

Grunt Melody
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THE MAN I SHOT moments before had his eyes locked on mine as he died. He was a uniformed NVA soldier, my enemy, a small man about my age of 20. I hit him four or five times in a firefight with my M-60 as he was running on the other side of a stream about 75 meters away. I was a machine gunner, and a very good shot.

The firefight lasted just a couple of minutes and two of my squad members reached the man I knocked down before I could cross the stream, working on him and talking to him, trying to keep him alive. They called medevac on the radio so our helicopter crew could risk landing in a hot area to rush a wounded enemy soldier to a US hospital. I guess that's part of the insanity of war; we do our damndest to kill each other, then, when the enemy is helpless, we're supposed to instantly morph from lethal to paternal. Our enemy was never encumbered with the same scruples. Besides, a live enemy, even if wounded, was a prime source of intel on unit strength, plans and movement. Some of them were conscripted, brutally treated by their officers and eager to talk.

Whether the guy I shot was dedicated to the cause or fighting because he was forced to, I don't know. I never felt guilty about shooting him, but I did feel bad. I guess you'd have to kill someone in combat to know the difference. After all these years, I still wish he had not waited to die until he was looking in my eyes, knowing I was the one who shot him.

My part in the war was about 40 years ago. Even so, some things are as fresh in my mind as this morning and when I reflect on our days and weeks trying to keep each other alive in the jungle I think about that NVA soldier, my buddies, Flash and Joe, and three young women who made their permanent mark in my memory.

OUR HELICOPTER APPROACHED THE side of a hill to insert us since there was no open and level LZ. We threw out our rucks and jumped about seven feet to the ground. This was my first mission and I was thoroughly unprepared. Even though a jump of seven feet is pretty quick I thought to myself on the way down: "How the hell did you get yourself into this mess?" Maybe it was equal parts bad luck and my own fault.

I was a good kid, never in trouble, active in my church and an Eagle Scout. When I graduated from high school in Salt Lake City in 1968, like many other young Mormons I was thrilled to enroll at Brigham Young University in Provo. But I was also a child of my time and I was drawn to the hippie view of the world. I ignored my studies, let my hair grow, dressed like a flower child and broke the rules I had been taught to discover the self-indulgent delights of beer and marijuana. My reaction to images of war on TV was to strum my guitar, wonder why America didn't just refuse to go to war and thank my lucky stars for college draft deferments. However, I spent my time doing the things that made me feel good at the moment, not the things that would keep me in good standing with the draft board.

Not long into my first college year, BYU uncovered my secret: I did not even resemble a student. At about the same time, the US Selective Service devised a new way to select draftees by a lottery system. Since 1942 they had drafted the oldest man first to determine order. The new lottery method was introduced on December 1, 1969, with radio and TV coverage of Congressman Alexander Pirnie, a member of the House Armed Services Committee, reaching into a large glass container to select and open, one by one, blue plastic capsules, each containing a date in the year 1970. As each capsule was drawn, that determined the 1970 sequence of drafting men age 18 to 26 whose birthday fell on that date.

BYU must have notified the draft board promptly that my college draft deferment was dead and buried deep because I received notice in January of 1970 that my draft number was 100. On April 22 I reported for induction into the Army. By 4AM the next morning I was at Ft. Lewis, Washington to start basic training, where, over an eight week period, they squeezed out every visible particle of our individuality, forcing us to conceal in the shadowy corners of our mind who we really were while we grew a thin Army veneer. The Army taught us vital skills like how to buff an ancient linoleum floor to a high shine in the middle of the night before an inspection, pushed our bodies to the limit every day for conditioning, and forced into our heads the things one must know to be a soldier. Well, at the least a beginner and reluctant soldier.

In the last week of basic, the Drill Sergeant called a company formation to hand out orders. The National Guard, Reserve and RA troops, the Regular Army guys who volunteered, received their orders to various training schools and fell out, leaving a dozen of us out of about 50 in the platoon. The Drill Sergeant gave us a sly grin and informed us we were now in the Infantry. He marched us across the parade field to our new and temporary home for AIT – Advanced Infantry Training. That meant we did eight more weeks of the same stuff we did in basic, just more intensely. We spent a week in the woods, learned to shoot the weapons we heard about in basic, learned tactics like how to set up and defend against an ambush, and generally became more conditioned to enduring the discomfort of an infantry soldier.

Despite rumors to the contrary, we all got orders for Vietnam. After a long airplane ride and a few days waiting at the 90th Replacement Company in Long Binh, I was assigned to the 5th of the 7th Air Cavalry, the 5/7, at Fire Base Snuffy, a huge artillery base near the Cambodian border in northeast III Corps in the Song Be area, not far from a part of the border that looks like and was referred to as the *Parrot's Beak*. Fire base Snuffy was used as a staging area for the Cambodian incursion earlier that year. The enemy had been very active in our AO, which was interposed between the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the enemy's supply route from Hanoi just across the Cambodian border, and the free capital city of Saigon, their primary target.

I know what you are thinking. The 7th Cavalry was Custer's unit at the Little Big Horn. You'd think the Army would have retired that unit!

My buddy Stanley grew up with me, got kicked out of BYU with me, was drafted with me, went through basic and AIT with me, and we flew to Vietnam together. When I was assigned to the 5/7 Cav, Stanley went north to the 11th Brigade, 5th Mechanized Division. I was grateful that we didn't go to the same unit because I didn't think I could handle it if something happened to him near me.

Another of my Basic and AIT buddies, Gordon Pitts from eastern Oregon, was assigned to my 5/7 unit and we paired up. We called him "Flash." When we arrived at firebase Snuffy, the platoon we were assigned to was not there, it was on patrol in the jungle, or as we soon learned to say, in the *bush*. While we waited about ten days for their return, Flash and I got the dirty jobs at the firebase, mostly shit-burning detail.

If you were never in that war, shit-burning detail sounds like something polite people shouldn't mention, but we all should know the realities of the daily life of troops sent to war on our behalf. Every American in Vietnam who served outside the comfort of a few large bases with flush toilets knew all about the foul shit-burning detail. Imagine the worst smell possible, then double it and you have a close approximation for the smell of burning our own sewage. Latrines, the Army term for where you go to poop, were built to accommodate a plywood slab with holes sawed in them for sitting, with half a 50-gallon barrel under each of the holes. Some holes were even sanded to remove splinters. Many latrines were built in the open with no privacy whatever, so you could enjoy nature without confinement, even continue your conversation with your buddies while taking a dump. We had *piss tubes* for urinating, many out in the open, artillery shell casings planted at an angle and partially filled with sand.

Flash and I tackled the filthy task of wrestling the putrid half-barrels out from under the hole, pouring in JP-4, the kerosene-gasoline blend burned in jets and helicopters, and lighting it off. The black smoke was considered semi-lethal and we always hoped for a breeze that would engulf the officer's mess at lunch or dinner time but the smoke usually drifted upward in the still heat. Helicopters would divert their course to avoid shit-burning smoke.

As some of it burned off, we had to stir it up, pour in more fuel and light it off again because it burned in layers. We were prepared for this awesome responsibility by the Army's fine-tuned method of training recruits to clean, shine or paint anything that does not move, unless it is shit, then you burn it. The awful smell and filthy job of burning shit is forever imprinted in our memory and, boy, were Flash and

I glad to see our platoon arrive from the field! If getting shot at was the price of our ticket out of shit-burning detail, we were ready. At least we thought we were ready.

Our platoon arrived from their jungle patrol on several helicopters, looking ragged, unshaved and grubby from 20-30 days in the bush, now looking forward to 4-5 days of rest in a secure area. They were wound up, ready to party, and uninterested in questions from new guys. So, while they yucked it up, Flash and I gathered our M-16 rifles, ammo, a pile of grenades, and we packed our backpacks that grunts called a *ruck*. We had no idea what we really needed and what we didn't need in the bush so we packed pretty much everything, and it's a good thing we packed when we did because the Lt. promptly returned to tell us to *mount up* to answer a *QRF* call, whatever the hell that meant.

