

**VIETNAM MEMORIES**  
**BY**  
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## VIETNAM MEMORIES

Steve Carlin

Sr. Medic C Company

Some Memories,

I joined the Army in Feb '66 on the buddy plan with Marty Gabriel. We both were graduates of Crawford High School, San Diego, Ca. 1965.

During the fall of '65: 45,000 men were being drafted. A friend of ours joined the Army and wrote us a letter in which he said, "don't get drafted". The ironic thing is Marty and I would have avoided Viet Nam if we were drafted. It just so happens that we were part of the re building of the 101st airborne. Both drafted and enlisted men were part of that rebuilding. The 101st deployment took place at the beginning of our third year of enlistment. The result was soldiers who were drafted for two years went home and we headed to Viet Nam.

Living in San Diego influenced our decision as to which service to enter. The Navy was out because who wanted to be a 'swabby'? The Marines and Air force wanted four years. The Marines at Camp Pendleton were a pain in our ass when we tried to sneak in to surf "Trestles" on the Marine Corps base. During that time there was a mini battle going on between the Marines and Surfers. That left the Army.

No one in my family had ever served in the military. My decision to choose the Army was probably more influenced by the song 'ballad of the Green Berets' by John Wayne than anything.

The influences on Marty's decision may have been different. We never spoke about it but his father was a Marine Corps veteran of WWII. Marty's father survived some of the most brutal fighting in the Pacific.

I do not remember Marty's dad personally except for that knowledge.

We decided to join the Army and went to the recruiter. I joined to be a helicopter mechanic. Upon leaving the recruiters office I asked Marty what he joined up for. His answer was Airborne. Well, there was no way Marty was going to be a paratrooper and I was going to be a mechanic. I marched back into the recruiter's office and changed my MOS from mechanic to Airborne. I remember the recruiter trying to talk me out of the change, but my mind was made up.

We joined in February 1966. After several weeks in basic at Ft. Ord we were sent to Ft. Campbell, KY to start Basic all over again. The specter of starting basic training all over was tempered by the fact we were going to be trained by paratroopers.

After Basic, instead of leave, we went to jump school at Ft. Campbell. Taking jump school before AIT seemed pretty cool to us. We knew our first leave would not be as a 'Leg' (the lowest form of existence known to man). Going home with bloused boots as a trooper was something we all looked forward to.

I remember on our first leave, in some airport, Marty and I encountered a 'leg' with bloused boots. That 'leg' continued his journey as a 'leg'. What could be more humiliating?

I was assigned to A Co. as an M-60 gunner. Sometime later I was transferred to the Recon Platoon, once again as an M-60 gunner. I liked the Recon platoon because we got to ride in those cool jeeps instead of walking. The Recon platoon was used as the aggressor or enemy in training, which was really fun for us.

The infantry would practice calling F4 strikes on us. (The enemy) I remember standing on the hood of the recon jeep racing down a dirt fire road, firing blanks out

of my M-60 while an F4 would be practicing dive-bombing us. The F4's would bear down on us not more than 100 feet high. Man, was that a hoot.

Somehow, Marty and I volunteered for medic school. I think we were looking for a change and ten weeks at Ft. Sam Houston, San Antonio seemed like a good idea. We volunteered along with a bunch of other troopers throughout the division.

We went to Ft. Sam as a unit. I was a PFC at the time. Perhaps a third of the men sent to AIT medic school wore combat patches on their right (?) shoulder. They had returned from Viet Nam with too much time to be let go. They fought with the 1st Cav, 173rd and 101st airborne.

We were an unusual platoon to say the least. All the other platoons had a total of 8 weeks plus 30 days leave in the Army. We were experienced soldiers with combat veterans.

Of the distant memories of Ft. Sam, one stands out. Our graduation was held in an auditorium. During the graduation, the brass was trying to comfort the many men who had just received orders to Viet Nam. The men doing the comforting did not have any combat experience. I will never forget the men in our platoon with combat experience standing up and sharing how few of the men in their units survived. Even now the hollow words coming out of those officers' mouths with no combat experience, doesn't set right with me.

Back at Ft. Campbell now, Marty and I were Medic's. I was not one of Sgt. Meulhisen's favorites. So when an opening for NCO academy at Ft. McCellen, Alabama became available, he sent me. I believe he thought he was not doing me a favor. Little did he know that compared to being in the 101st Airborne, NCO academy was a breeze. After being in a first strike unit like the 101st, the discipline and training at the NCO academy was a cakewalk.

