, [the military is] better than just hanging around. Might as well get paid – join the military and get some money." (Appy, *Working-Class War,* p. 56.) Nick wrote Stacia from Fort Jackson that he was hoping *for physical and mental discipline and restraint.*

Up to 80 percent of American soldiers in Vietnam came from poor and working-class families. In many neighborhoods throughout the U.S., military service for those young men was the equivalent of going to college for high school graduates from affluent suburbs. Economic hardship and medical exemptions were more difficult to get for poor and working-class men. Also, as the war progressed and more men were needed to fight in Vietnam, the military lowered its physical and educational standards, thus drafting men who used to fail various tests

and not be drafted. Such men were predominantly poor whites and poor blacks. Men from Dorchester and similar neighborhoods were much more likely to be drafted, to go to Vietnam, to do the actual fighting, and to die or be maimed in Vietnam than were college graduates.

Not all middle-class high school graduates during the 1960s wanted to attend college. But to avoid the draft and Vietnam, many of them reluctantly found a college that would accept them and enable them to achieve the minimum grades required to escape the draft. I taught at Quinnipiac College from 1968 to 1971, and I thought many of my students fell into that group. Some college teachers of the 1960s recall pressures to give male students B- grades (the lowest grade accepted for student deferment) so they would not be send to Vietnam.

Appy tells the story of Clark Dougan, who went to college and avoided Vietnam. But most of his classmates did not.

"I went to Valley Forge High School in Parma Heights, Ohio – a big, working-class, white, ethnic neighborhood just outside Cleveland. We were the Valley Forge 'Patriots.' Something like thirty-five kids from Parma died in the war. The principal would come on the intercom periodically and say, 'We've just received the very sad news that Terry Kilbane, a marine lance corporal, has been killed in Vietnam. Let's observe a moment of silence'." (Appy, *Patriots*, p. 304.)

Closer to home for Nick, and me, was Dorchester, a working-class neighborhood in Boston. Boys who grew up in Dorchester were about four times more likely to die in Vietnam than boys who grew up in the affluent Boston suburbs of Concord, Wellesley, Lexington, and others. (Information about the working-class and poor origins of soldiers who served and died in Vietnam came from Appy's and Emerson's books.)

A personal reflection. When a smart and promising high school or college student dies in an accident, or when she or he is murdered, newspaper editorials and letters bemoan the loss of a young person with such a bright future. The implication is that the death of an average or poor student, one headed for working-class jobs, is less tragic. Did the rules of U.S. draft boards exempting college students from the draft imply that some lives are less worthy than other lives, and some deaths less tragic than other deaths? It would seem so. Eventually, the draft was eliminated because of middle-class and student opposition to the draft and to the war, and now the present volunteer military attracts

mostly poor and working-class men and women. They see the military as their only means of earning an income and gaining skills.

Experiencing Vietnam

In his Vietnam letters, Nick referred to many of the problems, discomforts, and dangers faced by American soldiers. We need to also remember that Vietnamese soldiers and civilians faced more, and more severe, dangers. Many more of them were killed, wounded, and displaced. Nick saw that the war and the poverty disrupted and destroyed their lives and their land. The hardships became more difficult for U.S. soldiers to endure as most of them came to see no purpose to the war, saying "it don't mean nothin'." (Appy, *Working-Class War*, p. 208.)

For his book *Working-Class War*, Appy interviewed Vietnam veterans. Very few of them said they were prepared for the conditions they met when they arrived in Vietnam: "The hostility of many Vietnamese civilians; the dangers, anxieties, and moral pressure of conducting a counterrevolutionary war amidst a civilian population largely supportive of the Viet Cong; the uncertainties of service in rear areas; and the nature of battle once the enemy was engaged." (P.113.)

From the day they arrived they were counting the days until they returned home. Nick was hoping the year would fly, and even before he arrived he was anticipating the R&R leaves he would get. Aside from the dangers of a war, there were daily discomforts from the heat of a tropical climate. Remember Nick's delight in a hot shower. Appy's two books offer many graphic descriptions of the physical and emotional hardships the men faced.

Combat soldiers suffered the most. Very few soldiers saw direct combat, however. Appy says that "fewer than 2 percent of draft-age men were sent on combat missions in Vietnam." Emerson says of the men who served in Vietnam "probably only one in twenty [5 percent] saw combat." Whichever figure is correct, combat soldiers were a distinct minority who led harsh lives full of anxiety, deep discomfort, and emotional strain. Ambush attacks by the enemy were common, stressful, and lethal. Nick was killed during an ambush. Death by "friendly fire" was another stressful condition, with estimates that 15-20 percent of deaths were caused by such fire. (Appy, *Patriots*, p. 354; Emerson, *Winners and Losers*, p. 10.)

To relieve the stresses they faced, more and more soldiers turned to marijuana, heroin, and other illegal substances. Lee DeSorgher told me that he heard that when Nick was shot he was smoking a joint. As the war intensified, and by May 1968 it was at a most dangerous stage, more soldiers sought relief from drugs, especially when they returned to camp. Smoking pot became common and open.

For some, the stress of seeing their comrades killed and wounded was compounded by the stress of witnessing atrocities committed by American soldiers. The My Lai massacre of about 500 civilians has become the best-known example of these atrocities, but there were others. Philip Caputo, a Vietnam veteran, wrote in his memoir *A Rumor of War:* "Out there, lacking restraints, sanctioned to kill, confronted by a hostile country and a relentless enemy, we sank into a brutish state." Years later, "Veterans found it difficult to numb themselves to the suffering they endured, witnessed, and inflicted." (Appy, *Working-Class War*, pp. 252, 226.)

There was wholesale destruction of hamlets. George Watkins describes one. American soldiers forcibly took away 400 to 500 people from their valley and moved them to a camp. "All their animals was killed. Then we made the valley a fire-free zone. After we cleaned it out, anything you saw was a legitimate target. Two days later, half the people were right back in it. They went back to nothing because we burned and destroyed everything." (Appy, *Patriots*, p. 23.)

The killing and the destruction intensified the suffering and the poverty of the Vietnamese all around American soldiers. Nick commented on the poverty. The begging children found all around U.S. bases were a visible sign of that poverty. Nick gave to the children, as did other soldiers. Others, especially after they experienced constant begging and hustling, became hardened and indifferent. Some began to tease the children. (See Appy, *Patriots*, p. 531.)

A comment. What happened to them, what they did, and what they saw left long-lasting memories in many soldiers. Such intense experiences cannot be erased. Sixty years later, I remember the poverty of my youth in Greece. Even if repressed and never spoken, the suffering that Americans and Vietnamese saw can never be erased from their minds and souls. Nick's brother, Jimmy, was at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines from 1964 to 1968 and never saw action in Vietnam. But he witnessed death. *We sent many transport planes out with the kids killed in action.*

Opposition to the War

Discussions of the anti-war movement tend to focus on the United States. But there was active, intense, and long-lasting opposition to the war in Vietnam also. The most well known protest action may be the self-immolation by Buddhist monks, but there were many and continuing protests during the long war. As in the U.S., families struggled to keep their boys from serving in the South Vietnamese army. For example, parents would lower their children's ages in official documents to make them younger so they could avoid the draft. But the war went on for many years and boys eventually became of draft age. Then those who could afford it would bribe officials to transfer their children from combat to other duties. Generally, however, "No one in Vietnam could run away. There were different places but there was nowhere to hide for very long." (Emerson, *Winners and Losers*, pp. 96-97.)

Emerson wrote the story of Tran Thi Bich. All her five sons had been in the South Vietnamese army, and she recited her reasons for hating the war.

"The eldest, who was thirty-two, was wounded in a mortar attack. Part of his face was missing and his left hand was useless. He could not find work, perhaps it was because of the horrible new face he had, but then, many veterans had no work. The next reason: a thirty-year-old son who had become a madman who could do nothing for himself. 'A bright child, a nervous child, a good son,' she said of him; he was the one she had loved the most. The third son was a lieutenant on active duty. A fourth son, a twenty-three-year-old soldier, had been missing for 'a long time,' she said. The last reason was the youngest boy, a deserter from the army and in hiding. All this she told us matter-of-factly, always circling to the son who had gone mad." (*Winners and Losers*, p. 108.)