It turned out QRF was a Quick Reaction Force. When our platoon was relaxing at the firebase it was on QRF standby to respond when a unit in contact with the enemy called for help. So we rushed to the helicopter pads, loaded up and took off. Flash and I were pushed to the center of the helicopter while the experienced guys, bitching and moaning about their party being cancelled before it got a good start, sat on the ledge with their feet dangling over the side. I don't know if my eyes were wide with apprehension, but my mind certainly was. Flash and I had no idea what we were doing. It was rainy and cold, and when the helicopter edged close to the side of a hill that's when we jumped and, well, that's how I got into this mess.

WHEN I HIT THE ground from that first helicopter insertion I rolled around and got tangled in a bed of *wait-a-minute vines*, cut up and bleeding. I knew nothing about them but the experienced guys explained they had backward facing little thorns that grabbed your skin and uniform when you went by, and you had to stop, go back and unhook, thus the wait-a-minute name. I soon learned to spot and walk around wait-a-minutes. Here we were on a side of a hill, cold and wet in the fading evening light. I assumed we would try to find the unit that needed help but the Lt. told us to wrap up in our ponchos and sleep for the night.

Flash and I stood out like a neon sign. Our rucks weighed a ton and were unbalanced to the point we could hardly carry them, our fatigue uniforms were brand new while the grunts' fatigues were weathered, beat up and tucked into their boots. They had tight straps at their leg bottoms and calves and arms with sleeves rolled down, shirts buttoned at the top. They ignored us as they set up a perimeter for the night and made their sleeping spot. Oh, well, I figured, we'll ask them for advice in the morning. Flash and I settled in a spot to try our best to sleep on the ground under our poncho.

I didn't sleep much at all that miserable night in the cold rain. I was itching all over and scratching, couldn't get comfortable. In the morning Flash, and I were both covered in blood. We looked under our fatigues and found we had leeches all over us. Resisting the urge to be hysterical and embarrass ourselves even more, we burned the leeches with cigarettes to make them drop off while the grunts explained they used the straps and tucks, and slept in hammocks off the ground, to keep out ground leeches. I guess all those slimy little bastards found us instead of them. They showed us if we stood in one spot for a few minutes we would see leeches slowly come out from under leaves sliming their way toward us, like they had little infrared sensors in what passed for their heads.

Leeches were drawn to warm areas between our legs, our groin, between our butt cheeks, our armpits and behind our ears. They didn't hurt, but they itched and, when we scratched in our half-sleep, we popped the blood-bloated damn things making us look pretty much like a horror movie. It was a horrible experience, filed away in my memory for when I need a really good nightmare.

Flash and I set out on our virgin hump in the mountain jungle. We didn't know it then but this first hump would last nearly a month and would turn us into real grunts. We were way back in the column, struggling to keep up with our overloaded rucks and shiny new fatigues. We learned our mission was to find a LRRP team that had not reported in by radio when expected the previous day and had not been heard from since. I didn't even know what a LRRP team was.

We humped and I thought I would pass out from the heat and humidity. What rescued me from that humiliation was the slow pace and many stops as the point hacked through jungle. Sometime that morning I discovered what *contact* means. When the front end of our column opened up in full automatic gunfire, which we learned to call "rock-n-roll," I freaked out. I fell backwards with this huge heavy pack on my back and couldn't get out of it, stuck like an upside down turtle. Grunts were on their bellies, their rucks off and their rifles out, locked and loaded, safety off and poised to fire. One of them helped me off my back. We were the last squad in line, not close enough to see anything through the thick jungle or to shoot at the enemy.

One little grunt who had been in-country about nine months came over after the firefight was over and started going through our packs, throwing away all the junk we didn't need. He threw a bunch of our grenades into a sack to send back to the fire base, then he said, "Now get in your pack." We did and remarked how much lighter and easily balanced it was. Then he told us to grab the little straps near our armpits and pull them. We did and to our surprise the pack fell off. Flash and I didn't even know about the quick-release we would need when we came in contact with the enemy and they shot green tracers at us while we fired red tracers at them.

Flash and I were probably the perfect example of why grunts tended to stay away from FNGs as each guy showed up on his very own one-year tour schedule. New guys made lots of mistakes that might get themselves and those nearby killed.

We moved on and eventually found the four-man LRRP team, all dead, their weapons gone. On my first day in the bush I got shot at, was incapacitated by my own ruck, got my first sights and smells of death and filled up my nightmare files with images of leeches. Welcome to Vietnam.

I soon learned firefights were the exception, and long, steamy hot humps, boredom and fatigue were the norm.

We went out that first day as absolute cherries, and we stayed in the bush for a month. I was in pretty good shape but that first month in the bush got me conditioned to the suffocating humid heat and the work of hacking through thick brush and tangle uphill over steep mountains covered in triple canopy jungle. When the jungle was thick we could do 300 meters in a good day, and be exhausted. When we had time-pressured orders to cover a klick, or 1,000 meters, we all griped because it would be a day from hell. Our purpose was to cover ground, to patrol, to hunt the enemy while the concealed enemy decided whether they wanted to hunt us or avoid us.

Helicopters that we called *slicks* gave us mobility to get to our patrol area, and more importantly to take us out of the bush and back to the sanctuary of firebase Snuffy. I discovered I liked being on the lead slick going into an LZ, not knowing whether it would be hot or cold. I liked the thrill of the uncertainty, and the excitement of two cobra gunships circling and firing miniguns and rockets while the door gunners on our slicks worked out with their 60s to keep the enemy's head down as the pilot brought it to a near stop just off the ground so we could roll off and run to cover to set up a perimeter, and even before the last grunt was off the pilot would nose it over and haul ass. When the LZ was big enough the entire flight would offload and haul ass within seconds of each other, but most times the LZ was small and we'd have to do it one slick at a time, an open invitation to the enemy to shoot us and our slick. We'd sit on the edge of the helicopter doorway with our legs dangling in the air and no security straps, held in place only by centrifugal force when the helicopter turned and banked, so steep sometimes we were looking straight ahead and straight down at the same time! On my maiden flight I knew nothing and my stomach came up to my eyeballs, but as I became a grunt I got used to it fast.

When the jungle was thick and the going slow, we spaced ourselves in single file with about five meter intervals, trying not to bunch up in case we got hit, making it harder to hit many guys at one time. If the bush was more open our interval spread to ten meters and we staggered left and right, whispering when we needed to talk, heads turning, eyes searching, looking for signs of our prey, trying to spot them before we became the prey.

Something happened on that first hump that would change my experience in Vietnam. The machine gunner went home, and our squad needed someone to take the 26 lb M-60 machine gun. Since I'm a big guy they asked me if I wanted to be the gunner. I eagerly took the 60. I liked the idea of having a powerful punch when the shooting started.

I carried the M-60 locked and loaded, meaning ready to fire, but instead of using the shoulder straps most guys used, I carried the gun in my hands with a hundred rounds draped over my left arm. It was a fine gun and is still in wide military use. It fired belts of 7.62 mm rounds at about 550 per minute, over nine rounds a second if you do the math, with tracers every fifth round. The assistant gunner followed

me with more bandoliers of ammo, ready to link to my ammo belt when we made contact. My new role changed how I moved through the jungle, and it changed a lot of other things.

Our patrols were usually platoon size, which should be four squads of eight to ten men each plus the CP, the Command Post composed of the Lt., the radio/telephone man called an RTO who stayed near the Lt., the Medic, Platoon Sgt. and sometimes a Forward Observer to call and adjust artillery strikes, the FO's RTO and maybe a Kit Carson Scout, a former enemy soldier now applying his special jungle fighting skills for the good guys. We were always under strength and had just three squads and the CP. Sometimes we were company strength, three or more platoons hacking through the jungle. I don't know how that many men sneak up on anything with the noise they make no matter how hard they try to keep it quiet, and I don't know why we bothered whispering as we moved but we always did in the jungle.

When we took a break there were always a few grunts who needed to answer nature's call. They would tell a couple buddies what they were doing, and their buddies would keep their weapons ready while the grunt took his rifle and backed off a little ways into the jungle to do his business after digging a small hole, then covered it up so we didn't leave too much of a scent trail. Our body cycle got used to a daytime routine because it was too risky after dark.

When my squad was up front, the point man had his shirt off, hacking through vines with a machete to make our trail. The point man not only hacked a path, he also watched constantly for signs of the enemy like footprints, broken limbs, trampled vegetation, campfire residue, dropped items, trash or even their scent. Point was the first contact when we found them . . . or they found us. If there was a trip wire to a booby trap, the point man was the first to see it, or to trip it. Point was the first to be seen by the enemy, the most likely to be shot, the most at risk from booby traps. He had to be stealthy and observant. He had to be alert. Most guys avoided point because it was dangerous, and because it was a lot of work, so point was often rotated unless one man did the job well and liked it. Flash liked point.

