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HOME NOW

An intake doctor asked, “Do you need therapy?”

Immediately, my head returned to a Vietnam scene, to the action for which I was awarded the Silver Star.

I stood in a kill zone, though I did not know it. The terrain had been crafted to remove all the trees that might obstruct the view of a machinegunner. I was a city boy, a naïve nineteen-year-old. I believed I was searching an area cleared by beavers beside the river my unit had just crossed. Children laughed and played around a huge .50 caliber machine gun, then my battle eyes saw the adult sitting behind that machine gun.

At the doctor’s question, the stench of blood returned. It is the smell I associate with war, as indescribable as it is awful.

I wanted to die. I burst into tears and answered Yes.

The physician called a suicide counselor, with whom I met regularly for the next two months. It took time to stabilize me. The counselor was good. She kept me longer than protocol demanded. She discovered there was a lot more to my suicidal ideation than the collateral damage of killing children in combat. My childhood crap was present, too, demanding resolution; I was a Pandora’s Box awash with a past like a whirlpool sucking me down. Her search led to a specialty PTSD therapist in the VA.

Dr. Meyer excelled at helping veterans discover their self-worth. It wasn’t easy. In my case, the load of prewar baggage threatened my life, too. My pre-war parental abuse was inextricably intertwined with my combat-wounded head.

I was physically wounded in Vietnam in 1967. A land mine that I passed exploded, killing my machine gunner, a twenty-year-old from Berlin, NH. We'd arrived at the 101st together; his death was my first deep loss. The blast knocked me unconscious and several feet away, leaving a second hole in my ass and a headache that persists today. Morphine was my first comfort. I was medically evacuated to Clark Air Force in the Philippines. Thirty days later I rejected an obligatory offer to rotate back home; I begged to return to my unit. The next day, not completely healed, I boarded a flight to Saigon. I volunteered for Vietnam to escape home. When home I was defenseless; in Vietnam I had an M16 with a grenade launcher. I could fight back and kill. Killing in Vietnam was rewarding. When I did return home, instead of receiving a tickertape parade I was greeted with spit, jeers, and sneers. The anti-war movement had bloomed during my Vietnam tour. Home was a foreign country.

War was my escape. I needed to get out of my parent's home, so I chose the only available option. I enlisted in the Army as a paratrooper knowing I was destined for Vietnam. There I enjoyed stalking the enemy, being fearless, and killing. I walked point every day. I was good at maps, so good I was given my own map for every search and destroy mission I led; so good I could call in air strikes and direct Puff the Magic Dragon fire to save my pinned-down platoon. I enjoyed leading into combat my squad, my platoon, my company, and second battalion 327. I enjoyed being able to redirect my helicopter pilots to more appropriate landing zones. I was a Private First Class invited to pre-departure tactical sessions to give input on where my unit would fit in the hunt. I was recognized and respected for my abilities as a combat zealot. The war in Vietnam was better than the home I left in the States, better than the abuse and disrespect I experienced from my earliest recollections. My mother, father, and adopted father used me as a

punching bag. They talked to me like I was a neighborhood drunk. War was better than living in their house. Combat was fulfilling beyond my expectations. I excelled at every aspect.

My return to the United States was even more traumatic than battle. Every soldier returning from Nam was a pariah. In 1963, we moved from St. Louis to Wurzburg, Germany, where I graduated from an American high school in '65. Along with my two younger brothers, three black friends and I often ventured off the 3rd Infantry Division base where my adopted father was stationed as Major General A. O. Connor's Sergeant Major. The local economy was not yet stabilized from WWII; at an exchange rate of four German marks to a dollar, we found plenty of bargains off-base.

The local Germans walked behind us looking for tails, a holdover from Hitler's propaganda, that non-Aryan races were inferior, that African descendants were not fully evolved. Buildings remained in ruins from the war. Whole neighborhoods stayed as they had been after near annihilation twenty years earlier.

At Wurzburg American High School and at the base library, I learned about Audie Murphy, the legendary awardee of the Medal of Honor. Audie Murphy was a movie star, too. I discovered that the role he played in *To Hell And Back* was autobiographical. His war exploits inspired me.

I figured there would be no ticker-tape parades for my return from Nam. The war was endless. But I couldn't guess that I would be vilified for my service, or that I'd be treated worse than the Germans who followed me waiting for a glimpse of a tail. Naively, I hoped my war service might place me above a slave or a nigger. But St. Louis was my home, so I went there.

