

Another Step in a Long Journey

The Death of a Latrine

As told to Bob Spencer by “The Latrine”

Introduction

In the spring of 2012, during one of my imagination’s many trips back to Vietnam, I had the good fortune to visit with one of our old latrines – the one blown up by a friendly-fire grenade. Although Latrine acted somewhat pissed-off by the circumstances of his demise, he was willing to sit down and visit about old times. I found Latrine to be quite engaging - and surprisingly sharp and insightful for an “old latrine”.

You are probably wondering why my imagination, after traveling all the way back to Vietnam, would take time to visit a latrine? Honestly, Latrine wasn’t someone I went looking for – I believe he actually came looking for me. Over the past 45 years I had completely forgotten about Latrine, until one melancholy afternoon he appeared out of nowhere, wanting to talk. Regardless of how it happened, we found each other, sat down for a visit, shared some memories, talked about old times, and I believe we both came away from the conversation feeling better about our shared experience – I know I did.

As we began our visit, I asked Latrine if I could share his story with you...he was excited about the opportunity to talk...mostly about himself and how he feels about his past. I assured Latrine this would be his story, just the way he told it, but what I found is that I also had some things to say. I tried to keep my opinions and memories to a minimum as I put his story together...but I couldn’t resist the opportunity to share a couple of thoughts – for whatever those thoughts are worth.

I attempted to take careful notes as we visited – I didn’t pay enough attention to what was going on 45 years ago, so I wanted to take it all down this time. In reviewing my notes, some of the discussion still doesn’t make much sense – it is going to take some time for Latrine’s words to sink in. Of course he wasn’t just speaking to me...I know he was speaking to each of us who knew him, so maybe I wasn’t supposed to understand everything.

I hope you enjoy Latrine’s story as much as he enjoyed sharing it with you...he wishes each of you the best.

Latrine’s Story

Hi. I’m the Latrine you destroyed – and this is my story. As we sit down to talk about my demise, I told Bob you are going to disagree and argue with me – as you always did. But screw you. This is my tale - I’ll tell it as I remember. After being lost in what I refer to as a “blaze of glory”, this is the least I deserve.

Another Step in a Long Journey

After all, each of you was able to return home, while I remain in Vietnam, for eternity, a pile of ashes, without purpose or use. And you think you had it bad.

When I say I'm the latrine "you" destroyed, "you" know damn well who I'm talking about. You thought you had left it all behind – as if it would never come up again. Well, I am here to remind you that there is no statute of limitations on destroying a latrine – I may be willing to forgive, but I can't forget. This is my time to talk – so that's what I'm going to do...and let the consequences fall where they may.

You know, that's the trouble with guys your age – you never think about the consequences for anything. When I say "guys your age," I realize you may be older now, but you will always be 19 or 20 years old to me - so that's the way I'm going to talk to you. So, listen up assholes. If I notice you not paying attention, I'm going to drop you for 10. If you ignore what I say, I'll have you burning shit tomorrow morning. How would you like to pull guard duty at one of the outposts for a full week straight? I WILL have your attention.

"Wow, Latrine," I commented. "You are sounding a little angry...some of the guys are going to take you for some sort of curmudgeon."

"Curmudgeon," Latrine exclaimed with an alarmed look on his face. "What in the hell is a curmudgeon?"

"Well, a curmudgeon is someone who is irritable or stubborn – kind of a killjoy. I know we are just beginning our discussion and you are holding back years of emotions, but you come across as a little cranky...like you are pissed off at the whole world," I suggested. "And you'll have to remember we are each older now...all of us," I added. "Hell, I remember when waking up stiff had nothing to do with my back, legs or knees – but not anymore."

"OK, I'm sorry. If I come across as angry at you guys...I'm not. It is all forgotten. I appreciate you for who you are and what you did," said Latrine as he stared toward the ground. "It's just that I'm a little nervous and not used to talking – hell, I haven't talked to anyone for years...and I've certainly never talked about my demise – about the night I was blown up."

"I understand that," I replied. "The memories have to be difficult. Just go ahead and talk and tell your story and I will hold my comments – at least as much as I can."