In the U.S., as the war intensified, more soldiers were sent to Vietnam, increasing from 23,000 in 1964, to 385,000 in 1966, and 536,000 in 1968, the year Nick arrived. As more American soldiers were killed, sentiments and demonstrations against the war also intensified. Conflicts were spreading throughout the land. Lembcke summarizes the variety of protests:

"The late 1960s and early 1970s were rife with marches, rallies, demonstrations, street politics, inflammatory rhetoric, and violent be-

havior by both pro- and anti-war forces. Rocks were thrown, windows smashed, cars overturned, offices occupied, heads cracked, buildings bombed, people arrested, campuses occupied, and students shot and killed by National Guardsmen. These were days of rage." (*The Spitting Image,* p. 77.)

Anti-war opposition increased dramatically in 1968 after the Tet offensive, the presidential election, and more deaths in Vietnam. Surveys began to show that a majority of Americans had concluded the war was "immoral" and a "mistake." (See Appy's books.) Massive demonstrations took place in Washington and throughout America.

Opposition to the war also spread among American soldiers in Vietnam, becoming more intense in 1968 and after – the very time Nick was in Vietnam. Some soldiers were open in their opposition, for example, by placing anti-war posters on bulletin boards. More soldiers were defying their superiors' orders to fight. Fraggings, the killing of officers by their own soldiers, appeared and spread. The Army reported that there were 126 in 1969, 271 in 1970, and 333 in 1971. Lembcke wrote that fraggings are "all but forgotten." They should not be. They remind us of the intensity of the conflict and of soldiers' refusal to die because their officers led them into battles they saw as meaningless. Some soldiers committed suicide. Many deserted. Most followed orders but had to find ways to survive.

Many soldiers continued their opposition to the war after they came home. A 1975 survey of Vietnam veterans showed that 75 percent of them opposed the war. The following figures show that opposition to the war was deep and extensive.

563,000 soldiers received a less than honorable discharge;

1,500,000 went absent without leave (AWOL) at some point during their service;

550,000 deserted.

(Lembcke, *The Spitting Image,* p. 37; Appy, *Patriots*.)

In 1967, the Vietnam Veterans Against the War was formed and had 20,000 members by 1971. In addition to opposing the war, VVAW "worked for improved services and benefits for veterans, sponsored rehabilitation farms, halfway houses, and psychotherapy programs, tired to improve conditions in Veterans Administration hospitals, and supported legislation of benefit to veterans." (Lembcke, *The Spitting Image*, p. 64.)

But even though most Americans, most working-class Americans, and most veterans opposed the war, a majority of Americans also disapproved of anti-war demonstrations and demonstrators. Some of the disapproval probably came from a perception that demonstrators were privileged college students who had escaped the suffering of those who served in Vietnam. (Levison, *The Working-Class Majority*; Lembcke, *The Spitting Image*; Appy, *Patriots*.)

In *The Spitting Image*, Lembcke argues that the anti-war movement was critical of the war and the politicians waging it, but was not critical of the soldiers forced to fight it. In fact, VVAW and the anti-war movement in general supported and helped the soldiers before, during, and after their Vietnam service. This is not to deny that some war opponents did target some soldiers when they returned to the U.S. Larry Kneeland told me, twice, that he was called "baby killer" upon his return. To avoid being recognized as a soldier, he said, he changed to civilian clothes before he left Logan airport in Boston. Lembcke shows quite convincingly, however, that such actions were not typical of anti-war protesters, who opposed the government that started and carried on the war, not the soldiers drafted to fight it and lose life and limb in Vietnam.

Enduring Memories

Emerson's *Winners and Losers* is an extensive and detailed story of memories from the war, of people unable to forget what they saw and did in Vietnam. Foremost among those haunted by memories was Emerson herself. Nguyen Ngoc Luong, Emerson's assistant and friend during her reporting years in Vietnam, wrote her after she returned to America: "You are the only one who cannot overcome your Vietnam experience. There is an acute lack of forgetfulness in you about Vietnam." (P. 9.)

He may be correct that few people were tormented by their Vietnam memories as much as Emerson was. But probably millions of Americans cannot overcome, cannot forget, the wounds of Vietnam. Forty-three years after Nick died, as Stacia and I were visiting Nick's gravesite, she told me that she thinks of him every day. Jimmy said that the Vietnam war *has left a bitter taste in a lot of people.*

Maxwell Wells served in Vietnam about the same time and in the same area Nick did. He said he does not think he ever met Nick. But during our phone conversation he told me his Vietnam story,

told here in the sequence of our talk. In 2003, thirty-five years after his Vietnam tour, he had heart trouble and started having *a terrible time. I was so emotional. I went over to the VA hospital. It took me forty years for the PTSD* [post-traumatic stress syndrome] *to step out and get me…. I was a total workaholic, holding down two-three jobs at a time. I guess I did that so I wouldn't have to face the memories of Vietnam. And I flat put it on the back burner.* After his heart attack he got in touch with six soldiers he knew in Vietnam. Every year three come by and spend a week with him.

He was hospitalized twice, twenty-two days each time. *I live every day … I have good days and I have bad days, and I just hope I have more good than bad.* Two people at the VA worked with him and *they basically saved my life.* A social worker *pulled me right out of hell.*

He said that when he got home from Vietnam *I forgot it, I put it behind me, and it just built and built and built and built till I was just ready to explode…. I made my kids hate me. My kids now, we're very close now. I was a terrible father. I was angry. I was disturbed. I wasn't thinking right, and it made hell for my kids. Two boys.*

I asked him if he ever considered writing his story. He said he gets too emotional when he starts thinking about it, hasn't been able to sit down and do it.

Brenda Genest's husband Richard was killed in Vietnam. She was angry at the funeral. Friends and relatives sang "Blowin' in the Wind" and other protest songs. Soon "she went out in the world to speak against" the war. In time she remarried. "Even four years later, when she was living with a decent and affectionate man from Manchester, when her son Richard seemed fine, when the couple were thinking of building their own house in the country, Mrs. Genest could not stop from crying." (Emerson, *Winners and Losers*, p. 266.)

Leroy Quintana told this story. "I just met a guy who was in the infantry. He shot some people in the dark and they turned out to be children. He's been carrying that for thirty years. Even his wife doesn't know. How do you carry those kinds of secrets?" Tom Corey was wounded in Vietnam and has been using a wheelchair since. His father came to hate the war and Nixon. "He still has a hard time looking at me like this in a wheelchair. I can see the pain in his eyes to this day." (Appy, *Patriots*, pp. 539, 519.)

There are many, many other stories of losses and memories. None is sadder than Bong McDoran's. As a child, she was seriously wounded during one of the many battles in Vietnam. She was brought to the U.S. for medical treatment, recovered, and was later adopted and stayed here. In 1996, she returned to Vietnam and found four siblings, and was told what had happened to her father.

"The hardest part about going back was learning that my father did not die in the early seventies as we believed. I asked, 'Why did he stop writing?' The villagers said he went a little crazy, that even they couldn't find him for a number of years. He just wandered the countryside in a daze eking out some sort of existence and trying to find some meaning for his life. He'd lost his wife and half his children and his youngest daughter was in the United States. They said it tore him up inside to know I was alive but he couldn't see me. I heard over and over that he waited his whole life to see me again. They told me that one day a helicopter was circling over the village and my father ran out to greet it. He thought I was in the helicopter. Of course I wasn't. That was in 1990. The next day he died. If I had known he was still alive I would've jumped on the first plane to look for him. I would have gone back in a second." (Appy, *Patriots*, p. 524.)

Appendix B
Better Late (So Really Late) Than Never: Story of This Book

Nick died on May 5, 1968. I read his letters to Bill Beckler in October 1968. On May 8, 2011, forty-three years later, I began researching his life. And in January 2012, I started writing his story. In this chapter I try to make sense of why it took so long, so very long, to honor my debt to Nick and to remember and understand my own past.

The Beginning

In May 1964 I graduated from Clark University in Worcester, MA. That fall I began graduate studies in sociology at Brandeis University in Waltham, MA. While at Brandeis during 1964-68, at various times I lived in Waltham, Cambridge, and Lexington, all in the greater Boston area. Nick lived in Walpole for the first of those four years, and from mid-1965 to September 1967 he also lived in the greater Boston area (except for the trip to California and back). For some months, while Nick attended Manter Hall School in Cambridge, my wife and I also lived in Cambridge, less than a mile from the school. Sometimes I imagine that we crossed paths somewhere in Harvard Square, where the school was located. Certainly we were both living in and exposed to the 1960s social changes blowing all around us (see Chapter 5). The

spirit of Question Authority was spreading. It was and remains one of my guiding principles.