I became a machine gunner and Flash turned into a wild man walking point. He liked being on the edge, seeing, smelling, sensing tiny little signs that warned the enemy was near. I think he also fed on the thrill of being in the middle of it when the shit hit the fan.

Right behind point was the slack man, point security, rifle ready and watching the point man as he hacked a trail, looking ahead as point looked down, keeping point headed in the right direction. Behind slack was the squad leader, the man who would give direction during contact. I followed the squad leader with my M-60 to keep the heavy gun up front where it would be needed fast in a firefight.

When a man, especially point or slack, held up their hand everybody behind them stopped and waited, and when they held up a fist everybody froze, not making a movement or a sound.

Step by step we moved as quietly as we could through the jungle, climbing or descending steep inclines, stepping around the bushes and vines with thorns or noxious secretions, ever-vigilant for pit vipers, small snakes of many varieties with a body heat sensing indentation between their eyes and a deadly venom, indigenous to Asia. We watched for cobras, too.

I got used to the bugs, like foot-long centipedes with a thousand legs. Kit Carson scouts would catch big black scorpions, knock the stinger off their tail with a knife, eat them live and declare, "Numba One!" That means yummy. I learned to ignore the mosquitoes in the dry season even as they covered my sweaty arms by the hundreds, but I hated the ground leeches. If I stood still for a moment, they'd start coming out from under the leaves, a couple dozen of them, then I'd step to another spot. The bug repellent the Army gave us didn't do anything to the mosquitoes and not much for the other bugs either, but it literally melted the ground leeches. When we stopped I would see guys squirting bug juice and knew they were melting leeches; I loved watching those slimy little nightmares just boil away. We didn't have much of a leech problem in the mountain streams because they were usually fast-moving and we quickly crossed. Crossing the slow-moving streams in the lowlands was altogether different.

We moved and climbed steadily on, one foot in front of the other, watching the man in front of us, constantly turning our head to look side to side, now and then stealing a glance behind, moving and listening and waiting for something that seemed out of place, something that would try to kill us.

As the point man hacked a path, sometimes he would find an open area where he suddenly emerged onto a trail, like a tunnel thru the jungle. The enemy had lots of trails, or *trotters*, to transport men and weapons and supplies from the Ho Chi Minh Trail across the border in Cambodia, moving deep into South Vietnam and toward Saigon or other target locations. Sometimes the trail was ten feet wide, big enough for heavy traffic. When we found a trail, we covered our tracks with brush, backed off about 15 feet into the jungle and set up an ambush with claymore mines, clackers to trigger them on command, machine guns on each end and rifles in between. Usually the ambush was a squad size, in a line parallel to the trail, while the rest of the platoon backed off about 100 meters back in the jungle, close enough in case the ambush squad needed help. If the enemy came by on the trail we'd watch them to see if we wanted to hit them or wait, and if we hit them we tried our best to kill them.

Most of our firefights weren't planned, though; most were intense contact surprises that didn't last long. The noise of opposing forces firing weapons on rock-n-roll, violating the jungle semi-quiet, was always startling. I was rarely firing at people I could see; I was usually just shooting in a direction because the jungle was thick, though I did return fire back along the path of the enemy's green tracers coming at us. I would start with the bandolier over my left arm, my assistant gunner would link up his bandolier to mine while I was firing, then guys would pass up 7.62 bandoliers or ammo cans they carried and the assistant gunner would link them up so the M-60 had a continuous supply of 3,000 to 4,000 rounds. We never needed that much. We would normally have a short firefight, try to sort out and report by radio the enemy strength and suspected direction they took, call in medevac for our wounded, call in slicks to take our dead, and then hump some more to do it again, day after day.

THE DAYS WERE LONG, hot and weary. Relief came at night.

When we stopped for the night, we called it *night log*, probably a derivative of "logistics" because log was our slang for resupply. You might assume nights in the jungle would be tense, and sometimes they were but night log was when each man had a little time to himself, relaxing and doing the daily nesting things that might give him a little comfort. The Lt. would select a spot where we could get between the trees, maybe high ground, maybe a small area with one side protected, hopefully level but sometimes we didn't have much to choose from. The squads would be spread around a perimeter, with the three squad machine guns spread evenly facing outwards, rifles in between, the CP in the protected center. Guard duty was split up a few hours for each man. Once we were set up, then each man went through his own nightly routine, his personal daily ritual, a strange bit of privacy in the open for all others to see, his unique way of soothing himself in a miserable existence. For me, my ritual was my unrelenting grip on a small daily piece of normal life. Other than that, of course, we had each other.

When our night log was settled and my machine gun set up properly on the perimeter, I set up my sleeping spot for the night very near my M-60. Some units dug holes at night but we didn't in this steep mountain terrain with very tough ground. There was already plenty of cover for concealment even though leaves don't stop bullets, but digging in the jungle floor would have been futile with all the roots we would have to hack through. The Army issued us air mattresses to sleep on but they were heavy and the bugs would bite holes in them and they leaked. There was always some new guy using the air mattress but most grunts used a hammock. We bought them from the Vietnamese for almost nothing, they folded up real tight and weighed just a few ounces and were very comfortable. In the summer I would hang my hammock very low, just off the ground, and in the rainy season I would use my poncho to make a tent over my hammock to keep in a little warmth and keep out the cold rain. It was comfy.

When I had my hammock prepared, my ritual continued with heating my night meal, the only real meal I ate every day in the jungle. Because it was late in the war we had the good fortune to have prized LRRP rations for daily meals, freeze-dried meals developed for the rigorous demands of LRRP teams, tasty and loaded with calories and nutrition. I used heat tabs and a cook kit cup to boil water about 20 minutes, mix it into the dried LRRP meal, reseat it and let it hydrate with the hot water five or ten minutes. Then I added salt, pepper, Tabasco, or whatever . . . and it wasn't bad. When I didn't want to wait, I'd take a small piece of C4 plastic explosive, roll it in a little ball, light it with my Zippo and it burned real hot, boiling the water in no-time. The brass didn't like it but who cares?

We had boxes of C-rations, too. I liked the pound cake and beef and potatoes in the little cans and the peaches; the other stuff I gave away. After heating my meal and eating I would settle in for the night, always tired. Our sleep had to fit around our two hours of guard duty, but to a grunt in a war zone two hours of guard duty is nothing and I looked forward to my rest in my hammock in the jungle, catching up on sleep. The man coming off guard duty would quietly wake his replacement. Everybody took guard duty very seriously because our lives depended on guards being awake and alert.

One night in the pre-dawn chill of rainy season, one of our guys went to wake his replacement and found him already awake, frozen still, lying on his air mattress with eyes wide open. Lying on his chest was a small cobra about three feet long, apparently having crawled up on his warm chest while he was sleeping. The cobra was curled up and would raise its head now and then to look around. Mr. Warm Chest told us later he had been lying there for hours, terrified and waiting for first light so we could rescue him. Our squad leader, Bill, cleared people out of the way and took a prone firing position with his M-16, took careful aim, waited until the snake lifted its head then shot his head off with either a very good or lucky shot. Since dawn had arrived and everybody was now awake, we didn't need the guy for guard duty any more, which was a good thing because he was a basket case and had to be medevaced back to firebase Snuffy.

There were critters everywhere. When we set up night log, we would often set an automatic ambush on a trail or other path we expected the enemy to take approaching us, with a daisy chain of five to eight claymore mines and high trip wires. We ran the clacker wire back to our night log position so we could manually trigger the mines as well. When it went off with loud bangs that demanded our immediate attention, most often it had been tripped by wind or small animals. Once it was a tiger, a small one, dead with one side turned into hash by the claymores.

Every three days or so we were *logged*, re-supplied by helicopter. The chopper would make several trips to bring what we needed, like one of the cooks and containers of heated food to serve us a hot meal, maybe soda and beer, water and ammo, replacement weapons, other supplies and clean clothes. We just shoved the clean shirts, pants and socks out of the helicopter into one big pile and pawed through the pile to find something that came close to fitting. We didn't wear underwear because it caused crotch rot. In the rainy season, the clothes would get pretty moldy and jungle rot was prevalent especially for light-skinned guys like me. I always had jungle rot spots on my arms and ankles but the medic had ointment for it and the problem was manageable. With clean clothes on our back and hot food in our belly, we were ready to *Charlie Mike* . . . continue the mission.