It's just that you were all so full of shit back then, not even we latrines could relax around you. Oh! I said a funny – a latrine is saying you were full of shit! I mean you were full of shit as it relates to being unpredictable and mischievous. You all spent your share of time perched on my bench, pants around your ankles, bullshitting with whomever, dreaming up your little pranks. You were always up to no-good; and what does a latrine do to protect itself? You are idiots, so I'll tell you the answer to that one – the answer is "nothing." There is "nothing" anyone or anything can do to protect itself against your pranks. Heaven knows I tried...I kept my poop barrels fairly clean; I tried to keep the diesel fuel stored where you wouldn't

Another Step in a Long Journey

start it on fire with your cigarettes; I kept the splinters in my seats to a minimum. But you still fucked with me – finally getting me in the end.

Now, I know my demise was an accident...you idiots didn't mean to detonate a white phosphorous grenade right next to me. Oh, I know you were drunk – which everyone knows was the Army's fault...everything bad that happens is the Army's fault. And I know you intended to throw the grenade over my roof so it would eventually land outside the perimeter. However, somehow the alcohol reduced your super human strength so the grenade didn't travel the 175 yards it needed...I know that on any other day any one of you could have thrown the grenade that far easily – in your dreams.

"OK, Latrine, I don't want to break the rhythm of your story" I commented, "but before you go any farther, I need to ask a question. Is this a "true story"?"

"Of course this is a true story," replied Latrine with disdain in his voice. "Remember, I was there...and you were too. Are you suggesting I don't know what I'm talking about...or that I can't remember the circumstances surrounding my own demise?"

"Of course I'm not suggesting any such thing...but studies have shown that there's no such thing as a true story," I replied. "Just give me a minute to explain!"

"Spencer, it is beginning to come back to me just how much of a smart-ass you can be. I thought you'd probably grown out of that – or had it beaten out of you by now," Latrine replied sharply.

"Relax Latrine," I said in as calming a voice as I could muster, "Just let me explain. As soon as we start telling a story, trying to make it relevant and interesting to the listener, hooking the story into their worldviews and generating emotions and memories, the story ceases to be true, at least if we define true as the whole truth, every possible fact, non-localized and without cultural bias. Add to that the 40 plus years that have lapsed, our ages (we are getting older, you know), and the fact that we remember only what we choose to remember, makes it very difficult to suggest any story we tell could possibly be "true" in the purest meaning of the word."

"What are you trying to tell me?" Latrine asked impatiently.

"What I'm trying to say is, as you suggested when we first began this discussion, some people may not believe what you say...they may remember these events differently. That is fine – this is your story, you were there, you know what you saw, you know what you heard, you certainly know how these events made you feel. Go for it. I'll do the best I can to make the story come out the way you tell me. If someone wants to declare bullshit, that's their prerogative – let's just make it clear that this is your story – right from the latrine's mouth."

Another Step in a Long Journey

"I understand, Bob. Sorry about suggesting that you can be a smart-ass. You are too dumb to be a smart ass; you are just an ass," Latrine laughed. "Ok, I will be as careful with the facts as possible – but I insist on telling the story as I saw it!"

"Fair enough," I replied.

"Since this is my story, I am going to digress for a moment – back to your antics of that evening," Latrine commented. "I'm going to do what I remember each of you did while telling your stories back then...you drug them out and babbled on-and-on about the damndest things. All I could do at the time was listen and roll my eyes in disbelief, but now the shoe is on the other foot. It is my turn to talk and your turn to listen!"

"That's fine," I replied. "Take all the time you need. I'm in no hurry. Besides, when I get into one of these moods, I'm not going to be able to concentrate on anything else anyway. I'll stay focused on you until you are done talking. OK?"

"Great," Latrine responded. "Anyway, all of you were having a great time drinking beer and watching a USO show – the show wasn't a fancy Bob Hope show with Ms. America, but it was a South Korean troupe that sang 'good enough' English. Not that you were there to listen to American hit songs sung with a Korean accent – you were there to look at the girls. Don't try to tell me you weren't – I know every damn one of you better than that. The women performers were dressed in 'skimpy outfits' that covered some parts, but your imaginations immediately discarded what little clothing there was. You thought they were amazing – they had the habit of standing flat-footed while they bent over to touch the ground...always with their backs to the audience. At first, I thought they might have been dropping things they had to bend over to pick up...but if that was the case, I could never see what it was. Regardless, those of you in the front rows gave them lots of encouragement to continue. Actually, I was embarrassed for you...it was one of those times I was glad to be a latrine."