(Personal Note: Sgt. Muelhisen's attitude towards me was not without merit. I think he would be pleased with the progress I have made since leaving his command.)

After I returned to my unit two E-5 ranks became available. Because I had gone to NCO academy I got one of them. No doubt Muelhisen was not pleased (*with reason*) but he had to give me the rank. After all I was an NCO academy graduate. That is how I became senior medic for C Company 1/502 infantry.

When I think about Vietnam, I do not identify with the medic platoon in Headquarters Company. My identification is with C Company. I know that on paper I was a medic platoon member assigned to C Company. In reality C Company was my company.

Marty was assigned as 2nd platoon medic for C Co.

My memory was that we deployed to Viet Nam on December 8, 1967.

First Bien Hoa (sp) and then to Cu Chi.

Cu Chi, hot and hot and humid. I evacuated 10 to 25 men each day with heat exhaustion. They cooled off and returned that evening or the next day.

The 25th infantry was also at Cu Chi. The 25th had been there for a while and I remember them being a pretty discouraged division.

That picture of the 25th in contrast with the 101st has stayed in my mind. I am thankful to have been associated with the 101st. In every society there is a warrior class. If I was going to be in a war, I knew it was better to be hanging out with men of courage.

My memory is that Mott was the first medic wounded. I visited him in the hospital in

Cu Chi. It seems to me he was going to live. I don't know if he survived or not. On Jan 2 or 3 we found a 5-story weapon complex not far from the camp at Cu Chi. I remember it as a pretty big deal. There was a firefight at the entrance, which looked like a big pit.

During that firefight, an event happened that cured all the infantry of their envy of the door gunner's job.

As I said, 10 to 25 men were being sent in due to heat exhaustion daily. All the 11B2P's thought riding in a helicopter would be the job from heaven.

During the firefight where we discovered the arms facility, the helicopters were not more than 40 feet above us trying to flush out the enemy. Suddenly something (it looked like a spear to me) shot out of the bushes 20 feet in front of us. The object (spear?) hit the helicopter and it crashed not 50 feet from us.

After seeing that crash close up, not one of the infantry volunteered as a door gunner.

The evening of Jan 3, '68 the VC and monster mosquitoes were probing us.

Early the next morning, I remember waving at Marty as the 2nd platoon took its place ready to move out. Marty was smiling and walking with a swagger that was typical of him. Funny, what one remembers but Marty did have a particular walk that was unique to him. I can see a confident, almost cocky walk. I can't remember if the 2nd platoon was point or behind the point platoon.

That morning, perhaps less than an hour later all hell broke loose. I was with the Captain just behind 2nd platoon.

As senior medic I moved towards the firefight just ahead of me. It is amazing just how small an area a firefight can take place in. I remember thinking this isn't logical to move towards a battle.

The VC had sprung an ambush and 2nd platoon was in the middle of it. The terrain was flat with bush type plants with occasional trees.

The soldiers not hit in the initial ambush were laying down withering fire. Trees were falling, dirt was flying. Actually, a firefight is an assault on all one's senses. Where is CAL OSHA when you need them? There is no smell like human blood, no noise like that of an infantry company on full auto, no exhaustion like total exhaustion. One moment it is possible to be brave and the next scared beyond description and visa versa.

The VC were cleverly hid in tunnels, under the bushes. (The famous Cu Chi tunnels) At the time, the infantry did not know that and were on full auto. Anyone who has experienced a firefight knows the confusion, noise and general chaos that happen during a firefight.

I found Marty with GSW in the chest. I tried to revive him with mouth to mouth but his lungs full of fluids. It looked to me as if Marty was in the process of administering first aid during the battle when he was shot. I can guarantee Marty was killed because he was not concerned with his own life but rather his attention was on saving a fellow soldier.

Marty was a brave, talented, superior human. Who knows the contribution Marty could have made to our society if he would have lived?

I looked up and not 10 feet in front of me the enemy was firing at me through a bush. I was turned sideways to the gunman, as the rounds from his weapon, which was on full auto, swept past me only one hit me in the L upper arm. Less than an inch and

instead of hitting my arm the round would have gone into my chest cavity.

