

Brotherhood

With the assistance of writings of fellow Viet Nam veterans and authors, Robert Clark, and Dick Hanover, I have written the following to share my experiences regarding my military duty. Many of their thoughts paralleled mine.

Back in 2008, I was asked by someone if I still thought about Viet Nam. I choked and nearly laughed in his face. How do you stop thinking about it? Every day for the past 44 years I wake up with it and go to bed with it. But this is how I answered his question. Yes, I think about it, I can't quit thinking about it and probably never will. But, I have also learned to live with it. I'm comfortable with the memories, and I've learned to stop trying to forget. I have learned instead to embrace it, it just doesn't scare me like it used to.

My VA doctor once told me that NOT being affected by the experience over there would be abnormal. When I was told that, it was like a weight had been lifted. It was as if he said, Go ahead and feel something about the place Hank. It ain't going nowhere now. You're gonna wear it for the rest of your life, might as well get to know it.

A lot of my "Buddies" haven't been so lucky. For them, the memories are too painful, their sense of loss too great. I was told of this Viet Nam veteran when asked when he was there. Here's what he said. "Just Last Night". Yeah he said, just last night, during sex with my wife, on my way to work today, during my lunch hour, yes, I was there.

I have been told that I am not the same person that went to Viet Nam. My wife hints at times that I should go more places and not avoid crowds, she hints that I don't allow people to get close to me. She is probably right, ask a veteran about making friends in Viet Nam. It was risky,. Why, because we were in the business of death, and death was with us all the time. It wasn't the death of, "If I die before I wake". This was the real deal. The kind where young men scream for their mothers. The kind that lingers in your mind and becomes more real each time you cheat it. You don't want to make a lot of friends when the possibility of dying is real, that close. When you do, friends become a liability.

A veteran by the name of David Lawrence Jones was my friend. I helped put him in a body bag on a rainy day in May 1970. We had been talking the night before. We initially talked about our concerns about our mission and the mountain, Hill 882, we were on. we then talked about going home and how great it would be. David was a devote Catholic and asked me to share a prayer with him before we parted. In the wee hours of 16May1970 we were over run by the NVA and David took a direct hit.

Now David was a city boy from Pittsburgh , but somehow he acted like a county hick with a slow southern drawl . A buddy who was friendly and generous, and one who would do anything to assist a friend. I went through Advanced Infantry Training, the NCO Academy and a training session a Ft. Polk Louisiana with David. This man was like a brother to me, but I screwed up, I got too close to him. Maybe I didn't know any better, but I broke one of the unwritten rules of combat. "Don't Get To Close To People

Who Are Going To Die". Sometimes you can't help it. If he's a friend, then you are going to hurt if he dies, war hurts enough without adding to the pain. You get close, you get hurt, it's that simple. In war you learn to keep people at a distance. It may be 44 years since I left Nam, but sometimes you keep your distance without thinking about it. You will not allow yourself to become vulnerable again.

In May of 1970 when I helped put David's body bag on the medivac-helicopter, I vowed to say goodbye in the states. Immediately after the helicopter left, I went back to the command post as it was resupply day and mail call. There was a package and a letter for my good friend, David Jones. I picked up his care package and letter from his mother and went back to my position. I then took my entrenching tool and dug a hole. I placed the package and letter in the hole. I then took my machete and destroyed both. Next, I took a stick of C-4 out of my ruck sack and broke off a corner. I set it on top of the mutilated mail and lit it. C-4 burns hot and fast, just don't drop anything on it while it's burning. I then filled the hole back in. It had become a rather informal practice of close comrades to destroy the latest mail of a close KIA to let his family think he got to enjoy the last package and enjoy the last letter. Right or wrong, we felt better doing it.

On Veterans Day 2011, some 41 plus years later. Mary Ann and I with the assistance of Carol Haberchat from Pittsburgh, found David's grave site and we paid our respects. I got to say goodbye to a great friend and comrade. My wife asked no questions.

I can still see the faces of many veterans I served with. Most had the 1000 yard stare, looking far into the distant and lost in their own thoughts. I think of all the times we spent clearing LZ's and setting up Night Defensive Perimeter. We were usually totally soaked, exhausted and dirty, just dirty grunts. We set up our guard duties during the night time. If you were in a two man position it was two hours on then two hours off. If you were lucky and had a three man position, it was two hours on and four hours off. As the sun rose and turned the darkness into rays of light, we breathed a sigh of relief, "One more day god, one more day".

I can remember many of our conversations as if we had just spoke. Our stupid jokes, and our morbid sense of humor. We were scared to death of dying, and trying hard not to show it.

I recall the smell of gun powder in the air after a fire fight, and the odors of a triple canopy jungle. The constant battle with leeches, and bugs of all kinds. I will never forget the smell of blood and having it cover my hands and dry on. I spent more than one night with bloody hands and the uneasy feelings it gives you. That is a memory that will never go away.