"Really? I didn't think we were that bad or that out-of-control, although an anything-goes attitude could roll in once-in-a-while like a heavy fog, engulfing us all," I commented.

"No shit! That night some of you had a little too much to drink. Hell, all of you had too much to drink - the beer was flowing like water. It wasn't good cold beer – nothing was cold – it was just beer, take what you get, no-name beer. But being the studs you are, you drank it regardless – that is exactly what you are supposed to do during occasions like this, drink anything and everything you can get, as much of it as possible, regardless of the consequences. 40 years from now, that will be known as "binge drinking," but tonight you are simply living up to each other's expectations – blowing off steam. It is rare that even the most conservative and cautious among you refrain from getting caught-up in the excitement. After all, it is either this, guard duty, or nothing. Therefore, I can't hold getting drunk against you – I would have done the same thing if latrines could drink. We latrines don't do much but sit around and take crap from people! Oh my, I said another funny."

Another Step in a Long Journey

"In regards to taking crap, I do remember a lot of bullshit flying around when things got festive," I offered.

"Hell, even when things weren't festive there was always a lot of bullshit flying around," Latrine responded. "When it comes to bullshit, I've heard it all. For example, some of you had a knack with rhyme...I remember listening to you recite your cute little poems as you sat on my benches:"

Round and round it goes,
This is how it flows,
Through my colon,
And out my sphincter,
Hey look at that,
It's a sinker.

And you'd laugh at each other like you were comedians. You must have laughed to be polite cause your antics certainly weren't that funny. I'm embarrassed to admit your babbling bullshit made a big enough impression on me that I even remember. I must have been just as young and impressionable as you.

On another occasion, one of you came up with:

If you want to shit at ease,
Place your elbows on your knees.
A little grunt, A little squeeze,
And out they come
Like rotten cheese.

And there were more, some better than others:

I sit not upon this toilet seat
the crabs in here can jump six feet
and if you think that this is high
at the officer's latrine the bastards fly

and

I drained my bladder, which made it gladder.
I peed for an hour or more.
Then I sat and shit, till my colon was split.
Now my sphincter's all itchy and sore.

Another Step in a Long Journey

As I listened to you carry on with your babble and nonsense, I would question, “and this is America’s finest? My God, what did they leave at home? As a latrine, am I expecting too much from these idiots?”

“Bob, you have to be honest with me,” Latrine muttered under his breath. “I am trying to be as honest with you as I share my story, so be honest with me in return. Was I so bad? Wasn’t I a good latrine, even though you blew me up?”

“Yes, you were a good latrine...you have a place in each of our hearts,” I responded. “How could anyone forget you?”

“If you hold my memory that dear, what was there about me that that sets me apart from all the other latrines you’ve known?” asked Latrine. “I know I wasn’t your first...and there have probably been others in your life since me.”

“Well, I have never been asked that question before,” I responded. “Let me think. You weren’t just any latrine; you were “our latrine.” My favorite hole was the second seat on the left; sitting there was like putting on a comfortable pair of bedroom slippers...it fit just right. There were at least a dozen holes in total, but only one special hole – yes, the second hole on the left. You remember that we each had our favorite...we were so accustomed to daily routine and habit, it couldn’t have been any other way. Given the opportunity, even after 45 years I would still be using the second hole on the left”

“That is absolutely true, responded Latrine. “You were like a bunch of trained pigs, each returning back to your favorite hole time-after-time. How did you idiots choose?”

“Well,” I responded, “I can’t speak for everyone, but my decision was deliberate, and I believe well thought-out. It was all about elbow- room. The second seat on the left usually provided one empty hole between the wall and me...unless it was an emergency, no one would sit between another man and the wall...that’s just not natural. In addition, I am right-handed, so I did better when it came to doing the paperwork with a little more room on that side.”