I remember thinking that it felt like a bumblebee buzzing into my arm. Really no pain just a buzzing.

I was leaning over Marty at the time and fell to the ground. Thank goodness for shock. The thoughts that go through ones head during times like this. I wish I could say mine were of some deep significance, but simply I thought 'this was IT'. Simple, nothing complicated.

Not once did I witness any soldier crying or yelling after being hit. By yelling I do not mean 'Medic' or 'Doc', no I am speaking about the panic yelling that is sometimes portrayed in movies made by people unworthy of making a war movie. Shock sets in immediately and puts a person into some sort of zone that is rather calm.

Just before I found Marty, the Co Commander, Capt Jantauski (sp) had been hit in the upper arm. His wound was not pretty. Compound fracture, exposed bone and the entire trauma that goes along with being shot. I visualized that I had suffered the same wound. Not a good image to have.

While lying there, the enemy was shooting over my head. He must have thought I was dead. He then threw hand grenades over me at our men.

It is amazing how impatient we can be. I lay there forever (perhaps 2 minutes) thinking this was IT. I never saw the enemy because he (or she) was firing from the bush in front of me. I decided to get up and walk out, which I did and to my amazement no one shot me again.

We had 20 some wounded and 8 or 9 killed that day.

I went to 3rd field hospital in Saigon. My wound was not a million dollar wound.

The bone was not broken and I suffered no nerve damage.

While I was in the hospital, C Co landed on the Saigon Embassy and took it from the enemy.

I was not there but the (or so I was told) medic that replaced me did receive the million-dollar wound. The story I heard was that a ration can that was in a fire had blown up and a piece of the shrapnel hit my replacement in the hand. He was more annoyed than hurt. Turns out the piece of shrapnel damaged a nerve and he was sent home. Good for him if it was true.

Because I had a specific job that meant that if I were to leave the field a specific person would have to replace me. An infantry soldier did not have such a burden. If he were to leave the field for any reason the company would simply run short of personnel. I remember contemplating the fact if I were to send myself in because of some artificial ailment; I would have to be replaced by another Medic. This weighed heavily on me because it seemed to me if I were to do that, and the Medic that replaced me were killed or wounded it would be a guilt I would not bear.

I got back to C Co just before we went north to Quang Tri. We were the first to secure the sandy area that became LZ Sally.

C Company was down to 60 men during this time. As senior medic, it was my call if a soldier was eligible to return to the firebase. I would have sick call each evening after we set up for the evening. Many soldiers suffered diarrhea. Man, did they suffer.

Someone sitting in Newport Beach, with no combat experience might think it really cool to be operating with a small company. Sneaking around, thinking you are

invisible. Reality is much different; sixty (60) rifles are half as effective as 120 rifles. When we were down to a company of 60 men. I was pretty tough on the soldiers who were sick or felt they needed to return to base camp.

As I said many soldiers suffered from diarrhea I concocted a formula for those poor soldiers that consisted of tincture of opium and kalpectae.(sp) This recipe would have plugged the hole in the Titanic. I am sorry to report that the diarrhea was so bad in some men that even this recipe was not sufficient to help them.

These brave and courageous men continued on. I do not remember any time that a soldier questioned my decision not to send them in. They simply soldiered on bravely trusting in 'DOC'. They did not realize that in the back of my mind was how depleted our company was and that they were really needed.

As new soldiers arrived there did not seem to be any reason to get to know them or anything about their lives. Even the platoon medic's replacements do not have a place in my memory. I am sorry now because I feel a loss not remembering them.

What I do remember are flashes of heroism that do not compute in the present. We never lost a firefight. It did not ever occur to us that once contact was made, that we would not prevail. I is simply not possible for one who has not seen it to know the level of bravery that was almost common. I am proud to have known those men.

The tactics in Viet Nam sucked. We would land on a rice paddy and enter a village at one end and either walk or fight our way to the other end.

If we were in a village and it became late we would leave the village for a graveyard in the rice paddy for the evening. During the evening, ambushes would be set. The next morning it was an exposed walk across the rice paddy dykes back into the village. That is where the enemy would often hit us.

That reminds me of a personal significant event that happened on the rice paddy dykes.

