

AS THE VIETNAM CONFLICT ESCALATED IN THE LATE 1960S, MANY UMASS STUDENTS AND FACULTY MEMBERS OPPOSED THE WAR AND THE DRAFT, BUT CAMPUS HAWKS WERE PLENTIFUL AND VOCAL. HUNDREDS OF UMASS STUDENTS—NO ONE SEEMS TO KNOW JUST HOW MANY—SERVED IN VIETNAM, SOME WILLINGLY, SOME NOT. FIFTY-FIVE OF THEM DIED THERE. WELL BEFORE THE WAR ENDED, RETURNING VETERANS BEGAN ATTENDING UMASS. WE ASKED THREE OF THEM ABOUT THEIR TIME ON CAMPUS.

**BACK
FROM**

BY JOHN SIPPEL
PHOTOS BY JOHN SOLEM



Joe Cancellieri in the field.

JOSEPH J. CANCELLIERI JR. '75

HOMETOWN Boston, Mass.

RANK AND UNIT Corpsman,
Hotel Company, Second Battalion,
Fourth Marines

IN VIETNAM May 1967–June 1968

MEDALS Bronze Star for Valor,
Purple Heart

UMASS DEGREE BS, Nursing

POST-UMASS CAREER Military medical,
surgical, OR, and ER nursing
and teaching; civilian ER nursing
and interventional radiology



I got drafted in 1965 and in February 1966 joined the Navy because I wanted to avoid the Army. **I had no qualms about the war.** I felt I was doing what all Americans should be doing, meeting their obligation to the military. I wanted to be a quartermaster or dental technician, but ended up a corpsman, a battlefield medic. It turned out to be a lucky break: I got good training, and the nurses I worked with were wonderful mentors to me. **TO VIETNAM** > I got sent to Da Nang and then to Camp Evans via Phu Bai. Within hours, I was helicoptered out into the field. It was a good initiation: **the Marines were relying on me, and I was relying on them.** My job began when in battle someone would shout, “Corpsman up!” Then I’d do my best to get to the wounded man without getting killed. **DARKEST DAY** > On September 21, 1967, we were guarding a bridge and were attacked. **We had a battalion; they had a regiment.** For nearly 24 hours it was touch and go, especially at night. We had to call in jets with napalm to keep them from overrunning us. We had 52 fatalities, including three corpsmen, and twice that number of injured. There were almost 500 North Vietnamese dead. **HOMECOMING** > **It wasn’t very good coming home.** In many situations we couldn’t wear a uniform or do other things. I finished out my service at Chelsea Naval Hospital, near

Boston. There were often protesters outside the gate, and I had to bite my tongue a lot. I recognized their right to protest, but still it hurt. **Finally I realized that I had to overcome my anger.** After all, I was in a healing profession, and who wants to be treated by an angry nurse? **AT UMASS** > **I got accepted at UMass and liked it from the start.** But I don’t think I ever told anyone, student or professor, that I had been in the military; only my closest friends heard about that. There was a Vietnam veterans group on campus, but I only went to one meeting. I was ready to move on. **IN CLASS** > I quickly made wonderful friends from among my professors and fellow students, and I remain close to many of them. Academically, I struggled every year; I never thought I would pass. **I had to learn all over again how to study, how to prioritize.** Once I got into the clinical part, though, that was my forte. I graduated cum laude. It was all very gratifying, and it prepared me for a truly rewarding career. **PAYING BACK** > Starting in the 1990s, I began to be a very active alum. Now I underwrite a scholarship at the College of Nursing and have a room there named after me. **There is no question that my association with UMass has been one of the highlights of my life.**