WE MADE IT BACK to firebase Snuffy every few weeks to rest and party for a few days. The first time I came back to Snuffy I was not even aware of how dirty, smelly and wild I was now, just like the guys who scared the hell out of me on my first day just a few weeks before and, just like them, I had no patience for naïve questions from new guys. We probably wore the thousand-yard stare, too, the timeless look of weary soldiers who would respond to the command "mount up!" robotically, having done it too many times to care any more.

I had become a grunt.

By this time in 1971 the draft had injected a constant stream of unwilling soldiers fresh from the hippie counterculture, soldiers who had a far more refined taste for marijuana than they did for anything remotely military. Even if you rejected the hippie mindset, nothing will make you dive face-first into self-indulgent excess like coming off a month in the mountain jungle where we traded fire with shadows once in a rare while, and another month in the jungle coming up in a few days. The early war years were pretty much drug-free, but as the war wore on year after year and the ratio of draftees increased, there was an increasing demand for pot by guys with money in their pocket. In such a setting, a supply line will somehow develop no matter how illegal. We smoked pot and drank beer when we stood down for a few days. Maybe some of the officers didn't know about our pot, but others looked the other way or even joined us in the infraction. This late in the war delusions of victory were morphing into expectations of our eventual withdrawal, and morale was tenuous, even among some officers.



*Norm McDonald's squad relaxing at firebase Snuffy
Photo courtesy of Norm McDonald, all rights reserved*

So, two or three days a month while we were on a break back at the firebase, if anyone could find a stash we smoked a few joints. That doesn't mean we were sloppy in doing our job in the bush; we never, ever smoked pot in the bush. I never even heard of anyone who did. Smoking pot in the bush would be irresponsible to our unit and our buddies, never mind suicidal. If I had found a guard on duty smoking pot, I would have been tempted to shoot him myself.

During our stand-down we clowned around and tried to have a little fun. I would show off at the range with my M-60 shooting up old ammo that was wet and dirty. The gas recoil was just enough that I could fire it on rock-n-roll with one hand holding the gun by the pistol grip, letting the barrel *float* as the recoil of automatic fire held it up, and I even hit my targets like a small tree I was trying to cut down. I was smart enough never to play like that in a firefight. While you might be thinking *Rambo*, I was not the type, I was definitely one of those reluctant draftees. Besides, the stupid character in those Rambo movies is a joke to Vietnam veterans because it is so far from reality, which I hasten to add because Rambo carried an M-60 like me. Don't confuse Hollywood bullshit with the real thing.

OUR REST DAYS AT Snuffy were always over too soon and we would pack our rucks, mount up one squad to a helicopter and begin our next three or four-week hump. Most of our AO was a free-fire zone. Some people think a free-fire zone in Vietnam was where we shot civilians with abandon. That's wrong. A free-fire zone was an area with few if any noncombatants and frequented by the enemy, designated as a free-fire zone so we did not have to call on the radio for permission to fire on the enemy, we could decide ourselves in the field. That's what a free-fire zone was, and I resent how that term was used by the anti-war left and the media to portray us as murderers. I particularly resent it because I considered myself to be part of the anti-war left!

In all my time in Vietnam, in all the firefights I was part of, and all the villages we passed through, I never saw an American soldier intentionally harm a non-combatant, the key word being intentionally. Shit happens in war. Here's one example.

A squad from one of our other platoons found a trail in the jungle one day and set up an ambush. When the enemy came along the trail one of their guys triggered the ambush and killed two guys, but it turned out the two guys were not what they appeared; the rifles they had on their shoulders turned out to be sticks and they were civilian Vietnamese men. We never knew what they were doing there or whether they were helping the enemy but the squad felt horrible about the incident and the word spread through the company fast; we all felt like turds about it. And we went on with our humps in the jungle.

I did see mistreatment of one VC prisoner – he was slapped around by his American interrogator, very mild stuff in a combat zone. I assume there were isolated incidents of dark and unmentionable things because it was a war zone and people sometimes cross the line, but I never saw or heard of any war crimes. When I came home and heard the stories spread by the anti-war people about rampant war crimes by American troops in Vietnam, I thought they were incredibly stupid, especially since that story fit our enemy very well.

Our free-fire zones were not completely free of civilians. In the high mountains, way up there, were Montagnards, honest-to-God stone age village dwellers. They were a small, dark, peaceful people who built their communal hooches on stilts, persecuted by the VC and NVA who stole their food and killed them at every opportunity.

In October of 1970 we found a complex of enemy bunkers in the mountain jungle near the Cambodian border. The bunkers were in disrepair and the punji stake pits prepared as booby traps were seriously deteriorated and little threat. This discovery was unremarkable but memorable to me because years later I would recall this insignificant spot in the jungle as I rose in a college class to inform the professor he was wrong to say President Nixon's 1970 incursion into Cambodia was a failure. I told the professor and the class it was about time in 1970 that someone took off their blinders and recognized leaving the enemy's supply line intact on the Ho Chi Minh Trail was costing American lives and Nixon told our forces to cross the border and hit the enemy supply line hard. The American press portrayed the incursion in a negative way, I suppose because America was sick of the war, and college campuses exploded in protests by students who, by the way, didn't want to be drafted like me. Recognizing where self-interests lie sometimes adds a little clarity.

While I was slogging through the mountain jungles, Ohio National Guardsmen, who tried to disperse angry mobs of students with tear gas on the campus of Kent State University in Ohio, made the mistake of loading live ammo and ended up shooting and killing four students. America went berserk over the photo of the girl with outstretched arms, leaning over the body of a friend, a photo shown on TV a few million times. The media forgot to emphasize the students were rioting, breaking up businesses in the town and burning buildings on the campus. Hell, if I had been there I probably would have been right in the middle of the riot, maybe lighting off a building while I smoked a joint. But aside from all that, I also like to keep a firm hold on the truth. Nixon's Cambodian incursion was a huge success. That operation kicked the hell out of the enemy, set them back a long way, and saved American troops' lives. The enemy bunker complex we discovered, reclaimed by the swiftly-growing jungle during the months of its neglect, was just one tiny reminder that the enemy used to own these mountains but he was now licking his wounds elsewhere. By a grunt's rotten luck, I was about to be sent to find him.

IN MARCH 1971, ABOUT halfway through my year in Vietnam, I left the mountain jungles. My 5/7 Cav unit was standing down, pulling out and returning to the world. Since I had more than 90 days left on my tour, I did not go home with them. Instead, I was transferred to the 2/8 Cav based in Bien Hoa, operating in the jungles east of Saigon, toward the ocean in the Xuan Loc area. Delta company of the 2/8 Cav had the nickname *Angry Skipper* for some reason I never knew. Grunts like me didn't care about that stuff anyway; we left it to the officers to waste their time on unit pride, nicknames and such. We just wanted to finish our time and get out of that stinkhole.

Flash and I asked to stay together in the new unit. We got our wish, me in my comfortable role as machine gunner and wild man Flash walking point as he loved to do.

The change for me meant I was climbing hills instead of mountains, and the jungle was not quite so thick. There was another change. The NVA were active in this area, maybe because there were more villages, more people, more potential converts to their cause and more people to control if they prevailed. Two years prior, in 1968, the enemy's Tet Offensive began in III Corps with an enemy assault on Xuan Loc, the provincial capital in the area and it was a hell of a battle. Now things were quiet but the enemy was definitely here. We still humped and hacked through jungle, constantly hunting for the enemy while the enemy watched us. We found him once in a while though I figure the NVA mostly decided when and where they were ready for a fight. Sometimes it was a surprise to both sides.

One of the times we came in surprise contact, the point man, not Flash, was hacking through the jungle with his shirt off while slack had him covered, and the point man found a small clearing that turned out to be a trail. We reported by radio and higher-ups told us to walk the trail to see what we encountered. Sure, they didn't have to walk it and run into booby traps or enemy ambushes; they were just fishing, using us for bait. We spread out 10 to 12 meters apart, flipped our weapons off safety, watched for trip wires and punji pits as we walked slowly and quietly with eyes wide, almost tiptoeing in our jungle boots, edging around a bend in the trail when point unexpectedly walked up on an NVA soldier. Not 50 meters apart, they opened up on each other in a rock-n-roll panic but both missed. We dove for cover and I cut the jungle apart with my M-60, firing toward the source of green tracers. Then it was suddenly over; they were gone, disappearing shadows turning into the smell of cordite and drifting gunfire smoke.