Our company commanders were rotated what seemed like on a weekly basis. The bravest and best was Captain Wise. He was from Hawaii. A leader of men. He was our captain when we entered the Ashau Valley .(sp)

I forgot the name of the captain just prior to Captain Wise. When we were leaving one of the villages to return to a gravesite, for the evening the enemy fired on us. They were firing rockets that looked like 10' long torpedoes flying across the rice paddies. It felt like we were underwater and a submarine was shooting torpedoes at us.

I noticed the captain running. At that instant I was afraid. Why was he running I thought? I learned a lesson in leadership. Anyone else could have run and it would not have made a difference but the Captain running made me instantly afraid.

Another time, once again trying to get into a village walking exposed on a rice paddy dyke, we were engaged with the enemy. Several weeks earlier a small white dog had taken up with us as we wandered about. Here I am face down in the rice paddy looking at the leaches trying not to get shot and here comes this dog right to me. How about raising a flag to notify the enemy of my exact location. I remember knocking it off the dyke into the rice paddy trying to keep it from attracting attention to me.

In these villages there were these small shrines. They were perhaps 3'x3'x 5' high.

As we were fighting our way through a village I was with Sergeant Kiakina (sp) from Hawaii. He was another brave, no fearless soldier. As C co. was fighting through the village, we were together with another soldier that I have forgotten his

name. We were leaning on the outside of a small house like structure made of brick of mud. As we looked, we noticed one of these shrines about 20 feet ahead of us in the open. Sergeant Kiakina (sp) and the other soldier made their way to the shrine and were exposing their arms and legs. It sound strange now but the idea was maybe they would receive the million dollar wound and be sent back to the world.

I was watching them while they were waving their arms and legs. It was like a joke, they were laughing and it seemed perfectly reasonable and normal.

Well their plan did not work. They could not attract any small arms fire. They made their way back to me; just as they got to me the whole shrine was blown away. The enemy had opened up on the shrine and to our amazement the shrine was totally blown to smithereens. There was no doubt at to their fate if they had still been behind that shrine. We looked at each other and moved on. Just another normal day in Viet Nam.

During one of these tours through a village we were engaged with the enemy that was dug in under a giant tree. F-4s were called; we liked F-4s because there is nothing like a 500 pound bomb on your side. Many times the rockets from helicopters simply were not enough to rout the enemy.

The F-4 streaked over our head to the enemy dropping their loads not more than 75 yards ahead of us. Perhaps one of my clearest memories is that of the NVA tracers following the F-4s immediately after the bombs exploded. Several of us could not believe the balls of those soldiers. Almost as if it were on video, could you believe that? After all, now we know they were still alive and needed to send another 500 bomb their way.

There was an E-6 that received a sucking chest wound during that skirmish. I had him all patched up, hooked up to an IV but nowhere to go because of the battle, rounds were flying everywhere. Anyway we decided to get up and walk out of the fight back to where the evacuation helicopter would pick him up. I could not believe we were not shot.

I have often wondered if he lived. Some men were just tough and not going to die. He was one of those soldiers. I hope he did live. In sharp contrast I remember a soldier who died of a leg wound. I could not believe it. Guys with lungs blown out living and this guy with a leg wound dying.

Probably my real job as a medic was to give hope. Bandage the wound, give an IV, morphine and evacuate, but the real first aid was one of hope. Encouraging, sometimes even being lighthearted, was critical part of combat first aid. Always knowing that often if the soldier believes he will be OK the odds were greatly increased in his favor.

There is a saying, "scared the piss out of me". I know that to be true. Enough times to remember lying as close to the ground as I could in order not to get shot I had to piss. Almost funny if the consequences were not so fatal. Trust me the height of your body turned on its side trying to piss feels about ten feet higher than lying face down flat as possible.

There was a supply sergeant; I think his name was Black. It was taken for granted he was going to return to the world because his was a secure and safe job. I just happened to be in LZ Sally when a single rocket was randomly fired into the LZ. Sgt Back was play horseshoes was hit. The one guy that we were sure was going to survive didn't.

The months after the TET offensive we spent most of our time in the field. Occasionally retuning to an LZ. Usually Sally. As nice as it was in the LZ's compared to the field, standing down in the LZ had it downside.