In 1965-66, while at Brandeis, I carried out research on and wrote a paper about Orchard Home for Girls, in Watertown, MA. It was a group home similar to Longview Farm and also operated by the New England Home for Little Wanderers (NEH). I spent about seven months going to Orchard three days a week.

In 1967 I needed to find a topic for my Ph.D. dissertation. Originally I wanted to move into and write about a small town in New Hampshire, in the spirit of a sociology tradition of community studies, the in-depth study of a single community. My sociology advisor did not think it was a promising idea. I can't remember now how I eventually came to focus on Longview Farm, but certainly the research I had carried out at Orchard Home and my relationship with New England Home played a major role in my decision.

NEH administration approved my request, but they said final approval would have to come from Bill Beckler, resident director of Longview. One administrator referred to him as the "kingpin" of the Farm. On September 6, 1967, Bill and I had a very friendly meeting and he agreed to the research. From then to the end of July 1968, I went to Longview Farm over 120 times. Usually I would be at Longview on Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday afternoon and evening, and Saturday afternoon. Wednesdays from 9 a.m. to noon there was a staff meeting that I also attended.

During the course of the year I observed the boys in most activities and I participated where appropriate. When I was with them I usually talked with whoever was free and felt like talking. Very soon I became a source of rides to the center of town and other places. Believing I should respect some privacy in their lives, I stayed away from the high school they attended and weekend dances.

I also decided not to attend Nick's funeral on May 21, 1968. I wrote in the field notes for May 22: "I could have gone to the wake Monday night, and to the funeral Tuesday (though for the second I would have had to call off my class [I was teaching a course at Simmons College Tuesday mornings]). I did not for three reasons: I did not know the person involved nor his family; I did not have the time (or did not feel I did); and, I think most important, since this was such a personal

loss to Bill, such a tragic situation, I did not want to be there and find myself in the role of observing. I think some situations should not be exploited for research, and this is one of them. So I stayed away."

While hanging around the Farm I did not take notes of what I heard and saw, except during the staff meetings where it was legitimate to do so. But if something seemed significant to remember and note accurately, I would discretely jot down a few words to help my memory later. I remember frequent visits to the bathroom to write short notes. It became my rigid practice to type observations in field notes as soon as I went home, or the next morning at the latest, while memories were still fresh. Forty-three years after I wrote them, I read them in the summer of 2011 and was surprised how detailed they were. It was in these notes that I found some information about Nick and the funeral.

Three things in 1968 conspired to shape what I wrote about Longview Farm, the boys, and Bill Beckler.

One was Nick's letters that Bill had sent me. The showed the stark reality of Vietnam. They made opposition to the war urgent.

The second was the continuing turmoil over the Vietnam War that Nick's letters made so urgent and relevant for me.

The third was a demonstration on October 22, 1968. Six of us were arrested for picketing the home of the director of the New Haven Redevelopment Authority. We were protesting what we saw as his failure to enforce the housing code, which resulted in many people living in substandard housing. The police arrested us under a law prohibiting the picketing of private homes (a law later overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court in a related case). The quick arrest of six peaceful protesters, compared to what we saw as the injustice of people living in unsafe housing, angered us.

These events touched me deeply, and in a burst of political protest, anger, and energy I began writing the dissertation in November 1968.

I had planned to and did write about the boys' life at Longview, and how that experience had affected them. Most of the dissertation discusses the boys' backgrounds and families; daily life at the Farm; how the staff interacted with the boys, and the boys with each other; the boys' struggles to maintain or rekindle relationships with their families; how the boys may have benefited from the counseling and therapy they received; and much more.

But when I read Nick's letter in October 1968, something happened. His letters and death reminded me of and reinforced a fundamental argument of sociology, and of the 1960s: political, economic, and social conditions and institutions affect and shape our lives. Specific to Longview Farm and the boys, I realized that no matter what and how much Bill and the Farm did to help the boys overcome their family and other problems, and to lead a better life, there were limits. The politics, politicians, corporations, and other institutions that led to social inequalities and the Vietnam War shaped their lives much more deeply. We saw in Chapter 4 that Bill gave the boys as normal a life as was possible within the resources available to him. Like parents of the times, he drove Nick to dates and other activities. But he and Longview could not protect Nick from the ravages of the Vietnam War, and from the economic and political realities that led to the war.

A second point I made in the dissertation is more difficult to explain. It is contained in the very title: *Processing for Unfitness: Socialization of "Emotionally Disturbed" Lower-Class Boys into the Mass Society.* It reflected the thinking of some sociologists of the 1960s and 1970s. It argued that Longview Farm socialized the boys to fit into and accept the society around them, and not to challenge the conditions that created poverty and other social inequalities, conformity in education and religion, and so on. Nick talked about such conditions in his letters. He saw that the war was unjust and unjustified and was being fought by working-class men. By helping the boys adjust to the society, instead of challenging it (as Nick did), Longview was helping perpetuate conditions that led to the war and other problems.

This is a plain statement of a complex argument. I do not know whether I would make it today; I do not know what I think about it now. Did Longview help most boys lead a better life? It seems to have done so, at least for some. Was Longview an "agent of social control" that shaped the boys into accepting and not challenging the economic and social problems around them, some of which had probably created the problems in their lives? I thought so in 1969, and I still believe some version of that view.

I did and still do think that Longview could do relatively little to protect them from these inequalities and problems. Nick's Vietnam letters that I read in 1968 made me aware of that. Now that I have read

so many more of his letters, and learned so much more about his life, I see that Nick had begun to challenge the politics and social conditions around him. His letters abound with criticisms and questions about politics, religion, and much else. The letter he wrote to Bill in March 1968 (see Chapter 6 for the entire letter) is a good example. He denounced the repressive social conditions of the 1960s. That letter is worth reading more than once.

But angry as the letter was, strong though his disagreements with Bill were, Nick still valued and appreciated his relationship with Bill and the work Bill and Longview did with the boys. He wrote of his *respect, admiration, and esteem* for Bill, and after he signed the letter he wrote *DO WAIT before you judge this letter.*

I experienced the same emotional conflict about Bill. I respected him enormously, I liked him, and I was indebted to him for many things, especially for sending me Nick's letters. But I disagreed with him on some important matters. I also felt uneasy about what I was writing about Longview Farm. So on April 8, 1969, unaware that Bill had died in March, I wrote him the following letter about the conflict I faced.

Dear Bill:

It's been a while since I last saw you, or even wrote…. I've been writing and typing my dissertation, which is just about finished….

Whenever I do have that final draft ready, you'll get a photocopy immediately. It has turned out a much different document than I ever thought, Bill. In some ways I go beyond my work at Longview and I try to look at how Longview fits into the whole society. I don't really know what you'll think of it.

For now I have a favor to ask you (I hope not to bother you again). You may remember the boys' letters you sent me. Some I found very fascinating and I copied. Among these letters were some by Nick Conaxis. I have used them extensively in writing the dissertation, I was deeply moved by them. But then I realized that I knew nothing about Nick. Before I can use his letters in any final form, I want to know something about him…. Also, if at all possible, I'd like to have whatever impressions and memories of Nick some of the boys now at the farm have. I hope some knew him. Also any of the staff.

I don't need any specific family information, just what type of a person he was. I remember only that he apparently was quite difficult to handle all the time he was at the farm. I'm also very interested to know what happened to him between the time he left the farm and when he entered the army; how did he get to smoke pot, and read B. Russell and generally become rather disaffected with some aspects of America? From his one long letter to you, I gather you disapproved of his change. Did you? How? Why? He must have valued your friendship, for he kept writing you.

Finally, you and I never talked about his death. I saw how deeply it affected you, I wanted to talk to you about it, but it somehow never seemed the right moment. Only for my own benefit (I will not in any way discuss your private feelings about his death), I'd like to know some of your feelings now concerning your relationship to Nick.

Perhaps I'm asking too much. Do not feel obligated, in the slightest, to answer me. I'm asking all these questions because his letters moved me deeply (in all honesty, I've often wondered why you did sent me those four painful letters). In ways I cannot ever know, it has changed the nature of the study, what I finally wrote. Those letters, plus certain personal-political-intellectual events of the last seven months, have been crucial to the writing of my views of what I did at the farm, and therefore to me as a person. So that's why I'm asking, asking for more than I should, perhaps.