We met the enemy by surprise on another day near a creek. They shot at us, our squad up front opened up and that's when I shot the guy on the other side of the creek about 75 meters away, then walked over when the firefight was over and watched him die while the other guys worked on him and he looked in my eyes. I didn't want to kill him. Not a single grunt I knew wanted to kill anybody. We even had a grudging respect for our enemy, never mind that we gave them derogatory nicknames, because they were so tough and sometimes fought with so little resource.

THE MOST SCARED I have ever been came suddenly one evening after our company-sized patrol stopped for night log on the top of a hill. The perimeter was set, my gun was in place, and I was going through my nightly ritual when I heard a commotion on the other side of the perimeter. I thought maybe we were in contact so I got down and took my gun off safe, a little irritated that the small comfort of my routine had been interrupted. The shouting got louder and louder, grunts were running into the jungle in various directions and I couldn't figure out what was happening. All of a sudden, a bee stung me and then there were bees everywhere. I grabbed my gun and ammo because grunts were running away in the jungle leaving their weapons. The bees were EVERYWHERE!

About a hundred grunts without weapons had scattered into the jungle just before dark. This was not funny. By the time I got to the perimeter to escape, I had bees down my neck and in my pants, and I don't know how many times I was stung but I was all swollen up. After a while, the bees settled down and the grunts drifted back inside the perimeter. Some of them were getting sick from stings. Bees settled on the trees and leaves in our night log, crawling around, not in any hive. We carefully gathered our stuff to move about a click away where a medevac landed to take away the worst cases. The bees didn't bother us any more but, if my memory is correct, one of our grunts died from the stings.

My eyes were half swollen shut, but the CO, Angry Skipper 6, had eyes swollen shut so bad he couldn't see. He reluctantly went on the medevac later, replaced by Capt. Bill Neal, who remained as our CO the rest of my time with that unit.

What disturbed the bees? One stupid grunt was throwing a stick at a hive about 20 feet off the ground. He finally hit it and knocked it to the ground where it exploded. The terror of the bees was worse than a firefight, worse than the leeches. Well, maybe not worse than the leeches.

AT THE 2/8 IN the jungle I made another friend, a man named Joe Hall, a huge black guy from Little Rock, Arkansas. We talked a little bit in patches but we became real buddies one night back at the firebase during a few days of rest. The party hooch was too full and both Joe and I were tired of the noise and sat on top of the hooch with a couple other guys. Joe and I talked a long time about home, family, friends, girls and life in general back in the world. Joe was amazed that my mom's youngest sister married a black man in Salt Lake City in 1958 - still married more than 50 years later - and that I had black cousins. Joe scratched his head over that but figured I must be OK for a white

dude, and I liked him too, so we got to be tight. The humanity of real friendship amidst all the struggling and dying gave me a tiny lift. I also liked the idea of having a guy as big as Joe watching my back in a jungle rumble.

THERE WAS A NEW Army program for leave from Vietnam. In lieu of the normal two week R&R in Hawaii, Australia, Bangkok or Hong Kong, if we had enough leave accumulated and our CO approved, we could apply for a two-week leave in the world, in the continental US, at home!

I had already met my new 2/8 Commanding Officer, Cpt. Bill Neal. I didn't hobnob with officers but his wife had suddenly informed him in a letter that she was converting to become a Mormon, and he nervously needed a Mormon like me to explain part of the mystery to him. I did what I could, and I'm sure that had nothing to do with his decision, but he approved my leave back in the US. I was very excited about seeing my friends and family, and about getting out of the jungle for a while. I cleaned myself up, pulled a uniform out of my duffel bag and hitched a helicopter ride to the air base at Bien Hoa.

The Army provided my charter flight from Vietnam to the LA airport and I had to arrange a connecting flight to Salt Lake City. The charter flight was a new 747, a huge plane full of troops returning from Vietnam. I guess with a target that big, protestors somehow knew we were coming and had gathered.

As we were walking down the LA concourse we could hear shouting and I could see security guys and people behind a rope carrying signs on sticks. As we came closer to them we had to walk right by the rope line and their yelling was louder. I couldn't help but feel conflicted because I was a hippie in my heart and I wished the war would end, too, and if I were not a machine gunner in the jungle, maybe I would be there with a sign and yelling right along with them. With that feeling of distant kinship, I noticed one of them was a very pretty girl with blonde hair parted in the middle, blue eyes and wearing a granny dress, hippie clothes like I wore, fair young skin like mine but hers looked so soft and tender.

Damn, it had been too long away from women and I couldn't help myself staring at her right up on the rope line and as I passed by very close she spit in my face. I tried to turn my head but was too late and, with arms full I walked along with disbelief, spit dripping from my face as the shouts of "Get out of Vietnam!" and "Killer!" and "Murderer" penetrated down to the center of my soul where a little sensor began glowing to tell me I had been betrayed.

Didn't they know I was just like them and doing what I had to do because my country called me? Did they know better than our country's leaders about helping a country resist a communist takeover? As I slogged along, having mastered the art in mountain jungles with a heavy load, I burned with a confusing mix of unwarranted shame and resentment.

My burn slowly diminished on the flight to Salt Lake City where I was met by my parents and brothers. We had a good reunion and after arriving home I contacted my buddies, who arranged a party for me. You must understand, however, my buddies were Mormons, and part of their life was avoiding not only alcohol, but even coffee or tea to keep caffeine out of their body, which they had learned was a sacred temple. At the party they brought beer for me as a gift, an extraordinary concession since their beliefs told them it was wrong. Well, mine did too but I leaped that hurdle a long time ago!

I loved these guys for our high school comradeship, and I was grateful for their generosity at the party, but while they chattered about the same stuff we talked about as kids my mind was drawn to Flash and Joe and the other guys, wondering what they were running into while I sat and listened about who was going on their Mormon mission, who was getting married soon and other things that seemed so insignificant while my other buddies were struggling daily to stay alive. I could not get wrapped around what was important to my high school friends, what used to be important to me. I forced myself to make it through the party but after saying my goodbyes I fled and spent the rest of my leave time driving around in the little GTO I had left behind, soaking up the beauty of the Wasatch mountains. Driving up the various canyons I began to lose myself in what God surely meant us all to see: the monumental rocks thrust up in the sky, streams full from April snowmelt pounding down the canyons in a roar, throwing up cold mist that made rainbows when the light hit them just so, glacial carving of U-shaped canyons and moraine structures with entire communities built on top, so vast that they were recognizable only when driving down the twisting switchback turns of Little Cottonwood Canyon with its panoramic view of the south end of the Salt Lake valley. There is a feeling of insignificance amidst this vastness that is impossible to capture on any canvas and has to be seen with the naked eye. For a few minutes at a time, I was restored but something was bothering me.

People in the world continued their lives as if the war didn't matter. Shouldn't they be worrying every day about the young Americans like me sent against their will, on their behalf, to fight and maybe die? In my head that seemed crazy, but in my gut it seemed true.

I reconnected to my old source and scored some joints so I could get high and pass the time, and I struggled with the feeling that I was disconnected from my family and friends because they had no clue what was important to me now, no understanding of life in the jungle on edge every step, trigger finger itching to shoot someone before they shot me. While I was supposed to be enjoying my leave, there was a barrier between me and my family and friends, and I was missing my guys back in Vietnam. How crazy was that?

With each passing day on leave I became more anxious for it to be over. When the door opened on the charter flight after landing back in Vietnam and the hot, humid air settled on us like a blanket, I had the embarrassing thought, "I'm home." I was anxious to get back to Flash and Joe and the guys, the only ones on this planet who understood me now.

WHEN I REPORTED TO the 2/8 Angry Skipper company headquarters in Bien Hoa to wait for a flight out to my unit in the field, something was wrong. Usually the only ones here were the First Sgt. and the mail clerk, but here were grunts sitting on the porch and scattered around, many with bandages and slings, and I found out my Angry Skipper unit had a fierce firefight while I was gone.

