

A “Un” Welcome Home

By Bob Spencer
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Dedicated to my Brothers of the 589th Engineer Battalion. May we remember the good times and the bad, the happy and the sad; find ways to remember, ways to forget, and ways to heal together. God bless each of you.

I

am lucky to have a window seat. As we loaded the plane in Cam Ranh Bay, my intentions were to be able to catch the first glimpse of the US as it appears in the distance. Although my 130-pound frame fits comfortably into the cramped window seat, everyone is restless, anxious, and tired of sitting. I could have claimed an aisle seat from which it would have been easier to move around, but my first glimpse of the World is going to make it all worthwhile.

It seems I have been waiting a lifetime for this day. Not only am I returning to the US after being in Vietnam nearly two years, I will be discharged. I can't imagine anything better...although I am struggling with concerns about what will be next.

Maybe the term “struggling” isn't strong enough; I am tormented, almost sick. I wish I had some pot to help some of these fears and anxiety go away. I was never a “pot head”, although I did smoke on occasion – just to ease some of the depression and fear. I was too paranoid to smoke dope on a regular basis...the same anxiety that caused me to smoke was the same anxiety that kept me from using it more often.

I enjoyed the feeling of being high – except the feeling that everything seemed to be happening in slow motion. I remember what it felt like to have the depression and anxiety go away, if only for a few hours. It was great – such a relief – like a weight being lifted. I had no problems when I was high – the world was perfect. I wish I could experience that now. I wonder how many others on this flight feel the same way.

I feel fortunate in that I am returning home in one piece. I don't realize it yet, but I have some medical problems...the seeds have been sewn but there are no symptoms - yet. Exposure to Agent Orange will later manifest itself as cancer, heart disease, and all their related issues. PTSD will grow to become a problem. I am emotionally changed – I am reluctant to say emotionally damaged, but I will admit that I am different. I wonder if my family will notice.

I know I have matured since I left home, even though I am not sure exactly what that means. I wonder if maturity is learning how to view the world differently, being willing to accept responsibility, just acting older. I am 21 years old now – nearly an old man compared to the young 18-year old that left home. Many things have changed for me. I certainly view the world differently.

For one, I have learned how to hate, although I don't like it. I understand that when you go to war you have to hate your enemy...the military teaches you to hate for your own self-preservation. Intellectually I understand, but emotionally I know that I cannot go on hating...I don't want to hate anyone or anything anymore. Hating is the permission you give yourself to do what your conscious and values would otherwise forbid you to do. I pledge to myself to learn how not to hate, to be the kinder and gentler person I know I am, to work at giving back for some of the things I feel I took away from others during my tour of duty.

My worldview has certainly changed. I don't understand the Jane Fonda's of the world – nor do I understand all the protestors we hear about. What the hell are they thinking? I hate the bastards...no, I don't hate them; I just don't understand them.

The biggest change for me is that I am married now – I'm still trying to figure out how it happened. I don't want to be married. I'm not mature enough – I still think lighting a fart is funny. I'm not financially secure; I don't even know how I am going to take care of myself, let alone a wife and child. My future is not certain; I don't have a job, or the prospects of a job. I need to go to school, but I don't know where, when or how.

"Yes, you are married," I keep reminding myself, "and you have the responsibilities that go along with it." If I could only undo the last three-years of my life, undoing the marriage vows would be at the very top of my list. Having a wife is responsibility enough, but I also have a child – a three-month old daughter I haven't even met yet. How can I be a father when I haven't grown up myself?

I light another cigarette – a Lucky Strike - as I stare out the window at the clouds. Of all the thoughts I had, that one day I wouldn't be able to smoke on an airplane wasn't one of them. Most of us on the plane smoke – the air is blue as the sun shines through the windows and spreads its light across the cabin. The smoke hangs heavy in the air, but no one gives a thought for those that may not be smokers...a little second hand smoke is the least of anyone's worries.

The airline flight attendants are beautiful. They each have round eyes, full-sized breasts, hair that isn't black. It seems strange to see them in real life – in Vietnam, we seldom had an opportunity to see an American woman. If you saw one, all you could do is gawk from a distance like some perverted idiot. Talking to one was out of the question. These attendants talk to us – it seems everyone is anxious to visit – there are many questions about what is happening back home; what has changed, what is different. I find myself too shy to engage one of the attendants myself, although I give myself permission to listen in on every other conversation within range.

How, or why, I got married is still confusing to me – I really don't know how it happened. What was I thinking? I contemplate that the circumstances surrounding my marriage is the perfect example of why I shouldn't be married to start with.

I had received a leave back to the World the previous August, as a reward for extending my tour of duty in Vietnam. Marriage was the last thing on my mind as I made my way home. However, sex got in the way, I got confused by the difference between lust and love, and she found herself in the position of needing to take advantage of that.

We got married because “she thought she might be pregnant.” She had good insight – not only was she pregnant, she was very pregnant. I had only been home a couple of weeks, but she had been pregnant for several months. You might say she started our relationship before I did. Was that lying on her part, was it cheating, was it not knowing, was it a mistake? I would wrestle with those questions for the next 30 years.