There is one chapter I have not written, Bill. It's a chapter I dread writing. In my own estimation, it's the only chapter that matters. In it, I'll discuss my personal involvement, interests, needs, etc etc all the time I was at Longview Farm; I will also try to explain all the things that went on while I was writing up my "findings." All the time I'll be writing it, Bill, the people I met at the farm – and especially you – will be constantly on my mind. I'll try to be as honest as decency permits (for some feelings must be protected). My greatest difficulty is this: how can I write about people I know personally? I honestly don't know, Bill. I really don't. It's more difficult than I dare admit. (That's why I have not written it, I guess.)

Well, I don't want to go on, there is no use. You'll see what I wrote, definitely next fall, possibly in May or early June. I also hope to see all of you before we leave for Europe.

As for the information about Nick, anything you send I'll appreciate. Anything….

[I went on to send greetings to staff and boys at the farm and some personal news. I closed with] I just read over what I wrote. It reads like some of the letters boys have written you. Strange – or is it.

Yours, Alex

I did write the chapter I mentioned to Bill, calling it "Participant Observation, Ethics, and Political Deviance." Bill's death, however, made it necessarily incomplete and unfinished. (Parts are reprinted earlier in this chapter.) By early 1970 the entire dissertation was finished. In June 1970 I received a Ph.D. in sociology from Brandeis.

The Decades In-Between

In 1971, I wrote "The Poverty of the Sociology of Deviance: Nuts, Sluts, and Preverts," a paper that was published in 1972 and became relatively well known in sociology. I argued that an area of sociology known as "sociology of deviance" that focused on powerless people, such as mental patients, drug users, and criminals of various sorts, should focus instead on powerful politicians and corporations whose actions maim and kill millions of people. The Vietnam War was a prime example. Even though Nick is never mentioned in this paper, his life and letters were a major influence on the argument I made.

Then, as I wrote in Chapter 1, work and family preoccupied me during the 1970s. I do not remember now how often I thought about Nick.

In 1983 began a long, thirty-year journey that finally led to the research and book on Nick's life. I did not realize it then, of course, but looking back on my life it seems obvious now that Eric Bogle's words and music were the beginning. His songs about wars, the violence and destruction they cause to people, families, and communities, moved me deeply, inspired me, and would not let me forget Nick and Vietnam. They tell of "the crippled, the wounded, the maimed, the legless, the armless, the blind, the insane" (in "And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda"). (The lyrics of Bogle's songs are found on his website, www.Ericbogle.net. On YouTube you can hear the songs I mention here.)

Around midnight on November 4, 1983, I was listening to Priscilla Herdman at Passim, a small but legendary folk music club in Cam-

bridge, MA. (Surely Nick must have walked by it at some point while he was at Manter Hall in 1965-66.) She talked about Eric Bogle, a Scottish Australian songwriter, and sang his "And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda." It tells of the maiming and deaths of thousands of Australian young men in World War I. I closed my eyes and listened. Here are a few lines.

> And how well I remember that terrible day,
> How our blood stained the sand and the water
> And of how in that hell that they called Suvla Bay,
> We were butchered like lambs at the slaughter…
> And those that were left, well we tried to survive,
> In that mad world of blood, death, and fire
> And for ten weary weeks, I kept myself alive,
> Though around me the corpses piled higher…
> And as our ship pulled into Circular Quay,
> I looked at the place where me legs used to be,
> And thanked Christ there was nobody waiting for me,
> to grieve, to mourn, and to pity…

I've played "Waltzing Matilda" many times since, heard many versions. This and other Bogle songs about wars have nourished and strengthened my understanding of and opposition to all wars, to the brutality and suffering wars have visited on millions of people throughout history.

A few words about some other of Bogle's songs. In Chapter 1, and in a column I wrote (printed below), I mention "No Man's Land," an equally powerful song Bogle wrote after walking through a vast French cemetery where thousands of young men killed in World War I were buried. In the liner notes to the album *Scraps of Paper,* Emily Friedman wrote that it is a "profoundly poetic, almost painfully insightful" song with a "haunting evocation of the youth and hope that are among the first victims of war." Many years later Bogle walked through that cemetery one more time and wrote "Hallowed Ground."

In 1990, some of the few still alive veterans of the battles recounted in "Waltzing Matilda" visited the battlefields of their youth, and invited Bogle to accompany them. To commemorate the occasion, he wrote "The Gift of Years." Here are a few lines from that song.

And of all the ghosts of all the boys
Who haunt this lonely place,
Only one of them wears your cheery grin
And your Queensland joker's face.
When I drown in old and bloody dreams
Of helpless young men's dying screams.
I feel your hand give my arm a shake
And your voice say 'Steady, mate.'

In 1992, Bogle wrote "Welcome Home," telling the struggles of Australian Vietnam veterans. He closed the song with "May the years bring you release as the memories decrease, may you find some kind of peace, welcome home." As I have been talking with people about Nick, I have been wondering whether memories do decrease. For them, it seems, and for me, the memories have become stronger. The sharp pain decreases, but the sadness and other emotions linger on.

Two years after I first heard Bogle's songs I visited to the Vietnam War memorial wall (see Chapter 1). I wrote about that visit in "A Tribute to Nicky Conaxis," which was published in the *Watertown Sun* on April 11, 1990. I knew very little about Nick and his life then, so there are mistakes and incomplete information. It is printed here as I wrote it, with one exception. In 1990, I called Bill Beckler "Bob Williams."

Linda Rosencrance's touching and gentle tribute to the memory of Meredith Kamm (Sun, March 28) reminded me of Nicky Conaxis, a young man I never met, whose death in Vietnam 22 years ago moved me and touched me deeply. This is my tribute to him.

I know very little about his life. He came from a working-class family. He had apparently led a very troubled life, and in his middle teens he was sentenced to a group home for juvenile delinquents. There, Bill Beckler (the director of the group home), a gentle and caring man, became like a father for Nicky. They had many talks. When Nicky left, he had settled down and life was no longer such a struggle for him. [Now that we know about Nick's life during 1965-68, so wrong.]

In the spring of 1968, a year or two after he had left the group home, Nicky was drafted into the Army. He knew he was headed

for Vietnam, so he considered fleeing to Canada. After an exchange of long letters with Bill Beckler, and after some agonizing days, he changed his mind and went to Vietnam.

From there, he wrote three letters to Bill Beckler. They are angry and reflecting reports of the destruction of the war, the suffering of the Vietnamese, the anxiety and the bewilderment of the young American soldiers. He questioned his being there, the presence of the U.S. troops in another country, the awful destruction of a people and a country.

Nicky Conaxis was in Vietnam no more than three weeks when a grenade hit him on the head and killed him. The letter below is the last one he wrote, just a few days before his death. (Bill Beckler gave me copies of all letters Nicky sent him from Vietnam.)

"I'm currently at Pleiku and war becomes a stark reality of piercing fear and unmitigated discomfort. The agony of human suffering can only be comprehended after a direct involvement. Vivid war stories by wounded G.I.'s inspire awe and then a deep feeling of sympathy for the wounded and dead. These mentions aren't intended for spur concern for my plight because I am alive and have all my limbs. Water is rationed making showers a coveted luxury. My last shower was better than a week ago. I manage to keep my teeth clean but the rest of my body is rotting away. The dirt blankets the area with a dingy film and a too deep breath I think would be lethal. The food is comparable to Hayes Bickford with little fresh produce. For my birthday I could use some canned fruit!! It is only tolerable because I am thankful I am not in infantry. It is impossible to over emphasize the importance of mail. Remind the twins to write if they have time. My being here further reminds me of the value of an education, not only for personal betterment but more so to preclude having to be here. Each day seems to be one of philosophic rationalization, while never totally engrossing myself in the war effort. I've talked to many short-timers who have changed from anti-war to pro-war. I am convinced it is merely because they have completed their tour and are anticipating praise for their valour!?! I can honestly say I wouldn't want anyone here even though I have to be. This reversal seems a little feeble to me, almost like many of last year's Red Sox fans!! It also makes me wonder about demonstrators. If they weren't subject to the draft I doubt if they would be such active participants. Well Bill No news except the war."

I first read these letters and I first heard about Nicky in October 1968. I read them again many times, and every few years I read them again. Nicky Conaxis has stayed with me since the fall of 1968.

He was a young man who overcame his troubled youth and did not become bitter. In Vietnam, he gave his food to hungry children. "I became attached to some small children and ended up giving away half my rations and any trinkets I could scrounge." The beauty of the land, the gentleness of the people, and their poverty and suffering touched him and made him angry. He read the works of Bertrand Russell, the British philosopher who convened a citizens' court to try President Johnson as a war criminal, and he mused that the Army "would be quick to deprive me of some very interesting literature" if they realized whose works he was reading.