Any normal person, meaning those who were never in this war, would privately thank their lucky stars they were gone when something bad happened, but I think I found out what soldiers have always discovered to their surprise, that once you know combat, you feel like you let your buddies down if you are not there for them when the shit hits the fan. It was worse for me when they told me Joe Hall was dead. Maybe I was only 20 years old but I knew if I had been there maybe Joe could have made it because I knew some tricks of staying alive now. I knew how to tear the enemy up with my M-60, and maybe I could have helped Joe keep his big ass alive. But I was safe at home trying to be interested in who was getting married.

Goddammit!

The Angry Skipper grunts had changed. They probably didn't realize they had changed while I was gone but I could see it in their eyes, their movement. Something in their spirit took a hit when they ran into a tough NVA unit in the jungle and they found themselves in a firefight for their lives, not just a brief skirmish like most contacts, but a real fight while I was gawking at the Wasatch mountains like a tourist.

They gave Joe Hall the Silver Star posthumously. I was not surprised to learn Joe was a hero. He was a big, gentle and selfless young man, which is why I liked him. I was told that in the firefight Joe had been way back in the column when SSG Dillon was hit several times, and Joe just scrambled past everyone else up to the front where the lead was flying to help Dillon. Joe Hall died doing God's work, of that I am certain. I should have been by his side with my 60 instead of getting spit on in LA by some twit who thinks she has the answers. The very thought of morons like those protestors slinging insults at people like Joe Hall still makes my blood boil. Screw them!

I went back to the jungle for more of the same. The days and nights blend together, patrolling, searching, on edge, waiting, wondering when we would be in contact with NVA units we knew were in this area. To complicate matters, there were too many civilians to be a free-fire zone, so, unless the enemy shot at us first, we had to have radio clearance to fire on them.

We encountered a trotter one day while hacking through the jungle and backed away, set up a log, not a night log but just a defensive perimeter. Then the strangest thing happened. I don't know how he got through, but a single NVA soldier walked up to the perimeter on the other side from me and sprayed about 30 rounds in on us, then he skedaddled. Two grunts were casualties, one shot through the arm. The other casualty was very straight-laced, a seriously religious guy from West Virginia, who was not hit but just freaked

out, went hysterical for some reason. We medevaced both of them. Thereafter, for unexplained reasons, instead of avoiding party animals like me when we stood down, the formerly straight-laced grunt joined us in our drinking, carousing and smoking joints. Go figure.

AS TIME PASSED, AND I found myself getting short, I was more nervous about combat and tried to get a job in the rear where something wasn't always trying to kill me. With 60 days left in country, I got my grunt's dream job.

There was a huge rock formation out in the jungle with steep sides, flat on top where there was a US communications depot with lots of communications equipment and antennae. The only way up there was by helicopter unless you were a Ninja. My dream grunt job was straight guard duty. Six or seven of us short timer grunts pulled about four hours of guard duty a night in one of the five bunkers, and the rest of the time was our own. This was like dying and going to grunt heaven. This was not a safe area, but we were relatively safe on top of the rock except for exposure to mortar fire.

Someone had a guitar and it took me two minutes to refresh the feel of my fingers flying across the strings, making a little music to pass the time and wallow in being dry, clean, away from bugs and snakes and leeches and something always trying to kill me. I could pull two months of this guard duty so easy . . . and of course when a grunt like me was safe and comfy for more than an hour, one of the geniuses in the long chain above me would feel moved to put one of their stupid ideas into action, and when those geniuses moved symbols around on a map at headquarters it usually meant a load of shit was about to drop on grunts somewhere.

And that is exactly what happened.

Some genius decided to move the communications depot to the side of a higher mountain closer to the ocean and we had to go check out the desired locale and help the engineers blast trees to make an LZ. We were flown to a firebase at the base of the mountain and humped our way up, passing through a village where I could see the hate in the villager's eyes. Uh-oh! This was not only deep in the boonies, but the enemy owned this turf and apparently had the hearts and minds of these villagers as well. Not good. Not good at all, but we blasted the trees and made the LZ so the helicopters could make a million sorties bringing in the men and materiel to build a new communications site.

Where there are grunts and a lot of work to do, somehow the grunts get the lousy jobs. We started moving a couple platoons of infantry up from the firebase to the new LZ and they assigned me, the other grunts, the other grunts, the medic we called "Doc" and the communications guy to fill sandbags and build the hooches. It was a lot of work and it totally ruined my sweet deal for the last weeks of my tour. I decided to make the best of it. While we worked our butts off getting the job done the thing that was never far from my mind was the sweet security of the rock we left behind. This place was just begging to be overrun. I kept working and ignored my edgy nerves for a few days.

One night when the wind was strong, a trip flare went off outside the new circles of concertina wire. The grunts on guard duty opened up in the direction of the trip flares and I woke up long enough to decide the wind had probably blown branches against the trip wire, and I went back to sleep. The next night a trip flare went up again in the still, windless calm. Grunts opened up again toward the trip and I was guessing it might be an animal, as it was so often in the jungle. When green tracers streaked toward us, I knew we were in trouble. The contact didn't last long and I fired just a few shots as I was out of position for my fire to do any good. I had a deep sense of foreboding. These guys were not going to last on this hill. I knew it.

One grunt was killed that night. I was helping out down at the helicopter pad when they brought him on a stretcher face-up. He had been lying down in his rack, not even part of the short firefight, but a stray bullet somehow put a tiny little hole right between his open eyes. I didn't know his name, but he had fair skin like mine. But for the bullet hole between his eyes, he looked almost angelic in the surreal glow of the moonlight. His face is still just behind my eyelids.

The next day we grunts did what we do best, we humped on patrol, trying to flush or find signs of the enemy. We put out listening posts at night and heard enemy movement but could not see them. We had brief firefights whenever they decided to fire the first shot. We brought our patrols back inside the perimeter and called in gunships and artillery on spots we guessed they might be. Later we went back to building bunkers and pulling guard duty and I was thinking this was crazy, the NVA were in major strength in the area, they had the locals on their side this time, and they simply were not going to let this communication depot stay here on the side of the mountain. We were far enough in the boonies that when we got in contact and called for gunship support they were at least a half hour away. Their triumphant arrival is no good if you are already dead.

That night on guard duty was my worst night in Vietnam because for the first time I thought I was not going to live through my last few days in-country. I could feel deep within me that, despite all the times I had escaped with my life and body intact, I might not live through this one.

We made it through the night. As the sun was coming up the enemy hit us again. We started firing mortar rounds out into the jungle around us, and we heard their mortar rounds coming in on us exploding shrapnel everywhere. Doc and I dove into our unfinished bunker to ride out the mortar attack. Mortar shrapnel is deadly, traveling too fast to see when it goes through you. In this case a big sharp-edged piece of shrapnel, two to three inches long and one inch thick, flew through the bunker doorway – we had not yet built the door – and sliced through the instep of my right foot, through the boot and stuck in my foot.

Son-of-a-bitch! They finally got me, but if that was the worst they could do I would live. When the firefight subsided I was one of the wounded medevaced down to the firebase below, and I asked Doc to bring my ruck for me when he came because, as I told him, "You guys aren't going to be here long, they're going to take back this mountain. Bring my ruck when you come." He promised he would.

They flew me down to the firebase to see the Battalion Surgeon. He gave me a local anesthetic shot in my foot, cut the boot off and pulled the shrapnel out with pliers. The shrapnel carved a hole in my foot between the bones. I got lucky. It didn't break any bones, but it did cut tendons.

This relatively minor injury would turn out to have a major impact on my health in future years, and it would lead me to two young women who will always be at the center of my memories of Vietnam.

Doc cleaned out the hole in my foot, packed it with clean gauze and gave me antibiotics and crutches. I hobbled out to the helicopter pad since I had nothing else to do and I watched the helicopters bringing in load after load off that mountain, bringing the communications equipment, water, supplies, whatever was up there, evacuating that mountainside depot just as I had guessed. After dozens of round trips they started bringing the men down and I saw Doc step off a helicopter. I yelled at him to ask if he brought my ruck and he said, "I knew I forgot something. Sorry!" I could see as I looked up the mountain that nobody was left up there and the enemy must have been overrunning the place because, as I was watching, jets dropped 1,000 pounders on the compound. Watching the huge explosions and hearing the distant "Wham!" was a small thrill, knowing it fried a bunch of the enemy, but my ruck and the personal stuff in it were toast. All I had were the clothes on my back, a pair of crutches and a sore foot.

