

## Green Beret Does About-Face in Viet War View

By Gerry Keir

Special to The Washington Post

HONOLULU, Jan. 12 — Ernest Pounder, 28, is a Green Beret paratrooper, an 11-year Army veteran, who was wounded twice in Vietnam. He is the recipient of 14 medals.

In matter of days, Sgt. Pounder will leave his Schofield Barracks base, fly to California for release from the Army as a conscientious objector.

The medals? He's already shipped them off to Washington with a letter protesting "this insane war."

That's quite an about-face for a young man from Peoria, Ill., who enlisted at age 17 and seemed headed for a distinguished career as a soldier.

"When I first went in, I was in complete support of what we were doing in Vietnam," Pounder recalls.

"But I think it was because I was young and naive and well-indoctrinated in my training. The enemy isn't a person. You're taught that he's a 'gook,' a 'slant.'

"It makes it easier to fight him that way."

In his work in intelligence, Pounder had many assignments, including a hitch as part of the White House security detail during President John F. Kennedy's Ireland trip and work on the early stages of the raid on the Sontay prisoner of war camp. During a European tour, Pounder met and married a German girl.

In the field in Vietnam, Pounder insists he has never killed a man himself, although he asys he has called in air strikes.

But in the course of three Green Beret tours in Vietnam — during which he picked up a couple of

Bronze Stars, an Air medal, a Vietnam gallantry medal and two Purple Hearts — he started to change.

"Working in intelligence, you have to get out next to the people. I think that helped me — to see what was happening out in the rice paddies," Pounder said.

"You look at an NLF (National Liberation Front) soldier who can't get Med-Evac'd in 20 minutes, go back to a cold beer or a Coke, get R and R to Hong Kong, time off in Vungtau, and then rotate in a year back to the states."

He recalls vividly one event, in the aftermath of a 1967 Green Beret ambush near the Cambodian border, which he said "redirected my thinking."

"We killed a member of the National Liberation Front and I went through his effects" Pounder said.

"I found a book of poetry, pictures of his family, letters about how he hoped the war would be over soon. He was a person, not a 'Gook.'"

Now, he speaks in the jargon of the antiwar activist. He considered, he says, "liberating" himself by going into exile in Canada or Sweden. But he decided to hang on and see if the change to a volunteer army would make things different.

"It didn't. It was Madison Avenue propaganda to quiet the disenchanting," Pounder said.

After balking at a fourth Vietnam tour, he was sent instead to Schofield Barracks. Pounder said, "the presence of so much military in such a small place" (the island of Oahu) helped push him to his present views.

He joined the pacifist Catholic Action Group, shipped his medals back to the Pentagon, wormed himself out of an assignment as a counter-insurgency instructor and then applied for discharge as a conscientious objector.

"I can no longer be an instrument of war. I saw firsthand the brutality and insanity of war. I began to doubt; I began to question: My God, why, why?" he wrote in his discharge application.

After what he considered to be interminable delays (it was only four months, but Pounder said, "I've seen them move whole divisions of people to war in a matter of days") and the intervention of a couple of members of Congress, Pounder this week got word that his discharge was approved.

It came just days before the Jan. 15 deadline he had imposed on Maj. Gen. Robert MacKinnon, commander of the 25th Division, after which he said he would refuse to wear his uniform any longer.

Now, as he prepares to head back to Peoria to lecture against the war and get a degree so he can teach history, Pounder says he's glad it's over.

His wife has supported him, he said, although she is "naturally cautious and worried about the future" for their six children.

His experience, well-known among Army peers and publicized in newspapers here, has brought him some support and no real abuse.

He got "strong criticism" from career troopers "trying to justify what they're doing," Pounder said. But many other young soldiers "who oppose the war and the Army Mickey Mouse," have encouraged him.

"Sometimes, guys like that feel powerless. So this isn't just my story, it's theirs too" he said.