I longed to visit my Uncle Bennie. He was a WWII Navy Veteran, equal part genius and compassion. Bennie Randle understood war; he grew up in hard times in the toughest

neighborhood with an alcoholic father. His mom bore a scar across her face that Uncle Ben's father left following a drunken knife assault. His dad was a 6'5" drunk while his mom stood only 5'2". She was nicknamed Sugar Plum, a woman so sweet you could forget that ugly scar.

Despite the violence of his youth, or maybe because of it, Uncle Ben embraced Christianity. He felt compelled to minister. He dropped out of college after his third year to work full-time as a high-level Federal Civil Servant. He raised a five-member family while serving as a suburban church minister. He was also an athlete, a softball pitcher who fanned batters with Bob Gibson-like underhand fastballs. At table tennis, Bennie Randle was matchless. He was also a gifted painter.

To my young eyes, Uncle Bennie was the embodiment of good. He practiced peace, and love. He was a community bridge builder. Before Dr. King was famous, Uncle Ben brought white and black ministers together for problem-solving. His interracial, multi-faith coalition raised money for food programs at Grandpa's Southside church. The ministers resolved disputes in the county schools, many that averted riots. Bennie Randle would tell his wife, my aunt, that he'd been out doing work for the King. For God.

I needed to see Uncle Ben. I was on overload. I didn't know why I felt like I didn't belong in a civilized society. I didn't understand why I wanted to go back to Vietnam, why I was experiencing such pain. I just knew that if I could see Uncle Bennie, I would feel love. If I could see Uncle Bennie, I would not have to talk about anything, least of all Vietnam, he'd know exactly what was wrong. He would have the remedy. His experiences, his education and his compassionate heart qualified him as a healer. He was a fisher of men. When I finally saw him, I mustered two words: "I ache."

The first three days, I stayed in his house with his family of seven. They went about their daily lives. The fourth day home in St. Louis, I sat in the dark on a second-floor sofa. My right knee and shoulder were gently squeezed, and a whisper came in my ear: "It's alright son, you're home now, it's alright son, you're home now." With those words, with his calm and reassuring presence, my Uncle Bennie brought me back. He wiped my tears, then held me in an embrace that drenched his shirt. I don't recall how long he held me, or how long he stayed in place, working to medevac me from the rice paddy firefight in my head. I just know that for that moment, my pain eased.

We never discussed the war. I never volunteered a word. I was twenty years old, a tormented war survivor. I didn't know then, as I do now, that my tormentor was guilt. I couldn't fathom why my experiences could not be shared. Fear paralyzed me, that anyone might know what I had done. I could never reveal that I had loved killing. I could never disclose that I once tried to cut a young dead NVA soldier's ear off as a war trophy. I could not admit that killing him wasn't enough, or that my machete was so dull from chopping through elephant grass and brush that it failed to sever the boy's ear. Our unit would leave an ace of spades where the ear had been; the Vietnamese were rumored to be spooked by the card. How do I tell anyone that I felt no remorse?

Today, I realize that my descent as a human, my abandonment of Christian values, my adoption of a kill-or-be killed code, my broken moral compass, all made me a valuable soldier. The cost was the loss of sacrosanct values. This is who I was, sitting in my Uncle's house: a killer. The teen that fled home for freedom had evolved into a valuable war machine.

Most importantly, what I didn't know then was that you can't heal yourself. You can't magically be okay living with ghosts. War memories have no best-by date. Uncle Bennie had

played a key role in my development as a child and a teen. But I could not believe that he nor any God-fearing human could forgive me.

“It’s alright, son, you’re home now.”

I was home. Uncle Bennie’s assurances helped me see that the war was home too. I didn’t have to sleep in a foxhole or in a monsoon. My pain eased at his soothing voice. That short respite enabled me to rise above a thousand fears and combat secrets that might otherwise have destroyed me if I revealed them. I think Uncle Bennie’s refusal to ask me about the war helped me more than anything else he did.

My secrets, my deeds, were safe.

I was stabilized, but I was still shell-shocked; my moral code had been destroyed by teenaged soldiering. Over the following decades, my consciousness evolved into an internal life or death struggle, a fight that took on drugs and alcohol as allies.

Still, the truth, though crushed, will rise.