“That makes sense,” said Latrine. I can certainly see where you were coming from. But for you young Army idiots, I think seats in my latrine were a lot like women – you each looked for something a little different. Usually there was just no explaining why you made the choices you did. But you made your choice, sometimes later realizing you made a poor decision. When I would see a man, day after day, jumping from one hole to another, I knew he realized he exercised poor judgment and was simply trying to find something better.”

“That is demonstrating an unusual level of insight for a latrine,” I commented.

“Thanks,” Latrine responded. “I have always known these things, but I don’t remember anyone showing enough interest in me to ask the questions. I would have told each and every one of you at the

Another Step in a Long Journey

time, but you wouldn't have listened. You were each like my toilet paper, "you wouldn't take shit off anyone." Oh, I said another funny. Sometimes I just crack myself up – I can't help it."

"I understand," I assured Latrine, "but let's get back to the story you were sharing about your demise...the night you were the victim of 'friendly fire'. I can't remember the details, but the story is beginning to come back to me."

"OK," responded Latrine. "Maybe I should just rattle on...I am not very good at staying on topic or keeping events in sequence. I'll just tell the story and you can fix it later...bring me back to the subject if I wonder off too far. I'm just not accustomed to having anyone interested enough in me to listen. I have gotten up enough nerve to begin to share my stories on various occasions, but have always backed down. I would always begin to feel too vulnerable...I didn't think anyone really cared."

"I know what you mean," I acknowledged. "But most people do care...most people are interested. Trust me; anyone who reads this story will be doing so because he is interested in your perspective. We may not have been willing to listen to you at the time, but looking back is different. Back then, most of us didn't listen to anyone. Today, we want to know - we want to understand – we want perspective – like you, we are ready to talk about it. You say you are just a latrine, but that doesn't mean crap. We each played a part; we each did what 'The Man' asked us to do. You have to know you made a difference."

"Thanks Bob," said Latrine with a tear in the corner of his eye. "Just let me talk. If I get this story out, maybe I'll have other things to say. Do you want to sit down while I talk...that second hole on the left is open?"

"Damn, that's a great idea...it's been a long, long time. Just a moment – now I'm ready. This feels good; just like old times – I even have enough elbowroom to take notes. There is nothing like going back and reliving the old days," I commented.

"Yah, I feel something special seeing you sit there too. Just like the old days," commented Latrine, "except you are 90 pounds heavier and you do a much better job of covering the hole...now when you sit down, you don't allow any daylight to come through. It is like a "full eclipse" – everything goes black."

"Well, a lot of things have changed since I sat here last...90 pounds and a big butt are just the beginning," I respond. "But let's get back to your story before I get company in here – I admit to feeling self-conscious sitting here with my pants down around my ankles, taking notes...you know if anyone suggests we have been talking, I'm going to have to deny it."

"I understand. I will never admit to talking to you either," Latrine commented in a whisper, as if he was ashamed of having such an open discussion. I understood...it is not always easy to open-up after 45 years.

Another Step in a Long Journey

OK. Where was I? Oh yah, you guys had all gone to the big Korean show that night...every one of you was shit-faced. When the show got over, all of you were milling around...some drank more beer, some stood around shooting-the-shit, while the smart ones went back to their bunks. You, the ones this story is about – yes, you know who you are – didn't even attempt to appear smart by going to bed. Hell, you were just getting started. You were part of the drink more beerclub, thinking, "if this was our last day on earth, wouldn't we want to go out having a good time?" Your answer was, "Sure, we would. Tomorrow could be too late."

I will have to admit that when you are out for the evening in the old base camp, your entertainment options are limited – you have to make your own excitement using whatever is available. You can't drive around – nowhere to go. You can't chase women – there are none. You can't dance – that would be too gay, and at that age and during that period, most of you were a little sensitive about appearing that way.

Before I actually saw the four of them, I picked up on their gibbering back and forth – it was dark that night so I was able to hear better than see. I didn't recognize them at first, but as they stumbled closer I could see it was that Perry, Larry, Bill, and Manuel. Those are just four names I'm going to use for now....I'm not saying those were their names cause I don't have to use their names – they know who they are. I'll just use Perry, Larry, Bill and Manuel for my own convenience and state for the record that any resemblance these individuals have to anyone you knew is purely accidental. Know what I mean?