That night Doc and I slept in a little bunker on the firebase. During the night I started getting sick and feverish, my foot hurting like the devil. Whatever was wrong was beyond Doc's skills as a medic. I waited for daylight to go back to the aid station to see what was wrong and ask for more pain medication. By the time it was light enough to see, I could see my foot was badly swollen, the ankle dark like bruising. I hobbled down to the aid station. The Battalion Surgeon removed the bandage, took one look, diagnosed *gas gangrene* and called for medevac. In half an hour I was in the 24th Evacuation Hospital operating room in Long Binh, where they cared for patients until they were stable enough to send home.

MANY YEARS LATER IN my studies of medical terms I would learn that gas gangrene can be fatal if not quickly treated, and commonly develops overnight with spiking fever and delirium as mine did. I also learned what they did in the OR is called *debridement*, the process of removing dead or infected tissue and foreign material from a wound. Now the wound was far worse than when the doctor cut my boot off at the firebase, and they were talking about taking off my leg. Holy shit!

They cut the infected tissue away from the bone so I didn't get a bone infection, and with daily cleaning the wound improved and I was able to keep my foot and my leg. I was very lucky, and it is hard to put in words the gratitude I have always felt for the doctors, nurses,

and staff who gave much of themselves to care for us, and they did care. Working on a constant stream of wounded must have been a strain, and that strain had to show itself now and then.

They kept me there in the hospital for a couple weeks, cleaning the wound twice a day, trying to get it to heal from the inside out. Most patients had wounds far worse than my foot. As the days went by I got to know the nurses and orderlies, and they knew me from the music I sometimes played on the guitar they had lying around.

One of the nurses was drop-dead gorgeous. I know I had been away from women too long, but this young woman was very striking: nice figure, dark hair, flawless pale skin, sharply pretty face and piercing blue eyes, the kind of girl that made every male head turn when she walked into the room because that's just the way we are wired. Unlike so many beautiful girls, she was not full of herself. She was sweet and friendly and spread cheer throughout the ward.

One day it was her job to clean my wound and change the bandage, which of course made me happy. She unwrapped the bandage and gently pulled the antibiotic string packing to remove it so she could clean the wound, repack it with antiseptic string, and bandage it again. This time she stopped pulling when the end of the string was stuck, like it had adhered to a scab or something. I told her go ahead and pull it because it happened before. She asked "Are you sure it won't hurt?" I told her to go ahead, so she pulled it loose.

Apparently the packing string had adhered to a small artery because every time my heart beat about a three inch geyser of blood shot up out of that hole in my foot, and she freaked! She pressed her hand down on it but that didn't stop anything. Blood was bubbling up through her fingers, she was frantic about what to do and I was losing blood. Blood quickly soaked the bed and patients next to me were getting wary. She yelled for help and I started getting dizzy, either worried or from losing blood. The surgeon ran down to take over. He gave me a local pain shot inside the wound, which hurt like hell, because he needed to sew the artery back together. I was yelling in pain and the nurse was frenzied, feeling she was at fault. The surgeon finally got the bleeding stopped, repacked the wound and wrapped it in a new bandage. The staff cleaned up the mess, put fresh sheets on the bed and started an IV to give me a bag of blood. My special nurse came back, balling her eyes out, sat down beside my bed and hugged me for a little while, an unspoken apology she did not owe me. I thought to myself, "Well, that was worth it!"

There was a guitar there on the ward and I played tunes like *For What It's Worth* by Buffalo Springfield and *The Cruel War*, by Peter, Paul, and Mary for myself and the hospital staff, so they knew me if not by name. There was one tall nurse, from Ogden, Utah, my very back yard, but I don't remember her name. She was a quiet lady, on the night shift, and we talked about home and other things.

One night I woke up in the wee hours hearing noise down the way from me. There was a young guy who had been in the OR all day long where they worked on his wounds from a friendly fire incident. I was later told he had been hit on a firebase in a *mad minute* exercise when all the artillery batteries, and all the troops on the firebase, fired over the wire into the jungle, making hellacious noise and intimidating any enemy in the area. He was hit by fire from within the firebase. A team of doctors and nurses were gathered at his bed, having a rough time working on him, trying to get him stabilized. I fell back to sleep, and when I woke up later, still in the dark, quiet pre-dawn hours, he was gone. I knew he had died.

The nurses' station was near my bed, and in the quiet of the dark ward I could hear sobbing, so I pushed myself down there in my wheelchair. My tall nurse friend was there alone, embarrassed because I caught her crying, upset that after doing everything they knew how to do they lost the guy. We didn't talk but I could see she was tired and discouraged. I had never done anything like this before, but I wheeled over next to her and put my arm around her. She leaned over on me in my wheelchair and I just held her for about ten minutes while she cried. Then she straightened up in her chair and, when she stopped crying, I picked up the guitar that was lying around and played some soft stuff for her, just jamming, playing some riffs and chords and pieces of melodies, while she started doing a little paperwork. I played for her for about a half hour then she said she had to get going. We never spoke about it.

When my foot had healed well enough for me to travel, even though I was not ambulatory, they gave me my magic papers to go home. After a two-day stopover at a hospital in Japan, I made an unabashedly miserable long flight on a cot in an Air Force C141, outfitted to haul patients with a crew of nurses, straight through to Chicago, then on to my destination in Denver. From the Denver airport I was transferred to Fitzsimons Army Hospital in Aurora CO, where I spent my last days in the Army, healing my foot and getting skin grafts. With less than 120 days left to serve, I was released from the Army and eagerly made my way home, a free man at last.

WHEN I WAS TRAPPED in a place and situation against my wishes, like the Army and Vietnam, fantasies of what life would be like back home when it is over trickled involuntarily through my head like a delusional survival mechanism. But when I finally arrived home, everything had changed. I had changed.

When I left for the Army I was shy and timid. I came home anything but shy. I was self-confident, knowing after the jungle survival game I played I could endure just about anything. Still, I had a lot of growing up to do.

My adjustment to adult civilian life took a long and rocky path, but I can't blame it on Vietnam. I spent about ten years getting high on something every day. I might have done much the same thing had I not been in the Army at all. Who can explain addictive behavior?

From the time I returned, I always had a job because one thing I got drilled into me by my father was a sound work ethic. But in the 1970s I surely took every drug there was on the black market. I became addicted to cocaine with a \$300 to \$400 a day habit, trafficked in cocaine to pay for it and got in big trouble. But my reliable drug of choice, my convenient friend and constant companion, was booze. I had seven convictions for DUI in the 1970s. Of course that leaves out the countless times I wasn't caught.

I can't honestly blame my alcoholism on Vietnam, but I think what lurked in my mind from the jungles *enhanced* my drinking, making me more self-destructive than I already was, making me even more dangerous because of my willingness to ignore risk. I would have been a drunk anyway without Vietnam, just a different kind of drunk.

I know some will quickly blame my behavior on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, but you should be wary of popular, easy, knee-jerk answers substituted for the more difficult truth. That's not to say I brought no baggage from the war, because I certainly had baggage.

Soon after I got out of the Army and was living at my parents' house, my dad came downstairs to my basement room to wake me up for work. When he touched me I was startled and came out of the bed fighting. I was devastated when I realized what had happened but Dad told me to relax. He understood. Other times Dad would come down to wake me and find me in a corner on the floor, back to the wall maybe for safety, arms around my knees like a fetal position, asleep.

I was hyper-vigilant for a while. One day, probably around the 4th of July, 1972, I was ripping down the road in the middle of the afternoon in the 1968 VW campmobile I had traded for my hot GTO. Someone lit a chain of firecrackers and I instinctively hit the dirt; the problem was I was driving down the road at 30mph. The van bounced through a ditch, across a lawn, and hit a house. I told the cop what happened, but he called me a lying, hippie bastard and wrote me up for reckless driving. I guess my long hair and hip duds spoke louder than my words. Over time, these flashback behaviors ended as my alcoholism became chronic.