The life, letters, and death of Nicky Conaxis dramatized for me the nature of the Vietnam War. It was a war fought by poor and working-class young men, white and black, to protect the interests of the military, the corporations that supplied the military, and the rich who wanted to protect markets and resources for themselves. It was a war conceived by older men who ran the government and corporations, but fought with the lives of young men.

Nicky's letters made clear for me the injustice of the war. I could never allow myself to be silent in the face of other wars fought by young men for the interests of the military, of politicians, and of corporations. As much as any other reason, the life and death of Nicky Conaxis moved me to protest the war of the Contras, created and financed by the U.S. government, against the people of Nicaragua. Nicky moves me today to work for the Watertown-El Salvador Sister City Project [in Watertown, MA], to lessen the suffering visited upon the poor peasants of El Salvador by a right-wing military government financed by the U.S. government.

In April of 1985 I rode a bus all night to Washington, DC, to join thousands of others to protest the Reagan administration's support of the Contras who were killing children and older people in Nicaragua. Before we began the long march to the Capitol I visited the Vietnam Memorial. As I moved slowly towards Nicky's name, I was overcome by the tragedy of his death, and I cried and sobbed, silently. I stood staring at his name, thinking of his sharing of his

food with the children and of the dead children in Nicaragua and of my being in Washington that day. I felt his presence near me. At last I had come to know Nicky Conaxis.

I hope to have the strength and the anger to never stop protesting against the killing of other children and other young men, Nicky. It's the best tribute we can pay to your memory. I can never forget you. Rest in peace. [End of column.]

Sometime in the late 1990s I began thinking of writing a book about Nick. Instead, from 1999 to 2003 I wrote a sociology textbook, *Families: Joys, Conflicts, and Changes* (published in 2004).

In 2003, during the U.S. military invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, there were demonstrations against those invasions. After I went to one of them, I wrote a second column about Nick. This time I did not use his real name, thinking I should protect his privacy. I called him "Mickey K" and I called Bill Beckler "Bob." Here I use their real names. Otherwise nothing is changed.

I entitled the column "Forever Nineteen," but the editor changed it to "Another cruel and senseless war is happening," an accurate summary of what I wrote. It was printed in the *Watertown TAB & Press*, April 11, 2003.

On April 5, I went to a peace vigil against the war in Iraq, in front of Waltham City Hall. When it was over at noon we gathered in a church to listen to a few speakers and talk with each other.

The first speaker, who had been with us at the vigil, was a young woman whose brother is with the American armed forces fighting in Iraq. Her sign included the words "my brother might die tonight." She spoke movingly of her opposition to the war, her concern about her brother, and her struggle over what to do with these two realities.

As I was listening, I thought of the anti-war, peace songs of Eric Bogle (from Australia). "No Man's Land" tells of a visit to a vast French cemetery of young men who were killed in World War I. He imagines a talk with one of them.

Well, how do you do, Private Willie McBride,
Do you mind if I sit down here by your grave side?…

And did you leave a wife or a sweetheart behind?
In some faithful heart is your memory enshrined?
And though you died back in nineteen sixteen,
To that loyal heart are you forever nineteen?

I know of a 19-year-old youth who was sent to Vietnam in 1968. As a teenager, Nicky Conaxis was troubled and troublesome, and in the mid-1960s, he landed in a group home for delinquent boys. At first he was often in conflict with the staff and other boys, but he eventually settled down and finished high school.

He left the group home at that point, but the Vietnam War was raging in Asia, and in 1968, he was drafted into the Army. Confused and unsure about himself and the war, he considered going to Canada to avoid it. Friends advised him against that action, however, and in a few months he was in Vietnam.

[Here I omit the passages printed in 2003; they are contained in the 1990 column and in the three letters in Chapter 1.]

A few days later, he died when a grenade hit him directly on the head.

I never knew Nicky. Bill, to whom Nicky wrote, gave me his letters. In 1985, when I visited the Vietnam War Memorial, I located his name, touched the cold stone and cried for a few minutes. That day I though of Willie McBride and the millions of 19-year-olds who died in senseless wars.

So now a president who avoided the cruelty of the Vietnam War because of his political connections has sent other thousands of young men and women to kill other young men in Iraq, to be killed and to be wounded.

Every Memorial Day, as I watch people marching down Mount Auburn Street, I long for the day we will not have parades to honor those who die in wars, and for the days we will not write songs for the suffering and death of young men and women, and of mothers and children and old men. But as I write these words, I am haunted by those already killed and wounded in Iraq, Americans and Iraqis.

We are told the war and the killing is to protect our freedoms and to end the need for future wars. But that has always been the excuse. Bogle told Willie McBride (whose headstone he faced):

Did you really believe them when they told you "The cause?"
Did you really believe that this war would end wars?
Well the suffering, the sorrow, the glory, the shame
The killing, the dying, it was all done in vain
For Willie McBride, it all happened again,
And again, and again, and again, and again.

It is happening again.

Whether wars take place because of miscalculations, or egos, or for oil and greedy corporations, or ethnic and religious conflicts, or other political ends, or any other motives, we should all work for the day when our grandchildren will know no war veterans and will have no need for a Memorial Day.

The war in Iraq may be one of the cruelest and most unnecessary. I will not discuss here all the lies told to justify it, but the worst is the President's repeated lie that Hussein was involved in the September 11, 2001 attacks. Even members of our own CIA have denied the claim.

So for oil, for the control of the Middle East, and who knows for what other unspoken reasons, young men and women are dying and will die.

All of us opposed to the butchery and cruelty of war need to keep working to stop this one and create a new world order, through the United Nations or some other means, so that future disputes will be settled peacefully. Most of the world's people have reached that conclusion. We need to get our government to join the world. That will be the best tribute to the memory of Willie McBride and Nicky Conaxis. [End of the column.]

After my family textbook was published in 2004, I began thinking about Nick again. In the annual report of each Regis College teacher's past year's work and future plans, I wrote in June 2005: "I would like to write the biography of a young man who was killed in Vietnam in 1968. I never met him, but I read the letters he wrote from Vietnam, and they have shaped my sociological thinking and politics since I first read them in the Fall of 1968. I would like to interview whatever of his family is left, the soldiers he served with, his friends, and others."

To pursue that plan, in January 2006 I talked with Jerry Lembcke, a Vietnam veteran and sociologist. We had a very fruitful discussion of

how I might carry out the research of Nick's life and death. Soon after that I talked with Bob Erickson, the Veterans' Agent for the town of Watertown, MA, where I lived then. He was supportive of my plans. With his computer and Internet skills, skills I did not have then, he found Stacia's address and home number, stories in the *Walpole Times* about Nick and other Walpole men killed in Vietnam, and data on Nick's military service.

At the beginning of August 2006, I called Stacia and she agreed to meet me at her house on August 14. In advance of our talk, I sent her copies of the four Nick letters Bill Beckler had sent me. I wrote: "The letters moved me deeply, especially his kindness toward the children of Vietnam, and his sympathy for the suffering of the Vietnamese people. I think of Nicky at least every Memorial day, and each Memorial Day I play a song about wars and the young men who die in them." I included some lyrics from "No Man's Land."

Anxious, I went to Peabody on August 14. Stacia, her husband Killy, their daughter Ourania, and Killy's sister Aphrodite greeted me very warmly and we had a delicious Greek dinner. Stacia showed me copies of Nick's military records and his letters from Fort Jackson and Fort Sill. During the course of the evening I learned something of Nick's and their lives, but as I look back now I see that many details were still unclear to me.

On August 23 I wrote Stacia and Killy:

I have thought about our time together, your very warm hospitality, and of course Nicky, every day since August 14. I can't thank you enough.

I would like to come up next Monday or Tuesday (28 or 29) during the day, and meet you at your stores. It would be nice to see where you work. And if you think it's okay, if you brought Nicky's letters (from his basic training days and any others you have), I would like to read them, probably in a library. I'll call over the weekend to arrange this, if you agree to it.

Let me explain what I have been thinking for years. I wanted to write a book about Nicky. My goal would be to describe how a young man survived a difficult childhood, went to Longview Farm, began to form ideas about life, graduated and was seeking to find what he wanted to do with his life, was drafted, opposed the war but still went to Vietnam.

His Vietnam letters show a very kind, sensitive, thinking, and good man, whose life was cut short by a senseless war. I want to understand how he came to oppose the Vietnam war, and to do that I would need to talk with many people he lived with and met in the middle and late 1960s.