I wasn't back in Vietnam long before she wrote to give me the good news...she was pregnant. Although I had no way of knowing at the time, the seeds of a huge lie had been sewn. She made comments in her letters like, “the baby is really developing fast. The doctor says it may come early.” Sure enough, 5 months after our wedding, she delivered a full-term 7-pound baby girl.

She named the baby Robyn. “What?” I asked in a letter home. “Where did the name Robyn come from? Shouldn't we have discussed it?” I learned there are some events that transcend the need for a discussion – one of those events is naming a baby that comes too soon.

“The baby had to have a name before I could leave the hospital,” she responded. “I knew you would like it.”

No, I don't like the name – I have never heard of the name. Maybe it is not the name, maybe it is just that I didn't have an opportunity to participate in the decision. Now, every time I hear the name a little bell will probably go off in the back of my head as a reminder.

My father had an expression for situations like this. He would say, “The first child can come anytime, it is the second one that takes 9 months.” But this situation is different.

I was never good at math, and biology wasn't one of the classes I was ever interested in, but I am not stupid either. I'm pretty sure that having a full-term baby after 5 or 6 months is highly unusual – less likely than winning the lottery. I have been fooled. But I have made my bed; the honorable thing is to live with it. One of the lessons I learned in Vietnam is that I can survive anything, so spending the rest of my life with a woman who has lied to me, cheated me, raising a child that isn't my own, should be no problem. I hope it works out.

This brings up another character flaw I recognize in myself: the difference between knowing the truth and accepting the truth. I have found that even when I intellectually know something to be true, I am frequently reluctant to act if the truth isn't what I really want to believe. This flaw is something I will spend my life trying to correct. Therapists refer to this as cognitive dissonance.

Although we have had a good flight, the plane begins to jump around in some turbulence. I really don't like flying, especially the bouncing around. One of the flight attendants comes over the speaker system and asks everyone to take their seats – she reassures us the turbulence will only

last a few minutes. I don't know how or why the plane can possibly bounce around...the payload capacity of the plane must be maxed out, as every last seat is taken and one can only imagine the baggage piled in the cargo area. I have never heard of a plane going down on its way from Vietnam to the US, but with my luck, I can't dismiss the possibility.

The guy next to me in the middle seat, says, "This bouncing around is exciting; it is like a carnival ride."

I disagree. I don't like heights; I can't understand what keeps the wings of the airplane from flying off; if I want to bounce around in the air I'll gladly pay for the opportunity, although it isn't something I'll ever be doing.

He says, "Shit, this is nothing. Have you ever flown in a little plane?"

I have to admit that I had not – I'd never been close to a plane prior to joining the Army.

"I was in a single engine Cessna once, and we flew through a thunderstorm," he responded. "The turbulence was so great the plane turned completely upside down."

Why do people insist on talking about disasters and close calls when you could be right in the middle of one? What if this plane flips upside down? I discreetly reach down and tug on my seat belt just to make sure it is snug.

"We just hung there, upside down, hanging from our seatbelts," he said. "We just hung there for a moment, and then started to dive."

"I would have shit my pants, but I'm not sure that would have happened before or after I passed out," I responded.

"No, it really wasn't that bad...it happened too fast," he said. "The pilot, who was a friend of my dad's, did a great job of getting the plane back under control."

I shared that I was pleased they survived, while trying to discourage a continuation of the story. I imagined his full version of the event made a good story, and was probably repeated dozens of times at late-night bullshit sessions.

Even though I hate the Army – no, I dislike the Army – I think about staying in. I could re-enlist and simply disappear, stop communicating with everyone, and soon people would forget about me. I could forget about being married; forget about needing a job; forget about an education; forget about accepting responsibility for anything. I now have a Plan B – that's exactly what I'll do if things get to hairy. I'll simply re-enlist.

20 hours in a plane is a long ride – too long. I try to sleep, but my mind just won't shut down...my brain feels as if it is on a teeter-totter. One minute I am feeling high over the prospects of discharging from the Army and going home; the next minute I am bouncing off the bottom, contemplating my new life as a husband and father.

For the past 20 months in Vietnam, all I wanted to do was go home, get back to the World where everything is perfect. Now that I am finally getting my wish, I don't seem to want that either. I begin to wonder if I had realized that last August, and that is why I extended my tour for several more months. I must have shit-for-brains...how could anyone be so stupid and do such a good job of screwing up his life?

The thought of suicide crosses my mind...it would be easier to just leave this world – I would be doing everyone, including myself, a favor. Suicide would certainly be easier. Now I have a Plan C. Another option – life is all about options – one never has enough options. I went from Vietnam and having no options – no choices – to having three.

How would I commit suicide? I wouldn't want to shoot myself; I'd probably screw it up and spend the rest of my life a vegetable. And gunshot wounds are so messy. I could take pills, but I wouldn't begin to know what kind to take. Or, I could take a drug overdose like so many of the druggies do. If they can do it accidentally, I should be able to do it on purpose. Yah, that sounds like the best way.