"Yeah, I know what you mean...you're having second thoughts about using their real names and you're trying to cover your ass. You sounded so tuff when we started" I commented.

"I am tough," came Latrine's response. "When I need to be...but I'm not sure I need to be tough after 45 years – I want to be remembered in a good way."

"I understand. We are using first names only, and those names are ones you simply picked out of the air. Latrine, you are so transparent," I suggested.

Whatever! Ok, as they came closer, I could see that each of them was trying to look "civilian." I laughed to myself every time I saw that...you guys donning whatever pieces of civilian clothing you happen to have – none of you had a complete outfit – and pretending this is how you'd look back in the World. I can tell you now that you looked like a bunch of dorks- if you don't believe me, look back at your pictures...but boy did you feel cool! It's a good thing there weren't any women around or you'd have been laughed out of the country.

"Say, Bob, whatever happened to those guys?" Latrine asked.

"I am sorry to have to tell you that Manuel passed away in 2003 – but the other three are still very much alive and well," I responded. "Would you believe that they each went on to become rich and famous after leaving Vietnam?"

Another Step in a Long Journey

“No! Really?” Replied Latrine in an astonished voice.

“Yes,” I replied. “Are you surprised?”

“Shit yes I’m surprised. Based on what I saw the night of my demise, I’m surprised any of them survived much past puberty,” Latrine responded. “Those guys were crazy.”

“Well, what went on that night?” I asked.

“Watching the four of them stumble around, trying to put one foot in front of the other without tipping over, was like watching a really slow train wreck. They were having trouble covering much ground, but that didn’t matter – they weren’t going anyplace anyway. The goal seemed more about staying on their feet than actually moving forward.”

I could hear Bill, he was the tall, lanky one, talking louder than necessary, just to make sure everyone could hear. “I would really like to go to Hawaii after I get back to the World. Hawaii seems to have something for everyone: a beach for me, sun for the girlfriend, and sharks for my girlfriend’s mother.”

“And you all laughed hysterically - the laughter continued a lot longer than necessary, as the comment wasn’t really that funny. But in another way I was Ok with your stupid ‘go to Hawaii’ joke”, shared Latrine. “At least you weren’t making fun of me for a change”.

“OK, Guys,” asked Larry. “What do you do if a blonde throws a grenade at you? You pull the pin and throw it back. Then what do you do if a blonde throws a pin at you? You run like hell cause she probably has a grenade in her mouth.”

“Do you mean a grenade like this one?” asked Manuel as he struggled to pull a white phosphorous grenade out of his pocket.

“What the fuck are you doing?” the others chided in unison. “What the fuck! Where did you get that – it’s not even issue for us. What the hell – you’re one crazy bastard, Manuel.”

“Give me that son-of-a bitch,” ordered Perry. “You’re to drunk to even hold it...I’ll take charge of it before something happens. It’s a good thing I am here to watch over you guys. I may get drunk, but I never lose my sense of good judgment – as a mater-of-fact, the more I drink, the smarter I get.”

As Perry takes the grenade from Manuel, Perry asks Manuel, “Where did you get this son-of-a-bitch? If the Old Man sees this, your shit is really weak.”

“I got it from a friend, who has a friend in supply, who has connections, and can trade stuff, so he traded for it, and my friend got it and then I talked him out of it. Know what I mean?”

Another Step in a Long Journey

“We know exactly what you mean,” Bill responded... “You stole the son-of-a-bitch from someone. Good job Manuel – you make us proud. Can you steal some for the rest of us? Maybe your friend could find us a jeep, too?”

“You have to be mature,” injected Perry, “to carry one of these around. This just isn’t any grenade, its white phosphorous. If you’re not mature enough to handle it, you could hurt someone...this is some bad shit. It’s good I’m hold’em it.”

“Larry, what did you say to do if a blond throws a grenade pin at you?” asked Perry.

“You run, cause she probably has a grenade in her mouth,” Larry replied.

“When you referred to the blond throwing a grenade pin at you, did you mean like this?” Asked Perry as he slowly pulled the pin from the grenade’s trigger and pitched the pin underhanded toward Larry.