It was Nicky's life and letters that finally led me to conclude that the Vietnam war, and all wars, are senseless and kill young men and cause death and destruction to innocent civilians. I became committed to peace during the late 1960s, partly because of Nick, and I remain committed to peace and opposed to all wars.

As I said, I have thought about writing about Nicky's life for years, for the reasons I explain above. But what I cannot decide is if I have the energy, time, and ability to do that at this stage of my life. If I were to decide that I do (which I have not so far), the big next question is whether you and your family would want to such a book written, whether you would cooperate. You may not want to allow a book for many reasons, all of which I would respect.

It could be a project of many years, depending on how many people from Nicky's life I would track down to hear their memories of Nicky and their experiences with him.

If I were to decide now, I would probably say I don't think I have the energy, time, and ability to research and write such a book. But I am still very much interested in learning more things about Nicky's life, and in staying in touch with you. [End of letter.]

Reading that letter six years later (on May 8, 2012 – a year to the date since I began the research for the book), I can understand Stacia's polite reluctance to talk again. She did not say no, and we left it open when or if we would meet again. But given her reluctance and my inability to make a definite commitment of time and energy for the project, and given commitments to my teaching and family, I did not get in touch with Stacia for five years.

And reading that letter of August 23, 2006 now, I am certain that the doubts about energy, time, and ability to write the book were only overcome the day I heard "The Last Train." I had no choice but to find time and energy. It was a debt I owed to Nick and myself.

After I retired from teaching in May 2007, I spent time with my grandchildren and researching and writing a book on Colin Turn-

bull's book *The Forest People.* (*The 1950s Mbuti* is found on the website www.Turnbullandthembuti.pbworks.com.) I finished that project by January 2009. From then to December 2010, when I first heard Janis Ian's "The Last Train," I spent more time with my four grandchildren, read more books than I had for years, and worked with various community groups in Watertown.

Finally

After I first heard "The Last Train," on December 7, 2010, while driving to pick up my grandson from school, I listened to the song daily for over a month, often two or three times. For months I played it several times a week. Ian's lyrics, the melody, and Nick's memory would not leave me. The song gave me the emotional strength, energy, and urgency I needed to undertake the research and writing.

Early in February I typed "Nicholas S. Conaxis" on Google search and came across about fifty entries on Nick. Almost all of them were listings on military websites. On February 16, I wrote the following sentences: "Nicky Conaxis was killed in Vietnam on May 5, 1968. If you Google 'Nicholas S. Conaxis' you will find essential data on his military service, but not a hint that Nicky did not want to go to Vietnam, that he opposed the war. He is presented as a fallen hero, but just before he was killed he was reading Bertrand Russell's argument for trying President Johnson as a war criminal.

"This is the story of his life: how and where he grew up, the institution where he lived as a teenager, why he came to oppose the Vietnam War, and his emotions, fears, and reflections in the weeks before he died." Of course, at that point I had no inkling of what I would find in the following months.

Then in March and April I expanded on the above statement and submitted a proposal for a talk on Nick I that presented at the October 15, 2011, meeting of the Association for Humanist Sociology. On Sunday morning, May 8, 2011, I formally began the research by reading carefully all the websites that mentioned Nick. Foremost were the remembrances of Nick I found on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, presented in Chapter 1. Still unsure whether I could stay with the research, that evening I wrote in my log, "I hope to stay with the project and finally do it."

The following is a summary account of how I found the people and information for this book. It involved the Internet, letters to the Walpole Times and other newspapers, references and recommendations from people I interviewed, pursuing leads, and "miraculous events" such as the email Marsha Greenberg sent me.

Using the email address listed with Virginia Porter's remembrance of Nick, I wrote her that evening. She wrote back that she could help me find some of Nick's 1965 classmates. But she did not answer the follow-up emails I sent her for some time, until we communicated again in the fall of 2011. The other people with remembrances either included no email addresses or those they included were no longer working.

Tasha Lingos's words were so reminiscent of "The Last Train." On February 28, 2003, she wrote: *My Dearest Nick – Hopefully our lives together continue into eternity. Loveth Forever Tasha.* She left no email address but I found her home address and wrote her on May 10, 2011. I explained my history with Nick and the letters, mentioned her remembrance of Nick, and told her of Ian's "The Last Train." I closed with "I hope you're the Tasha Lingos who knew Nick. Please get in touch with me, if you are. I'd like to talk with you." I included my email address and phone number.

Six days later, on May 16, came an email from Tasha:

This is rather odd writing to you, but indeed ironic, since I often pull out my mementos of Nick for Memorial Day. Yes, indeed, you have located the … Tasha Lingos who had a wonderful friend whose life was taken illegally by our own government. (NO, I shall not get into that). I figured I would send these photos, so you could see the amount of information I have, but unfortunately, I live in Utah, and much of the content is extremely personal. I am willing to speak with you …and we can discuss this information. I have, on several occasions, begun compiling notes to create some type of journal of Nick's (mis)adventures, as he was a great writer. I have one-line postcards, from 1966 when he "split for the coast" as was in fashion back then, as well as many others which were sent from basic training in Ft. Jackson, SC, then Fort Sill, OK. The 10 letters sitting on the table next to the box of letters (which he unfortunately never received) are stamped:

"Verified DECEASED.
RETURN TO SENDER
D.G. BRUMFIELD
MAJ. AGC., Assr AG
Return to Sender"
I received 1 package from Nam with a lovely silver bracelet, and a wooden pipe hand carved by a native.

She then gave me some information about Stacia and her family, and included five attachments: A photo of Nick when he was about sixteen, another of Nick with Stacia and her two daughters, and three photos of boxes of Nick's letters to her and the letters she wrote to him that came back from Vietnam.

Thus began a series of phone conversations and interviews, and many email exchanges. She sent me copies of some of Nick's letters, and I sent her copies of the four letters Nick wrote to Bill Beckler. Eventually she sent me copies of almost all the letters Nick wrote her. Without those letters we would have had a much more limited knowledge and understanding of Nick.

The interviews with Tasha, and almost all other interviews, were conducted by phone and tape recorded

At about the time Tasha and I began talking and writing, I realized that I was delving into people's loving and painful memories of Nick. I started to have some doubts about whether I should pursue the research. I talked with friends who encouraged me to continue. But the uneasiness and doubts would not go away, so I decided to meet once with a therapist I had seen occasionally for six years. She agreed to see me on July 4, 2011. I did not keep detailed notes of our talk, only writing the following in a daily log I keep. We met to "discuss some of my concerns of the research I'm doing – fearing I'll bring back sad memories to people. She said people can handle them." I don't know how accurate that summary of our talk is. I did continue with the research.

The next person I interviewed was Florence Sundquist, a ninety-two-year-old retired teacher who had clear memories of Nick. Her name was mentioned in a December 15, 2005, Walpole Times story on the four men from Walpole killed in Vietnam in 1968. I wrote her on May 16 and we met at the Walpole senior center on June 3.

At some point in May I became concerned that I would not find many Walpole people who had known Nick. One day it occurred to me to send a letter to the editor of the Walpole Times explaining what I was doing. I assumed that people in their sixties would be more likely to read a local town paper than to browse the Internet.

It was printed on June 9, 2011.

"Searching for those who knew Nicholas Conaxis.

"To the editor:

"I am looking for people who knew Nicholas Conaxis, a 1965 graduate of Walpole High School. He was killed in Vietnam in 1968. I never met him, but I have read letters he wrote to various people before he went to Vietnam and while he was in Vietnam.

"I am a retired sociologist (taught at Regis College from 1971 to 2007) and would like to write something about Nick and his life.

"If you knew him, or know people who did know him, I would appreciate it if you got in touch with me." I included my phone number and email address.

It proved a very productive move. Nancy Walsh, Tony Lorusso, and Bob Turco called or emailed and soon shared their memories of Nick. In a later email, Turco referred me to Larry Kneeland, who was a great source of information on Nick's three months at Fort Jackson. He also let me borrow for months his copy of the Fort Jackson book with pictures of Nick, which I later copied and sent to Stacia and Jimmy. Nancy Walsh later helped me find information on more people to interview.

Kevin Groden, who does not live in Walpole now, called me June 11 after someone from Walpole called him and read him the letter. We met June 27 and two more times, had phone conversations, and exchanged emails. He also insisted I talk with Jeff Storey. Jeff did not respond to a letter and phone call in August. Finally, after a phone call from Kevin, he answered a phone message I left and we talked in January 2012. It was then I learned of Nick's living and working on Cape Cod in the summer of 1966. Dennis Nolfi was another reference from Kevin. We talked on July 26 in my house.