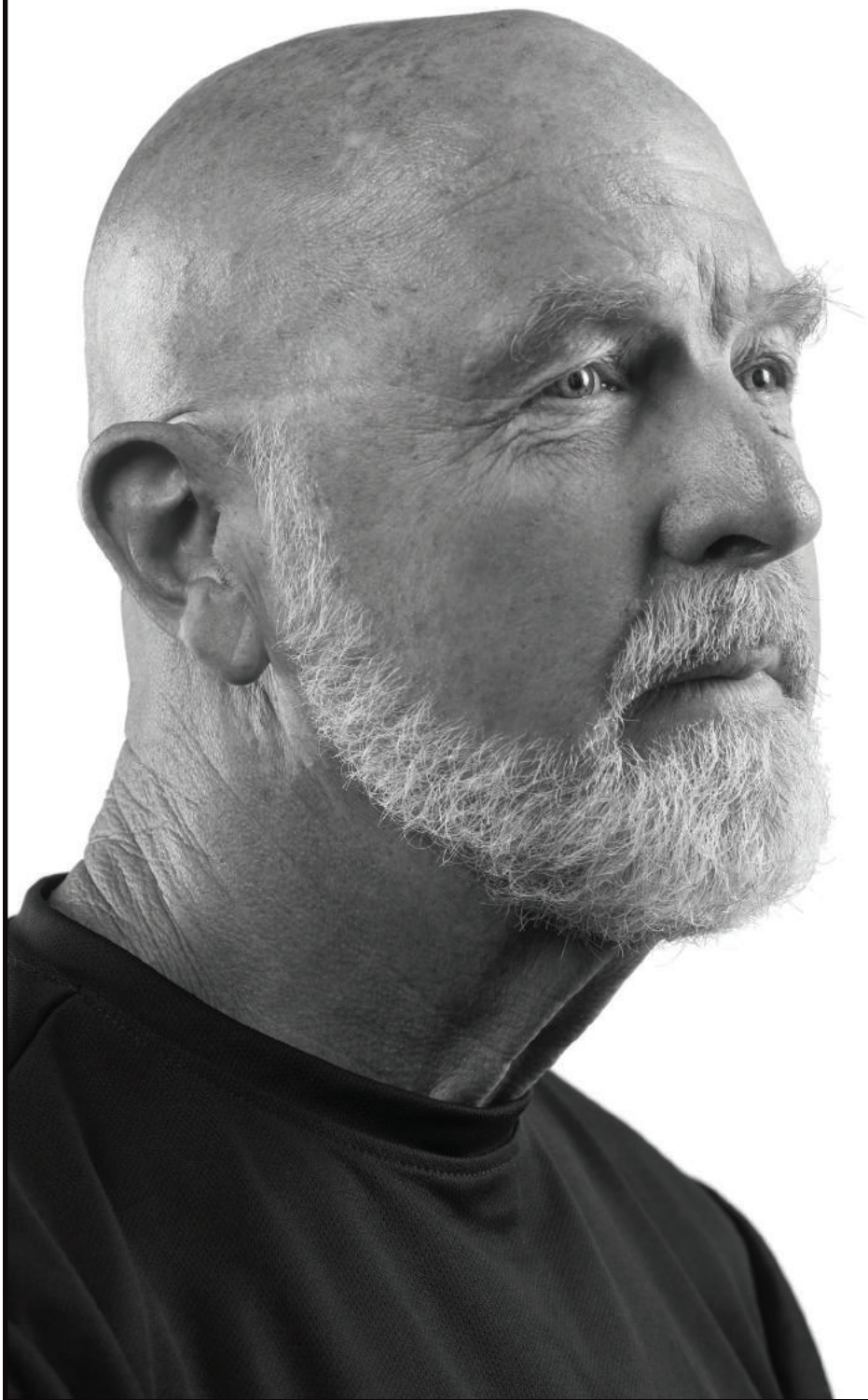
ROBERT SCHMID '74G

HOMETOWN Barrington, R.I.
RANK AND UNIT Buck Sergeant,
Fifth Infantry Division

IN VIETNAM
July 1968–June 1969

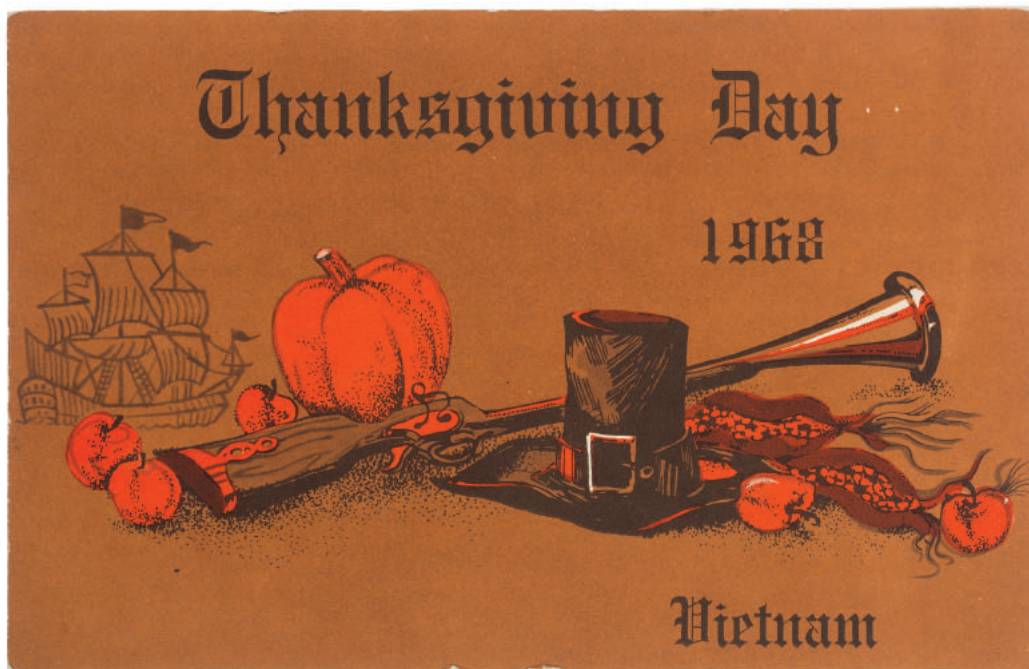
UMASS DEGREE MEd

POST-UMASS CAREER
Counselor at three high
schools; contractor



By the time I got to Vietnam, I was opposed to the war. The vast majority of guys I served with went in very cynical about it. We were between Quang Tri and Dong Ha, eight miles south of the demilitarized zone, in a really bad area. I was a finance clerk, in charge of a pay team. We had a tent right in our camp where we made out pay vouchers on typewriters. When enlisted men got killed or wounded we had to close out their records, so I knew who got killed, who got wounded, who got sent home. **It was surreal: the mortars, artillery, rockets, firefights were just constant, 24/7.** One other job could be traumatic: once a week we had to do nighttime guard duty at one of the bunkers lining the perimeter. **HOME COMING** > I got out of Vietnam a month early, after being accepted into a master's in teaching program at Wesleyan University. At Cam Ranh Bay several of us—still in uniform, dirty, and smelling horribly—got on board an American Airlines flight that stopped in Honolulu. The airport there was full of people celebrating something or other. No one, and I mean *no one*, looked at us, spoke to us, said anything to us. Nobody said anything nasty; they just ignored us. **We were invisible.** **THE TOLL** > **Once I got home I was pretty messed up:** smoking a pack and a half

a day, jumpy, nervous about everything. I had a very sweet girlfriend who couldn't understand why I didn't have fun swimming or going for bike rides, or why I got so angry watching the TV news from Vietnam. I taught history at St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire, for two years. It was good for me for a while, but I got tired of teaching and felt isolated. **AT UMASS** > **I decided to enter the graduate program in counseling at UMass's School [now College] of Education.** I was accepted by Professor Jack Wideman, who was a Korea vet; I remember his face sort of lit up when he heard about my being in Vietnam. But in my first week I had to attend a group meeting for new students. We sat in a circle. We talked about what we'd been doing, and I mentioned Vietnam. Afterward, several people were like, "**What? You were in Vietnam? Why would you do that?**" Not hostile, but incredulous. I thought, "Wow, I guess I'm not gonna talk about this anymore." **ASSIMILATION** > But other than that **I liked the atmosphere at the school, how open-minded and dynamic it was.** I felt safe, able to say what I wanted to say. It was kind of a wild time at the School of Ed, very experimental. That was perfect for me, because that was where I was at.