“Did you just throw the pin at me?” asked Larry. “It’s so dark you can’t see shit, and you’re throwing grenade pins around? Where the fuck did it go? You better be holding on to that son-of-a-bitch’em grenade Perry.”

“Not to worry, guys,” replied Perry in a very relaxed, casual manner. “Remember, I’m the mature one. Of course I’m holding on to it...do you think I’m stupid or something?” The one thing you can’t do when handling a grenade with the pin out is be careless...I know exactly what I’m do’em here.”

“Next thing I know,” said Latrine, “all four of them are down on their hands and knees, feeling around in the dirt, cussing like sailors looking for the lost grenade pin. A situation that would have concerned anyone else, suddenly became really funny to them...they laughed and laughed and laughed as they grubbed through the dirt looking for the pin.”

“You better not be feeling around with both hands, Perry,” one of them insisted. “As a matter of fact, you should keep both your hands firmly wrapped around that fucking grenade and we’ll find the pin.”

“I think I found it,” Larry commented in relief.

“Where? Where is it?”

“I’ve got it in my hand.”

“Where is your hand...its so damn dark I can’t see anything.”

“My hand is in my pocket,” Larry replied. “I don’t want to lose it again.”

“No wonder I can’t see your hand. Give me the damn pin and I’ll put it back in,” exclaimed Perry. “No! Not in that hand – that’s the hand with the grenade in it...I need it in the other hand.”

Another Step in a Long Journey

“Well, hold still. I can’t give it to you when you’re wobbling all over and you can’t even stand up straight. Let’s just sit down and do it – that’ll be easier.”

“So they all sat down,” remembered Latrine. “All four of the crazy bastards...as Larry very slowly and deliberately handed the grenade pin back to Perry.”

“Can you get it in?” asked Bill.

“That’s what she said,” responded Larry. The comment was received with another round of laughter. What we need is some more beer!”

“I’ve got a couple more cans in my pockets,” responded Perry. “Let me get the pin back in this grenade first...there, I think I got it. Does anyone have a lighter so I can make sure it’s in before I let go of the handle? Or should I just let go and see what happens?”

“No, damn-it! Hang on to that son-of-a-bitch until we find a lighter. There...it looks “in” to me. Me too. You can let go of the handle, but if it jumps out away from the body throw the bastard as far as you can. Can you do that?”

“Can I do that?” Perry responded. “Remember I’m the mentally mature one here...the one that gets better when he’s drunk. I’m the natural born leader of men...if there is a problem, I’ll be the first to detect it...then I’ll analyze it, consider all my options, select the best one, and then act. Of course I can do that.”

“OK...it is in and holding. God damn, that got exciting for awhile.” Perry commented. “Manuel, you’d better hold the grenade while I dig the beers out of my pockets. Damn, they got warm on me...we should have some cold ones!”

“Just a minute, I have to pee again.”

“Watch what you’re doing – you damn near pissed on me.”

It’s dark...I can’t see. If you feel something wet, just pretend like it’s a warm rain. If I fall over while I’m going, just reach down and turn off my faucet, will yah?

In your dreams, you gay bastard. I’m not going near your faucet...we’ll just leave you lying in your own mud.

Let’s drink these warm beers up and go find some colder ones. Shit, it tastes like warm piss.

Did you guys know that beer contains traces of female hormones?” Larry asked.

“You’re full of crap. I may have had a few beers, but I’m not falling for some silly story,” replied Bill.

Another Step in a Long Journey

“Well, it’s true,” Larry insisted. “Scientists gave 100 men each a half-case of beer and observed that an astonishing percentage, 100 percent, (‘‘which is over half,’’ insisted Bill) started talking nonsense and couldn’t drive.”

“And they laughed their asses off again,” said Latrine. “I didn’t mind them laughing, but all the time they kept playing around with that damn white phosphorous grenade...I just knew there was going to be trouble. I knew it for sure. We latrines know shit when we see it.”

“Did you think about doing anything?” I interjected.

“I couldn’t do a damn thing,” Latrine responded. “These guys were riding a fast freight to a train wreck and all I could do is watch and wonder.”

“What happened next?” I asked. “That must have been something to watch them drink beer with one hand and toss a grenade around with the other. You must have been a nervous wreck.”