At our June 27 meeting at a bar in Newburyport, Kevin said he did not know where Nick was buried. He told me that Nick's name is listed

on a memorial stone outside Rowley town hall but Nick's grave is not in the Rowley cemetery (I told him it is in Peabody). At that point I knew nothing about Nick's years in Rowley. I went to the Rowley town hall a few days later and asked the town clerk if she knew why Nick's name was listed in the memorial. She did not, but she gave me the name and address of Kenneth Gawrys, from the Rowley Veterans Association. who might. I wrote him, and he turned over the letter to David Hardy, who grew up with Nick in Rowley. We met July 12 in his Rowley home. Later we talked by phone a few times, exchanged emails, and he led me to Nick's friends Barbara Gurczak and Lee Stevens.

I came across Eugene Alexander in his tribute to Nick posted on the website www.Footnotes.org (now Fold3). I emailed the site administrator asking how I might find Eugene, who suggested I send an email to Footnotes and they would pass it on to him. Eugene responded to my message on July 17. We had two conversations, he answered some questions I mailed him, and in December 2011 he wrote a wonderful tribute to Nick (see Chapter 6).

During the summer of 2011 there were weeks with no interviews and little progress in the research. Restless to move on, at some point I decided to use the free time to read the field notes I wrote while at Longview Farm in 1967-68 and the dissertation I wrote about Longview. It was a sobering experience. There was so much I had forgotten. I relived my visits at the Farm and the experience of writing the dissertation. It was so much a 1960s document, so radical and angry, so moved by Nick's letters and death. In addition to Nick's letters and the DCG documents, the field notes are the only other contemporary source of information about Nick, Longview, and Walpole.

In early August, still thinking Nick had lived in Franklin in 1965-66, before I learned of his attendance at Manter Hall, I wrote the following letter to the *Franklin Gazette*, hoping for results similar to those that came from the letter to the *Walpole Times*. It was printed on August 9.

"Did you know Nicholas Conaxis?

"To the editor:

"I am looking for people who may have known Nicholas Conaxis, who lived in Franklin in 1965-66. He was drafted into the army in 1967 and was killed in Vietnam in May 1968.

"I'm a former teacher at Regis College, now retired, and I am writing a biography of Nick. I never met Nick, but I have read his letters from Vietnam and have spoken to some of his high school classmates (from Walpole High School) and friends.

"If you knew Nick, or know people who did, I would appreciate hearing from you." I included my email address and phone number.

No one from Franklin responded, but others who read or were told of the letter did get in touch with me. Jack Carey, Nick's friend from Rowley, called, as did Doug Wiley, a Walpole High School classmate. Bob Golding, now living in California, called and told me someone had sent him one of the two letters to the editor. I interviewed all three of them. Steven Kenney also came across one of the letters, emailed me, and we talked in late August.

Both Kevin Groden and Doug Wiley urged me to call Larry Richard. Larry and I had a wonderful conversation on September 7. I sent him copies of Nick's four letters to Bill Beckler, I visited him at his shop and we went out to lunch twice, and we talked on the phone a few times. Larry and others insisted I talk with Emily Burnett, Nick's high school girlfriend, but no one had any contact information.

Larry gave me Emily's sister's name in Walpole, and I wrote her inquiring of Emily's whereabouts. She sent my letter to Emily, who called and left a message September 18. We talked the next day. I sent her copies of Nick's four letters to Bill Beckler and we talked three more times. They were delightful and rich conversations.

It took a while to get in touch with Jimmy, Nick's brother. I wrote him on July 25, after I found a confirmed postal address in Washington state. After I received no response I sent a second letter on September 6. He called September 13 and we had a long interview that answered many questions about Nick. I then sent him copies of Nick's four letters to Bill Beckler. Subsequently we talked on the phone four or five more times and exchanged emails. We met in person in Massachusetts on February 14 at Stacia's restaurant. The three of us reminisced about Nick and talked about our lives and memories for two hours. Later, Jimmy sent me photos of Nick from the Rowley years and information about their family history. I sent him and Stacia copies of photos of Nick at Fort Jackson.

At about the same time that I began talking with Jimmy, I was trying to get access to Nick's records from Longview Farm. After a phone conversation and some email exchanges, Peter Evers of New England Home emailed me on September 19 that those records were destroyed in February 2010. But even if the records had still existed my access to them, if any, would have been limited.

Also in September 2011 a friend gave me contact information for Rich VanWart, and he gave me Lee DeSorgher's name and email address. I interviewed both that month and we later had some fruitful email exchanges. They opened a window on Nick's "aggressive energies."

I knew nothing about Nick's attendance at Manter Hall until I received an email from Marsha Greenberg on October 6, 2011.

Today I googled Nick to see if I could find out some details about his death and came up with your posting. My name is Marsha Greenberg and I knew Nick from the Manter Hall School in Cambridge. He went to school there with me in the 60s. I am not exactly sure what years he attended but we were good friends. It was sometime between 1963-67. I have letters he wrote me from Viet Nam. I was asked to speak at an anti war event where I live … and I had planned to read the 3 letters I received before Nick was killed. I also have several letters he wrote me before he went to Viet Nam when he was in the army stationed in the states. I am so curious that you are writing a book and would love to talk with you. He was a very special person whom I loved very much….

Life is full of miraculous events and this is one of them.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Marsha probably found my posting on one of the four military websites where I wrote looking for people who may have known Nick during his military training and twelve days in Vietnam. The only response I received was from Marsha, who told me of Nick's year at Manter Hall. Thus I learned that Nick had never lived in Franklin. We talked on the phone three or four times, exchanged emails, I sent her copies of Nick's four letters to Bill Beckler, and she sent me copies of Nick's letters from Fort Sill and Vietnam.

It took a while before I would renew contact and talk once more with Stacia. Considering how long it had been since we talked in August 2006, I was unsure and insecure about whether and how I should

approach her again. Finally I sent her a letter on July 30, reminding her of our last talk and telling her of the research I had carried out since May 8. She did not respond to the letter, nor to a telephone message I left at the end of August. I was disappointed but understood her silence. I decided to wait.

After I had talked with Jimmy in early September, at some point I began to consider visiting Stacia at her restaurant without calling. Anxious about her possible reaction to a surprise visit, I drove to Salem, MA on October 7. She greeted me graciously and warmly, and apologized for not answering me. We agreed that I would call her later and arrange for an interview at her house. I visited on November 7 and we talked for two hours. At the end she handed me boxes of all of Nick's letters and everything else she had from and about Nick.

I made copies of all items and returned the originals eleven days later. After we talked at her house for a few minutes, we drove to Cedar Grove cemetery to visit Nick's grave together. At one point during our visit she told me that she thinks of Nick every day.

It took a few calls and emails before I could confirm in January and February 2012 that Nick did register for classes at UMass – Boston in the fall 1966 semester, did drop out without finishing any courses, and never registered again.

After I had read Nick's letters from military training it became obvious that Professor Glasser, Nick's teacher at Manter Hall, had had a profound influence on Nick. Then I began an ultimately fruitless search for him. Nick never gave Glasser's first name. I found some people who were at Manter Hall in the 1960s but none of them could remember it. Nick wrote that Glasser was at UMass - Boston in the late 1960s, but calls to the archives and history departments turned up no Glasser teaching there at that time. Other attempts to find Glasser failed. If he is still alive, perhaps he might read this book and get in touch with me.

Ethel Conaxis called me on November 15. A relative had sent her a copy of the letter I had sent to newspapers. She said it took her a while to decide to call me; she was unsure if I wanted to hear what she had to tell me. I assured her I certainly did want her story, and we talked on November 29.

Louis (Tee) Verrochi came to me through Stefanie Farrell, who knew of the project because she was transcribing the interview tapes for me. She met him at a class. I*t was the first few weeks of health class and he mentioned he was from Walpole and the years. I just put two and two together and asked him if he happened to know Nicky.* When we talked he told me the story that the deaths of four Walpole men made him and other teens reconsider going to Vietnam.

How I found Judy Beckler is another "miraculous event." I had been looking for her for months. No one knew where she might be. Doug Wiley told me in August that he had heard her being interviewed on a radio program. In November I decided to send another letter to the *Walpole Times,* asking if anyone knew where Judy was. No response. Then on February 9, 2012, while talking with Sheila Frankel of the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families about Nick's files as a foster child, I mentioned Bill Beckler's name. I did not write why I did, nor do I remember why. She immediately told me she knew Judy and gave me her work number.