Finally, we can see land off to the east. Beautiful! Just knowing we are approaching the World sends a round of cheers, excitement and anticipation through the plane. I can't believe this part of my life will soon be over.

We land with lots of cheers and hollering. I am as excited as the next guy, but my stomach feels like I could throw-up. The others on the plane seem to be genuinely happy, so I wonder what is wrong with me...it will all be good.

Although we land, the Army is not through with us. The military at Fort Lewis is well prepared for guys returning from Vietnam, feeling short and having an attitude. They allow that we can follow the rules, process out and be gone, or we can screw around all week – it makes no difference to them. It seems that everyone is eager to comply.

We have a physical examination, during which time they check for the number of fingers and toes and document any obvious injuries – although nobody looks very hard. If you have problems, this is the time to declare them or you will play hell getting any compensation later. The truth is that you will play hell getting benefits regardless of whether you declare them or not. We also have an opportunity for a dental exam – I had only seen one dentist in 3 years, but wasn't about to take the time to see one now.

And there was the question as to how you are doing psychologically...do you need to see anyone? No, I don't want to see an Army psychologist – at the speed of Army, those sessions could keep me around for months. Absolutely not. I am perfect – not a problem in the world. Just get me the hell out of here.

A voice comes over the intercom, "Before you are discharged, we have to issue you a new dress uniform. Nobody walks out of here unless you are dressed in a Class A uniform, complete with tie, hat and dress shoes."

This is so much bull shit – just let us go, for God's sake. For the past year, we have been

waiting for everything. We wait for sleep; we wait for showers, for food, for something cold to drink, for something hot to eat, for R&R, for a day off, for new boots and replacement cloths, for the rain to stop, for peace of mind, for our tours to end. Now, at the very end of this ordeal, there is more of the same.

After a long night of processing, I am finally out of the Army. The Army issued each of us some travel pay, so I have a couple of hundred dollars in my hand – more cash than I ever had at one time - new shoes, new uniform, discharge papers, and a handful of cash.

What a great feeling. I completed my obligation to Uncle Sam and I'm free – free to do what I'm not sure, but I am off to do it.

My new wife and daughter pick me up in my 1962 Chevy II Nova convertible that I purchased earlier for \$400. The weather is nice – we leave the base with the top down.

Back into the real world...but things had changed – this wasn't the place I had left a couple of years earlier. I wasn't so naïve as to expect marching bands when I returned, but I didn't expect to be the focus of people's wrath.

We needed gas, so I pulled into a Texaco gas station along the highway, saying “fill it up and check the oil please” to the attendant that greeted us at the pumps. I would have also liked him to check the tires, as I figured the air pressure had probably never been checked since I left, but what can you expect when you spend less than \$5.00 for a tank of gas. I went inside to pay and pick up an ice-cold Pepsi for the road. As I came outside, wearing my brand new class A Army uniform, a couple of longhaired hippy type commented as I walked by. “Hey, baby killer. Kill any babies lately?” Then, one of them spit in my direction; not on me, but in my direction.

They may as well have hit me in the head with a brick. I instantly want to kick their asses...so bad. Not only were they disrespecting me, but everyone I served with, and especially all those that didn't come home.

I have heard rumors that returning vets are not getting good receptions from some of the public, but what the hell. I don't need a band, but I would appreciate a little understanding. I hadn't killed any babies, nor do I know anyone who had. We just did what we were ordered to do, when we were ordered to do it. Did many of us feel guilty – probably? Are we guilty? We are probably guilty of a lot, but we are not all guilty of doing some of the things a few outliers have done.

“You guys are punks,” I tell them as I walk to my car. “I hate them.”

“Oh no, I don't hate them,” I quickly remind myself. “I just don't understand them.” It is going to be harder to get over my willingness to hate than I thought it would be. I need to lose this uniform.

We traveled from the Texaco station to another station a couple of miles down the road...it had an outside restroom. I parked my car in front of the restroom door, grabbed a change of civilian clothes, and went inside, trying not to be noticed. To change from a GI to a civilian took but a moment...I had to wear the Army issue shoes as I had no others, but no one would notice that.

Billionaire financier Warren Buffett is credit for saying, "It is only in the rinse cycle that you see just how dirty the washing was." As I leave Fort Lewis and put my military career behind me, I am about to go into the first rinse cycle of my life. Little did I realize, the first few hours out of the Army would reflect the next 40 years of my life. Nobody cared about my military service – if they did care, it was a negative. Military service – especially service in Vietnam – carried a certain stigma. I learned quickly if people don't ask, don't tell them. Even if the subject comes up, dodge it at all cost. Dodging my service in Vietnam will become natural for me.

The Times They Are Changing.

By Bob Dylan

Come gather 'round people Wherever you roam And admit that the waters Around you have grown And accept it that soon You'll be drenched to the bone. If your time to you Is worth savin' Then you better start swimmin' Or you'll sink like a stone For the times they are a-changin'.

"The End"