In the field there was a pain level that one operated with in. By pain level I mean dirty, sweat, general body aches and pains, functioning on little sleep. It would take a couple of days in the field to reach that 'pain level'. Leaving the LZs all clean and fresh knowing what that you needed to transition to that 'pain level' during the next couple of days was a (sorta) negative aspect escaping the field.

We entered the Ahaw valley. Perhaps, the purest place of raw beauty in the world. As we entered the mountains, we would first hop from one mountaintop to the next securing it for an artillery platoon.

We were assigned to an engineer unit that was grading a road into the valley. One thing I knew was never to use the graders for protection. My logic was the enemy would ignore me and fire on those big boys, especially if they had any mortars or rockets. If a rocket hit a tractor, I reasoned the tractor would instantly be transformed into a giant piece of shrapnel.

We were hit by 60mm mortar attack. I hated that because there was no warning. I remember the rounds just started landing all around. It bugged me because normally we could hear the 'swoosh' of the mortar being launched. Come to think about it, I also hated hearing the 'swoosh' when mortars were being fired because of the pain of anticipation. Guess I cannot win.

I had a personal experience during our time in the Ashaw. As I said, I was a surfer boy from San Diego. Simple beach boy. My world was rather small. The Army was my first experience being in contact with other races. There was a black soldier that I got to know. He got hit, with shrapnel in the stomach. I can clearly picture his wound. As I looked at the wound to dress it, I was hit with a profound personal moment. Just below his skin, the thinnest layer his wound was exactly the same as mine. This was not an intellectual moment, no this was more of an instant of realization that there was no difference between us save the thinnest of membranes that covers us. Sounds kinda dumb but I meant something to me.

Any one who has ever humped the field know that humping or being a grunt is science and art. Every ounce counts. I started out carrying an M-16 with lots of rounds. Pretty soon it was an M-16 with one extra clip. Then I somehow got a hold of a smaller M-16 (forgot its name) and carried it with one clip. Eventually I got rid of the rifle and carried a 45. My reasoning was that if things got so bad that I needed a rifle there was usually one around. I actually thought I would shoot myself to keep from being captured.

There was a kind of social contract between the grunts and Doc's. They do their job and we would do our job. When a firefight would breakout or if we were entering a village and there was resistance I would concentrate on any wounded and the soldiers would concentrate on the enemy. If there were no wounded I had it pretty easy, trouble was that did not happen much.

Another reason I quit carrying an M-16 was we hated when the enemy would capture an M-16 and use it on us. We could pretty much tell by the sound if they were firing an AK or M-16. Anyone who has seen the damage caused by an M-16 knows it is the baddest rifle on the planet. The damage caused by an M-16 was so unpredictable that no one would even for one moment consider shooting themselves



to get out of the field with the M-16.

So after patching up a soldier I made sure not to leave his rifle on the ground. Sometimes that meant carrying him, his rifle, my rifle, and my aid kit at the same time. The last thing in the world I wanted to do was have to return to get his rifle if it was left behind. It did not take long to settle on a 45 as my weapon of choice. Humping the field in the Ahaw was a bit scarier than other areas because of the triple overhead canopy. The canopy meant our terrain maps were sometime not accurate. I think it was B Company, (probably it was A company) which was hit by our own artillery because of the difficulty with the canopy. More on A Company later.

The real reason the canopy was scary was because everyone knew it made it difficult or even sometimes impossible to be evacuated by helicopter if one was wounded. Also the art of humping was taken to new heights because it was not possible to resupply us every evening. We would be issued a case of sea rations. A case of sea rations is a heavy bulky item. Everyone would break open the case and cherry picks as many cans as they felt they could carry. Peaches and pound cake were on everyones favorite list.

After first attending to a soldiers wounds I always asked if they had any good sea rations left. They were getting a ride out and were glad to give me their rations. Peaches and pound cake anyone?

Someone had gotten a hold of a portable radio. This radio made its way through the whole company. I carried it for a couple of days and decided it was not worth carrying the weight to be able to listen for a couple of minute of listening pleasure. I passed it on to someone else. In the end it probably ended up in a rice paddy somewhere. The logic was we carried all we could. That meant extra ammo either for your self or the M-60 gunner. It was taken for granted that the radio would not replace even one round of ammo. As I said every micro ounce of weight counted, and a luxury like a radio was the straw that expected to be the 'straw that would break your back'.