I called Judy immediately and she agreed to an interview. I sent her copies of Nick's four letters to her father for her to read before we talked on February 13, 2011. We said we would stay in touch and I visited her and her husband in their home on March 25. For me, that day took the place of the talk I never had with her father. At some points during our breakfast I felt a few tears running down my cheek.

I found Connie Dougan nine days after I called Judy. Nick mentioned his name in one of his letters to Marsha Greenberg and she encouraged me to find him. Late on a Saturday afternoon I found his phone number and called him immediately. He was surprised and happy to hear from me. During our interview a few days later, he was laughing as he recalled Nick and their year together at Manter Hall.

I came upon Jon Aldridge when I read his remembrance of Nick on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund the night of May 8. *Nicholas Conaxis was one of the four members of the 6th Bn, 29th Field Artillery, 4th Inf Div who were killed during an ambush while on a vehicle recovery mission.* I wrote him three days later hoping he knew Nick. He replied:

I did not know Conaxis. I served in the same Artillery Battalion in Nam at a later date. I submitted the remembrance for him so that others would know the unit he served in. From what I have found he was one of 4 guys in the

battalion who were killed during an enemy ambush while trying to recover a vehicle which had broken down. I assume he was in the motor pool section that worked at the headquarters base camp in Pleiku.

I administer a yahoo group site for the guys that served in the battalion in Nam and will post your request in case any of the members recall Conaxis. If he served there for only 12 days, I suspect he didn't have much time to get acquainted with many of the guys in the unit. The 5 May 68 mission may have been his first time out with other members of the unit.

Wish I could be of more help.

Aldridge did try to help me find people later. We emailed a few times, and early in 2012 he gave me Lujan's email address, who put me in touch with Max Wells.

In March, April, and May 2012 I took a three-month break from writing while waiting for Nick's DCG records from when he was a foster child. It was very much worth the wait.

In September 2011 I inquired at Massachusetts state senator Steven Tolman's office where I might find Nick's records as a foster child. They gave me Sheila Frankel's name at the Department of Children and Families, the newly named Division of Child Guardianship. She explained that such records are only available to siblings, parents, or children. I then asked Nick's brother, Jimmy, if he would request the records and give me a copy. He agreed and made the request for Nick's file with Sheila. After Sheila went through the file and deleted some names, the file went to a DCF attorney for approval to release. In June 2012 Jimmy was sent two copies and he sent one to Stacia. I made a copy of her copy.

The information contained in social workers' reports, letters from and to various government and social welfare agencies, and other documents added great richness to this account of Nick's life. Many gaps in his story were filled. Brief comments, some almost in passing, gave important clues to Nick's emotions. For example, Nick's being upset after his mother's visit is presented in just two lines and can easily be missed, but for me it became a clue to his sense of abandonment and insecurity. Chapter 3 would have been much weaker without the DCG material. His struggles with his Greek identity, his disappointment at not being adopted by the Nixons, and the details of his eventual estrangement from them would have been missing.

Research Matters

Here I present a brief account of how I found people and located various resources; some of the problems and limitations of the research; decisions I made to leave out some material; and how the research affected some people.

Most people I interviewed by phone, and some in person. One person answered my questions by mail.

I found most people through letters I sent to local newspapers looking for people who knew Nick. Some people who read them called to talk with me, or told their friends, or both. By a different route, Sheila Frankel led me to Judy Beckler. Almost all people who were referred to me agreed to an interview.

Some people I tracked down when I found their names on the Internet; for example Tasha Lingos and Eugene Alexander. But Marsha Greenberg found me on the Internet when she googled Nick's name and read a letter I had posted on a military website. Other people I found when I looked up their names on Internet address and telephone lists. Some responded to my calls, as Connie Dougan did. Some did not respond to messages I left, or perhaps I had the wrong person.

Nick's childhood Rowley friend David Hardy I found through persistence and luck (see that story earlier in this chapter).

There were a few Walpole people I was told I should contact, but I was unable to do so. Some I could not find. Others I did find but they did not respond to calls or letters. I do not know why they did not. Perhaps they did not like Nick, or did not want to relive his death, or were busy with their lives.

Some important data were gone by the time I began the research. New England Home told me in September 2011 that Nick's Longview Farm records were destroyed in 2010 as part of destruction of old material.

As I noted earlier in the book, I did not find people who lived with Nick at Longview Farm during 1962-65, were with Nick at Fort Sill, or served with him in Vietnam.

And as I noted in various places throughout this story, fading, incomplete, and mistaken memories were a problem. Everyone I talked with alluded to this problem. At the same time, however, people in-

sisted that some memories were clear. And some memories of general impressions of Nick were strong and universal, and can be believed.

I left out some letters and stories, and I was told some letters from Nick were not given to me. I believe the stories and letters included here provide a detailed, accurate, and fairly complete account of Nick's life.

I made decisions to leave out parts of some of Nick's letters. Some were long, meandering philosophical discussions; some were personal comments; and many were repetitions of material already included. I also left out a few stories people told me about Nick when they seemed to be based on unclear memories of one person. I think these exclusions do not change the essential aspects of Nick's life.

During the research I discussed these decisions and omissions with my friend Barbara Dowds. She understood the explanations I gave and agrees that the omissions do not change the essential truth and reality of Nick's life.

I'm writing these words in October 2012, as I prepare the manuscript for printing. Recently I have been sensing that the research and telling of Nick's life at times have been hard on people. (I am one of those people.) I can give no details or reveal names. Perhaps I'm wrong. People have told me, and I do believe them, that they have enjoyed talking about Nick and reliving the fun times with him, their friendship and love of him. I saw smiles and heard laughter as we talked. But I now realize that Nick's hard life and death brought sadness to some people. It was while talking to one of his friends in September 2012 that I appreciated how painful it was at times for some people to talk about Nick. I can only hope that people felt more joy than sadness as they talked about Nick.

The effects on me were also strong and deep. I have lived with Nick every day, and many nights, since May 2011. Just two days ago, in October 2012, as I was driving I pulled off the road to write another thought for the book.

A Letter to Nick

Hello Nick.

Ever since December 7, 2010, when I first heard "The Last Train," you've been on my mind every day. Several times a day. Even at night.

I usually wake up two or three times a night, and during many of those moments I think of you. I think of people to call and topics to explore.

I rest by watching episodes of M.A.S.H., sometimes even in the middle of the night. One day I began seeing you in Hawkeye, or Hawkeye in you. He was forever joking and pulling pranks, as you were, such as throwing pillow feathers out train windows. Also like you, he was a total flirt. And you, like him, cared deeply about your friends and fellow soldiers, helped them with cash, and defended them from the insanity of military life. You both survived by mocking the madness around you.

When I went to visit my family in Greece and Albania in August 2012, you were with me. I am walking by the lake in Yannena, Greece, where I lived from 1947 to 1955 (from six to fourteen years old). As I look at the lake I remember a mischief some of us children practiced on passing adults. We would find a dead eel from the lake, tie a string on one end of it, and slowly pull the eel across the sidewalk as adults walked by early in the evening. We hoped they would take it for a creeping snake and scream in fear. I don't recall that anyone was actually frightened, but we found it funny anyway. And I immediately think of you and your pranks and mischief.

I'm reading your DCG records and come across this passage from January 4, 1950. Nick "removed his shoes, socks and overalls in preparation for bed. He then helped foster mother's grandson by taking off the same clothes for him in preparation for their nap." You were not two and a half yet. I read it over and over. It has stayed with me. It will be forever in my memory. Just now, as I type these words, I remember a story my mother told me in 1980. When I was four, with a cast on my foot, my mother was carrying me on her back. She said I was warning her of branches and other obstacles ahead.

I remember October 1968, when I first read the three letters from Vietnam you wrote to Bill Beckler. *I became attached to some small children and ended up giving away half my rations and any trinkets I could scrounge.*

March 2012. My grandson Marcelo, seven months, is asleep in my arms. I imagine you as a small child – father and mother hospitalized, you in temporary homes. I think about you often when I spend time with my five grandchildren.

October 2011. I'm listening to Marsha fondly recalling your friendship. *I would describe him as a tough guy. But I would also describe him as a gentle, caring soul. He was a wonderful human being.*

June 2012. I come across the list of your possessions in Vietnam the Army returned to Stacia. Last in the list is a water pistol. Immediately I imagine that you used it to play with the children. Immediately. Or perhaps you were planning to give it to one of the children.

I could go on for pages. You get the idea.

In peace, from a man you never met,

Alex Liazos

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