“I was. You know what I’m saying?” responded Latrine. “I was shaking clean down to my shit barrels.”

And then that Bill says, “Wouldn’t it be something if a liar’s pants did catch on fire?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Bill responds, “You know that poem: Liar, liar, pants on fire, hanging from a telephone wire. Well, what if your pants did catch on fire when you told a lie?”

“Bill, you are one crazy son-of-a-bitch. Who would wonder about something like that except you? I’ve got to pee again, so if your pants burst into flame soon, I’ll help put out the fire...but I may not stop when the flames go out.”

“Anyone that would worry about a liar’s pants catching on fire would also worry about getting that shot in the left testicle with a big square needle,” Manuel commented. “Have you got that one yet, Bill?”

“Sure I have,” came the response.

“Now you’re ly’in....no wonder you’re concerned about your pants catching on fire,” slurred Manuel. “There is no such thing as a shot in the left testicle with a big square needle...that’s just a story they tell all Army recruits.”

“Oh shit, you don’t know anything about shots,” replied Bill. “I’ve had more shots than the rest of you put together...and I distinctly remember one of them being with a big square needle in the left testicle – there are some things a guy just doesn’t forget.”

“What did you get the shot for,” questioned Manuel?

Another Step in a Long Journey

Bill was already anticipating the question, so it didn't take him long to respond. "I don't remember the exact name of the illness, but it was a rare tropical disease you only get in the jungle...like jungle rot or something, only on the inside of your body where you can't see it – very rare – you had to be in the shit to get it!"

"If your pants don't catch on fire by themselves, we should light them. What a bunch of shit your feeding us right now," observed Manuel.

"And then they kept going back and forth and on-and-on about the trauma that must have been inflicted on Bill when they inserted the big square needle," commented Latrine. "They were crazy drunk talking, speculating that the shot in the left testicle with the square needle is what made Bill's hair curly – or that if a guy ever did get one of those shots, he would never be able to be with a women again – and that no wonder Bill's judgment was jaded after having a square needle poked directly into his brain (which was located squarely inside his left testicle)." The four of them were relentless, back and forth, all the time playing with that damn grenade."

"God damn that was funny, Larry, when I threw that grenade pin to you," said Perry. "You damn near shit yourself."

"The hell I did," responded Larry. "Shit like that just don't bother me anymore - it didn't hardly even get my attention. I almost asked you "what grenade pin", cause I'd already forgotten about it."

"My ass, you crazy bastard...you nearly shit yourself," Perry insisted as he continued to play with Larry. "I'll prove it. Here! Catch this," he said as he pulled the pin the second time and pitched it to Larry.

"By this time they were pretty close to me...I could see it all, even though it was blacker than a used shit barrel", said Latrine. "The pin hit Larry and bounced off, falling somewhere, on the ground, in the sand, lost and gone forever. Oh, they looked for it all right, but never found it. They were on their hands-and-knees, for the longest time, combing the sand with their fingers, cursing their luck and swearing at the Army, but they never found the pin."

"Manuel, you hold this bastard for awhile," pleaded Perry as he handed the grenade gingerly off to Manuel. "Got it? For Christ sake don't drop it or let go of the handle. We have a problem here so I need a minute to think."

"That's right, Mr. Leader of men," the others chimed in. "The Mr.One That Gets Better When He's Drunk; the Mr.Natural Born Leader of Men...if there is a problem, you'll be the first to detect it...then you'll analyze it, consider all the options, select the best one, and then act...You need to come up with a fucking plan."

"This is where I get a little nervous about admitting I know who actually threw the grenade," admitted Latrine. "They were all sober enough to know they couldn't hang on to a live grenade forever, but

Another Step in a Long Journey

too drunk to realize they couldn't throw it very far either." Their plan was to throw the grenade over the top of me, out into the perimeter where it would explode without causing any damage."

"But whoever threw the grenade didn't throw it far enough...and didn't the grenade end up exploding right next to you?" I asked Latrine.

"Yah, it was bad...it was really bad," Latrine responded. "When that son-of-a-bitch exploded, there was fire everywhere. I didn't last long at all."