The Asha, as I said was pure beauty. Saw my first and only 'bamboo two stepper'. That was the name for a pit viper that would kill you within two steps after biting you.

We dug in every night. In the Asha we had to be careful because in digging a foxhole sometime we would dig down across a centipedes hole. Later if one was unlucky the centipede would be happily walking down its hole only to fall into our foxhole. I treated several guys with wounds from the legs of the centipede walking across their arms.

The Scorpions were so big that if one wanted to study them they would not need a microscope.

I cannot imagine a more physical endeavor than soldiering in a war. It is like racing in the tour de France or some other equally physically demanding task. Never did I think it possible to be so tired that if the choice was to keep moving or die I would chose dying. Yet, I am sure soldiers have reached their limits where the choice to live or move did not exist, because moving was out of the question.

I had a wristwatch that had a bezel. The Bezel was set to San Diego time. I just wanted to know what time it was in San Diego when I was going to die.

Getting wounded or killed is a very lonely thing. I was painful aware of how little

glory there is in war. I mean in the moment of battle. Glory is simply not present on the battlefield. As is said, what is present are phenomenal selfless acts done by ordinary, great young men. (I am not one of those men, just proud to have been associated with them)

After virtually every battle I was plagued by self-doubts and feelings of failure. Could more have been done? When four to fifteen men are wounded triage is done on the fly. You patch a guy up and then either leave him to go to the next or help him to the rear, either choice leaves room for doubt and even guilt.

It was up to me to decide if a soldier was dead. I hated that responsibility. Life doesn't always leave a body by announcing its departure. If, while working on a wounded soldier he were to die, that moment of decision to discontinue aid was always a struggle to let go. Later it was always 'were you sure'.....

I remember Charles Crawford. He served with the 173rd in the infantry. He was a mystery to me because he was returning to Viet Nam to die. As I think about it now being a survivor is, for some the most difficult of burdens. At the time it just did not compute when he would say he knew he was going back to Viet Nam to be killed. He was assigned to A Company. A Company was the unluckiest company in the division. We would meet up with them in some graveyard as we were being loaded into helicopter. Just as we lifted up they were mortared. These kind of things happened to A Company all the time. I wonder if anyone of the original members of A Company survived.

I heard that Crawford was nominated for the Congressional Metal of Honor but the captain that nominated him got killed and the replacement got killed so pretty soon there was no one around to confirm or pursue Crawford's nomination. I am sure he was deserving of the Metal. No doubt he was a hero.

I don't know why I ended up putting down these memories and thoughts? It just seemed to fall out.

I remember a mortar attack in Bien Hoa (sp) when leaving Viet Nam and 24hrs later free in San Francisco. On the Flying Tigers flight home we counted 5 medics of the original platoon on the Airplane. Four of us had been wounded and one guy made it without a scratch. Because I had only a few months to go I was discharged in December, two months early.

History, if it is accurate will portray the soldier who fought in Viet Nam as the greatest of all soldiers. We never lost a firefight won the war. Acts of courage were a daily occurrence. The physical and mental demands on a soldier in war cannot be understood by anyone who had not experienced it. My generation served honorably in spite of being betrayed by Congress and not having the support of their own country.

The cowards of my generation managed to enter the entertainment, news and political world. One can only hope their distortion of history and the warriors who fought in Viet Nam will not succeed.

I did not need Desert Storm to justify going to Viet Nam. I was one of the easily sacrificed young men without connections and on some fast track.

There is no doubt in my mind that we were disposable. Born to be killed. The politicians who devised the draft with its deferments devised a system for identifying those men who were expendable. In their arrogance they deprived our society of men like Marty. These leaders were not worthy to speak Marty's name.

**For anyone interested this is the abridged version of my personal life after Viet Nam. Went to College and met my wife Gloria, still married almost 30 years.**

**Lived two years in Europe.**

**Upon returning to U.S., became a Christian. The most significant event of my life (yes greater than Viet Nam) was accepting Jesus Christ as my personal savior. After all what is one year against eternity?**

**Joined the San Diego fire Department 1994.**

**Retired San Diego Fire Department 1992 after 19 years service. Disability due to back surgery**

**Moved to Kauai Hawaii for 3 years**

**Moved to Newport Beach. I am President of a development and construction company with projects in the inland empire of Los Angles.**