I was kind of a *player* when I first got home from the war, the bad boy moms warned their girls about . . . and so I had a lot of dates with very popular girls who had a thing for bad boys. Some of these were the same girls who wouldn't give me a second glance a couple years before in high school. I really liked one girl and took her to a drive-in show to see *Soldier Blue*. When the soldiers rode through the Indian camp shooting the people, somehow I went into a panic, fell between the seats convulsing and hyperventilating, and scared the hell out of her. I never saw her again after that night. I rented that same movie in the late 1990s to test my reaction. I didn't have the same reaction but I did become nervous at that critical scene, maybe because I remembered how I panicked 20 years before.

My last drunk was September 30, 1981, 10 years after my return from Vietnam. That night I was busted for many things. I went into a local VFW club after drinking beer in another bar all day, sat down to have one last beer before going home, and saw a lady next to me with a margarita in a pretty long stem glass, salt around the rim and a fresh curl on the slush. I remember saying "I want one of those!" That's it. When I came to I was in the Provo City Jail drunk tank. I had thrown up on my chest and had urinated on myself from my waistband down to my knees. In a moment of clarity, I saw what I was at that moment, knowing what I could be, and I slid down into utter despair, what Alcoholics Anonymous calls "incomprehensible demoralization." I love that phrase.

The railroad where I worked was a pioneer in programs for employee assistance. I called the hotline and asked for help. The guy I talked to was local, a Marine vet who had been in Vietnam a couple years before me. He took me to AA in Provo, and I made a commitment that night to them and to myself to attend meetings. I've been sober since then.

I went to college using the GI Bill for financial assistance, and, a few years after getting sober, I received counseling at the Vet Center on dealing with some of my Vietnam memories. I went further and worked at the Vet Center on a work-study program, helping other vets come to grips with their own issues.

Conventional wisdom says that Vietnam produced an unusual number of vets with PTSD. Like so much of the conventional wisdom on the Vietnam War, it is mostly wrong. PTSD is an umbrella term encompassing a number of behaviors that are believed to be caused by traumatic experiences which are suppressed at the time of the event, only to emerge in certain behaviors as the person gets older, like hyper-vigilance, a heightened startle response, isolation, recurring dreams, flashbacks, self-medication with drugs or alcohol, strained relationships and others. When trauma is suppressed, like soldiers who shrug it off as they have always had to do, sometimes the pressures of keeping that inside emerges in these behaviors later in life, perhaps decades later, usually with the person unaware or in denial, the behaviors varying wildly between individuals. Some never show any outward signs, some are severely affected. The experts concluded these behaviors in response to suppressed trauma have been with us since man sharpened spears around campfires to prepare for battle, but for our prior wars like WWI and II and Korea, we didn't recognize those behaviors in veterans, we didn't talk about them even though they have always been there. As a matter of convenience, we call them PTSD.

That's what I have learned in coming to terms with my own life, trying to honestly see what I was doing to myself, and what part of it might be coming from my combat experience. There are countless Americans who assume Vietnam veterans are particularly prone to PTSD, one notion among many that seems to have been born out of the political struggle over the war. I chalk it up to ignorance, but there actually is one thing that I believe made it harder for my brothers to adjust when they came home, and that is the reception they received. The indifference to their sacrifice, or the frequent assumption they had been part of something bad, weighed heavy on so many of them. Anyway, that's what I think.

I NEVER REALLY FELT any hostility about having served in Vietnam other than the girl who spit on me in the LA airport. Over the years nobody talked about Vietnam or wanted to hear about it. For a while I thought nobody cared, but looking back I think now maybe friends and family were nervous to broach the subject, having been *trained* by the media to wonder if we were brooding and morose, or that we might react in an unpredictable way *so don't talk about it*.

In 1985 the local Vet Center asked a few of us in a vet's group if we would like to walk in the Provo, Utah Freedom Festival Parade escorting a POW/MIA display. Ours is the fourth largest 4th of July celebration in the country with 80,000 to 100,000 lining the parade route. I'm more comfortable under the radar and I didn't plan to walk in the parade until my buddy, big Tom, called me the night before and dared me to show up and walk with him.

Tom had lost a leg in Vietnam, was self conscious and kept his artificial leg hidden under long pants. He joked and said, "If you come I'll show up in my Hawaiian shirt and short pants wearing my Purple Heart!" I said, "Fine, I'll be there with *my* Purple Heart!"

We showed up early where the parade was to begin on the 4th. There were about 25 or so vets milling about, apparently nervous and quietly speaking to each other as we waited for the parade to begin.

We started down 9th East, right out front leading the parade, about a mile down to Center St. Along the way, folks were pushing their reluctant husbands and fathers and brothers out of the crowd to the street and now there were about 50 vets walking.

The crowd were all on their feet, clapping and yelling things like "Welcome home!" I nearly lost it when two young soldiers in full uniform on the side lines snapped to attention and saluted us. We went down Center St. to University St., about a half mile, and by then there were 200 to 300 vets spread out about half a block. As we turned up University for the last mile of the parade, a girl maybe in her mid-twenties ran up and kissed me on the cheek, gave me a carnation and said "Welcome home!"

On the way down University St. to the end more vets joined us from the crowd and there must have been over 400 of us walking with pride while the crowd's roar was deafening. It was almost as if all the people who had been silent about Vietnam were saying with their cheers, "We don't understand what you had to endure, but we know it was hard and that it was for us and we thank you."

That is the day I came home from Vietnam.

OVER THE YEARS MY foot problem has led to limping, a fallen arch, nerve problems, knee and hip problems because the footbone is connected to . . . well, you know. In those same years I *found myself* in my work and my family. My first marriage was short, ending before I found sober life, but my second marriage in 1981 has made me a rich man: my wife, Maggie, a Navy veteran, my children, all grown now, and seven grandchildren to bounce on my good knee. My son Thad is an Iraqi Freedom veteran. He was there when we took Bagdad by storm in 2003 and I am quite proud of him.

After graduating with a BS in Medical Laboratory Science in 1992 from the University of Utah, I went to work as a Medical Technologist in Transfusion Services, and am now Director of those same services in a multi-hospital network.

Looking back over my life, there are three years that I cherish but would never want to repeat because the accomplishments in each of those years came at a high price. The first was my year as a grunt in Vietnam. The second was my first year of sobriety, when I was emotionally an infant and learning a new way of life at 30 years old. The third was my year-long university study in organic chemistry. I just hated that course of study. It was very tough and tedious with the complication of brutal competition from medical students. I had become accustomed to earning As in this second college adventure, but I never worked so hard in my life and was grateful for my C in organic chemistry. It is the hard things we go through, I think, that make us who we are, and I would not trade away these difficult years.

Joe Hall would be about 60 now if he had lived. He is forever frozen in my memory at 20 years old, as is the blonde girl who spit in my face. The two nurses from the 24th Evac Hospital in Vietnam are etched permanently on my heart like a fine and delicate tattoo. That leaves Gordon Pitts, my buddy Flash, the wild man walking point.

I lost touch with Flash when we left Vietnam and found him again just a few years ago. So far our catching up has been on the telephone. Flash and I used to make private jokes about the lifers in the Army when all we wanted to do was finish our two grunt years and get the hell out of the asylum. The funny thing is, after a short time out of the Army, Flash walked into an Army recruiting office in Washington state to re-enlist. He spent the next twenty years as a Drill Instructor turning maggot recruits into soldiers. Go figure.

Flash might be coming to visit soon. Maybe we'll talk about the war in a far different way than we did when we were in the middle of it. When I was young, I was angry and disillusioned about the whole system: the war, the state of the country, the lousy treatment we faced coming home. It made me an anti-war vet, though I wasn't a *John Kerry* anti-war vet; I always knew he was a liar.

Over the years I mellowed and studied and thought a lot about it. From the distance of time and a cool head, I can now see the geopolitics of the collision between freedom and communism, and that Vietnam was just one hot spot in the whole 50 years or so of the Cold War. I see myself as doing my small part in bringing down the Iron Curtain and I am proud to have served in that capacity. I don't think that is rationalizing, but who knows? Maybe I'll ask Flash, and no matter how much we differ I will treat his view seriously because he and I humped through hell together and watched each other's back.

I want my family to meet Flash. My grandchildren can watch us talking about old times, thinking of us as a couple of old coots telling irrelevant and exaggerated stories, refusing to let go of the ancient past. I hope they never realize the jungles of the Vietnam War were far worse than what we say, and I'll pray they never know in their heart what it means to fight for their life, or to shoot a man and watch him die.