

## Taking a charge: Tales from the Nam

- [Karl Lindholm](#)
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I hadn't meant to wait so long to read "Tales from the Nam."

"Tales from the Nam" is a first-hand look at the life of a "grunt" in the Vietnam War. It's comprehensive and compelling, authentic, well researched, well remembered, and well recounted.

It was written by Dave Nicholson, my friend and basketball teammate from long ago at Middlebury ("Nick" to all who knew him then), and published in 2008.

Nick was a brilliant soccer player, small and fierce, an All-American, a scorer who willed the ball into the net. He played on terrific Middlebury teams in the mid-1960s (the Panthers' overall record in his three varsity years, 21 wins, 4 losses, 3 ties). He was the team MVP for two of those years.

He was also a talented basketball player, playing in the backcourt, bringing the ball up against pressure, darting about. I believe he invented the intentional offensive foul in basketball — that is, he "drew the charge" time after time in a game.

He sacrificed his body (5-foot-7, 140 pounds), getting knocked down by an offensive player in order to get his team the ball and a foul charged against the other team. It was a play that symbolized his combative nature. In one game against Tufts, he drew 16 charges.

Once against Norwich, he drew a charge against their star player and the Norwich coach, a beefy ex-Boston Celtic named Bob Brannum, screamed at his player, "I told you the 'little rat' would do that every time!" Of course, we called Nick "the little rat" after that.

In another game against Norwich, he attempted the same play against a large Cadet who knocked him down and then kicked him. This player was literally 10 inches taller and 100 pounds heavier. Nick got up, decked him with one punch, and a near riot ensued.

After graduation, he enlisted in the Army before he could get drafted. It was 1968: he went to Vietnam as a combat infantryman. He said he liked to walk “point,” out in front of the rest of the troops, because “everybody depended on you.”

In “Tales from the Nam,” he wrote: “Point man was the position I wanted, coveted. Nothing else would do for me. The infantry is often described as the tip of the spear. Walking point is the tip of the tip of the spear.”

It’s also a good way to get yourself killed.

“All my sports life I had been preparing for this role,” Nick explained in his book. “In basketball I was the point guard. In soccer I was the striker. I wasn’t big enough to get the rebounds or shut down the other teams’ strikers, but I excelled at creating chaotic situations.”

Nick was stationed in Phuoc Vinh, about 80 miles north of Saigon, and flown in and dropped off near the Cambodian border to engage in “search and destroy” operations. His unit, Charlie Company, was in a number of “chaotic situations,” and suffered many casualties.

On March 8, 1970, his outfit was ambushed: A mortar fell within feet of him, killing his platoon leader and another soldier, and filling Nick with shrapnel in the neck and arm. He crawled away, and the bombers were called in: They dropped their napalm and destroyed the area.

Nick survived and came home. He finished law school after Vietnam, despite living the bohemian life of the time. He met Dierdre, who later became his wife, came to Vermont, and hung out his shingle. He practiced law in Burlington, by himself, defending clients the bigger firms with greater profit incentives tend to avoid.

His life after Vietnam has not been a time of quiet contentment and unbroken success in Vermont. There have been ups and downs, the biggest down perhaps when he discovered in 2000 that he had contracted Hepatitis C from tainted blood transfusions in Vietnam, and his liver was failing. The Veterans Administration declared that he had a “100-percent combat-related disability.”

In “Tales from the Nam,” we count off the days with him until his tour in Vietnam is over. With his liver failing, his days were again numbered, and he was “short.”

In the fall of 2004, he played in the alumni soccer game that commemorated a half-century of soccer at Middlebury. The grads beat the lads, 2-1, and Nick, nearly 60 years old, scored one of the goals. When I saw him after the game I asked about his health, and he answered with typical irony and bravado, "Dead man walking."

In April 2005, he received a call at 3 a.m. from Tufts-New England Medical Center informing him they had a liver for him, a "good liver." He writes in "Tales from the Nam," "By June I was starting to recover and in early August I felt well enough to start this book."

He's retired now, and spends his time tending the garden and antiquing with Dierdre. He's taken up golf and follows avidly the Red Sox and Patriots.

He still plays hoop, four nights a week, assuming the point and taking the charge.

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