I was a platoon leader at Cu Chi. **I felt myself becoming harder and harder every day I spent there.** I was losing my soul and becoming a well-disciplined soldier. I was fearful but accepted the fact that I had chosen to walk into the Valley of Death. **I was tough; that was my image and my mask.** **HARSH EXIT >** I was wounded June 26, 1966, after 56 days in the field, leading a counter-ambush to rescue five men. A gunshot wound shattered my right arm and ripped up my shoulder muscles. **I felt overjoyed to have been hit; I knew I was out of there.** **TRANSITION >** I spent about three months in traction in a hospital in Japan. I began reading, which helped me regain my sanity. I needed to know the history of the U.S. in Vietnam. **I felt I had earned the right to question anything on this planet; nobody, nothing was my superior anymore.** I really enjoyed trashing authority figures. I was the only authority I had any respect for. **HOME COMING >** I came back to the States in September 1966. While being driven to my parents' house in an ambulance, I sat in the front. All I could see was potential ambush positions: my body tensed whenever I saw shrubbery perfect for concealment. **AT UMASS >** In early 1967, I went back to the UMass graduate program in political science that I had left to join the Army. The department

was split into two camps, hawks and doves. **I was treated warmly by all. No one spat on me, no one called me a baby killer.** My right arm was in an extended support cast that covered half my body; I thought of it as my hair shirt of penance. One day I was walking into the Student Union and a student asked if I had broken my arm skiing. I told him I had gotten wounded in Vietnam. I was the first Vietnam veteran he had encountered. He wanted to know all about what it was like and whether we were doing the right thing. **HEALING >** **Graduate school was great therapy for me.** I had a lot of time to acclimate and de-escalate. I had serious conversations with people about the war and the morality of it. I helped them think about it, because I let them know that I had doubts. They probably helped me even more than I helped them. **PROTESTING >** I joined the antiwar movement in the summer of 1967 and was part of the October 1967 march on the Pentagon. In November 1967, I became a part of the McCarthy for President campaign. I helped organize Vietnam Veterans Against the War in 1968. That period seemed full of tremendous promise; I felt we were about to take control of our lives. It didn't turn out that way, but I felt at home. **UMass, not the U.S.A., was my home. UMM**

JOHN J. FITZGERALD '63, '78G

HOMETOWN Holyoke, Mass.

RANK AND UNIT First Lieutenant,
Combat Infantry Platoon
Leader, 25th Infantry Division

IN VIETNAM May–June 1966

MEDALS Bronze Star for
Valor, Purple Heart, Combat
Infantry Badge

UMASS DEGREES BA, Government;
MA, History

POST-UMASS CAREER Social
studies teacher, Longmeadow
(Mass.) High School; coeditor,
*The Vietnam War: A History in
Documents* (2003)