I remember being attacked once just after the midnight hour. We called in artillery support and they also shot out parachute flares. As the flares flickered on there way to the ground, the shadows passed us by and many times left you totally scared as to what was out there. I recall one moment in a two man position after an attack, it was dark and other than the sound of an occasional shot, all was quiet. You could not even see the

comrade next to you. After a few minutes we both reached out at the same time to reassure ourselves the other guy was still there. I don't believe he looked my way, but he said, "I Know, I Know". It was a human moment between two soldiers a long way from home and scared to death. These guys had become my close friends and it hurt every time one of them died. Despite our desire to stay disconnected, we couldn't help ourselves.

We grew to respect one another beyond anything we ever experienced in the real world. I guess you could term it a brotherly love. Based on our horrible experiences and completion of our duties, we did our best to not become as hard as our surroundings. We touched one another and said "I Know". Like a mother holding a child in the middle of a nightmare. "It's going to be alright".

During the summer of 1970 our medic got wounded. The following resupply this tall over-weight dude got off the resupply copter. His name was Sgt. Ben Odell Johnson, from Texas. He was very forward with his anti-war sentiments, but he wasn't a conscientious objector. As was his choice being a medic, he did not carry a weapon. We did find out later that once he was in combat and his medical needs weren't needed immediately, he would pick up a weapon from a WIA or KIA and fight along side us. He quickly trimmed up and we learned that he was a class medic. He became Doc or "D" to us grunts and was well liked. He accepted orders but when he could, he would take the easy road and not follow total protocol.

I would turn 23 years old on August 19, 1970, and would observe the occasion humping the jungle. We would get resupplied every four days by helicopter. We would get a case of C-Rations each and whatever ammo we needed. Every other resupply we would get clean fatigue pants, fatigue shirt and T-shirt and two pair of socks. No, we did not wear underwear. We would also get mail-call and hopefully a care package from home. It worked well for Roy Larison and I, we both got care packages every other resupply. Luckily they were opposite resupplies so we shared our packages each resupply.

During resupply, which would take about an hour from first helicopter to the last one, we would set up a defensive perimeter, a circle, atop a hill giving the helicopters easy access. Every third person would stand guard while others distributed the supplies and ammo. We would alternate people after someone had the supplies he needed. When we were in this military alignment, somewhere near the center we would establish our latrine. We would all share the same hole dug and upon leaving the area we would cover it. Should mother-nature call while on the trail, meaning number two, not number one. You needed to get two comrades to stand guard while you did your business.

August 21, 1970 was resupply day, to my surprise my mother had baked a two layer cake and my sister had taken it to work and had each layer vacuum sealed. They enclosed a can of chocolate frosting to complete the dessert. I quickly took my buck knife and frosted the cake, cutting myself a piece. First cake we had had in months. I then told my squad to divide the rest, I didn't have to ask twice. We had just finished enjoying the cake and the sound of an AK-47 got our attention. We quickly learned that Doc, our medic, had been killed. For whatever reason, Doc chose to short cut orders and this time

he paid the ultimate price. Mother nature had called while he was on the perimeter. So instead of either asking for security or using the company latrine, he chose to drop his fatigue pants and do his business on the outer perimeter. There he laid, his pants around his ankles and Two bullets in his chest. In typical morbid fashion we had to cope with this. Comments made were: Poor Doc, he got lead poisoning, or worse yet, Did you hear, Doc got his shit blown away.

It wasn't until forty years later that I realized how close Doc and Milkman had become. Milkman, a soldier in my squad, and I have communicated frequently over the years and I am aware of his family. It never clicked in my mind that his son, Ben, was named after Doc.

We tried not to lose touch with our upbringings. We tried to be the good boys our parents had raised and not to give into that unnamed thing that was inside all of us.

You want to know what is truly scary. A nineteen or twenty year old boy who has had a sip of that power over life and death that war gives you. It's a boy who despite all the things he's been taught, knows that he likes it. It's that same boy who has just lost a close friend in a fire fight and is angry and scared and determined that some, "Asshole", is going to pay. To this day, that thought scares me and makes me think.

As I write this, I have a picture of my comrades taken in Washington DC in 2012. It is myself with Eraldo Lucero, James Brinker and Milkman. We are in a place far away from Viet Nam, and allowed to be ourselves. My wife knows how I feel about these guys that shared that part of my life. She knows she will always share me with them. And she understands how I feel about the ones still out there. The ones that still answer the question, "When were you in Viet Nam"? Man, I was there just last night.

It's funny when you come home after a combat tour, you speak a different language. The people you know, or knew, hear your words, they know them, but they don't understand. They are where they were, you are back where you started, but you've moved on. You see and hear each other, your feet touch the same soil, but now you're in a different world, and they can't reach you, nor you them. You belong someplace else, among your own kind, but you can't go back there, either! If you're strong enough and lucky enough, you adapt, blend back in, assume protective coloration and become invisible or at least indistinct.

Then one day, you hear a familiar voice, reaching you from the past, from where you once dwelt, and then there are others who speak your tongue, their eyes know the wonders and horrors you've known and you can freely speak of these things long suppressed, and suddenly the bad fades, and the good is recalled as though nothing else ever happened. You can live this new life and deal graciously with the old through your new-found Brothers, your old comrades or brotherhood. Suddenly you realize "At Last, I'm Home.

I would like to end with a quote from General Douglas MacArthur:

“The soldier above all other people prays for peace, for he must suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war.”