"I don't know what to say, Latrine," I responded. "I still feel sad for you...and I want you to know that I was sad then also, as was everyone who did their business there."

"Are you sure you don't want to tell the world who threw the grenade and destroyed you, the one and only A Company latrine?"

"No," Latrine replied. "It would serve no purpose now – I'm over it...I've left it behind. Anyway, I know it was an accident."

"Well, that was a great story...you tell it well, Latrine," I commented. "Thanks for sharing."

"But that's not all the story," Latrine replied. "Those crazy bastards who threw the grenade really had to shit-and-get when it went off – as you remember the fire started quite a commotion."

"That's right, I remember. But I don't know what the guys did when you exploded?" I stated.

"They ran for the hills," Latrine responded. "They'd probably still be running if it wasn't for the perimeter wire that kept them pinned in. Looking back on it, the sight was funnier than hell. Have you ever seen four drunks that couldn't walk trying to run as fast as they could? They reminded me of balls in a pin-ball machine – bouncing off everything that got in their way, running into each other, falling down, jumping up and running some more. But shit, you remember our base camp...you couldn't run more than 100 yards in any direction without hitting the perimeter – they had nowhere to go."

"Yeah, I remember how small it was. So what did they do," I asked.

"Well, I'm not sure what Bill and Manuel did, but that crazy Perry and Larry climbed into the back of a water truck," Latrine insisted.

"You mean they climbed up on the back end of a water truck?" I asked.

"Yes and no," Latrine responded. "The crazy bastards climbed up on top of the water truck, then dropped down inside the water tank itself. Can you imagine that? It must have been like Jonah being swallowed by a whale."

Another Step in a Long Journey

“No shit – it’s crazy,” commented Latrine. I remember Perry saying to Larry, “Let’s get into the water tank.” I don’t think the idea was one of Perry’s better moments – it was one of those ideas he would look back on later and wonder, “What the hell was I thinking?”

“Why should we get in the water tank,” Larry asked?

“Because they’ll never find us there...who would ever look for us in a water tank?” Perry responded.

“Exactly, Perry. That’s what I’m worried about...we’ll get in there and never get out.”

“Where’s your balls, Larry? Follow me! Damn, I just amaze myself at times...I just never seem to run out of good ideas,” Perry muttered in a loud whisper.

So, up on the top of the water tank they climbed where they opened the tank cover. “Will I fit?” Larry asked.

“That’s what I ALWAYS have to ask,” responded Perry. Then they sat down on the top of the tank and laughed as they contemplated dropping through the hole.

“Here I go,” whispered Perry as he dropped into the tank. From out of the tank came a long drawn-out lingo of cursing and swearing. Perry was having problems.

“You OK?” Larry whispered down through the hole.

“Fuck no, I’m not OK. I think I tore my knee off on something. I can’t see a damn thing, but judging by the pain I’m going to need some serious medical attention. Get your ass in here and save me,” Perry pleaded.

“If I get in there, we’ll both need to be saved,” came Larry’s reply. “What’s it like?”

“There’s water in here...and some metal baffles that are ready to kick your ass...I think that’s what I tore my knee on. You’re going to get wet, but that’s better than explaining to the Old Man about how the latrine got destroyed. Get your ass in here!”

So, in goes Larry...only after he takes his watch off so it won’t get ruined in the water. He never saw that watch again.

“It is dark in here,” Larry commented. “And wet too. Listen to all that commotion going on outside...I’ll bet everyone is trying to figure out what just happened to the latrine. They’ll never figure it out...and they won’t think of looking for us here.”

“You don’t think we are acting or looking guilty, do yah? Perry commented.

Another Step in a Long Journey

“No. Shit no. We are the last ones anyone would ever suspect of anything,” came Larry’s reply. There are too many other crazy bastards around here for anyone to pick us out.”

“Got a lighter so we can see?”

“No, do you?”

“No, but I’d like to check out my knee. I think I’m bleeding.”

“Are you bleeding in the drinking water?”

“Probably, but we are also getting a bath. If the guys new they were going to be drinking our bath water tomorrow, they’d shit. Somebody would probably find a reason to bitch – but they’ll never know.”

“Drinking dirty water don’t matter...they put chemicals in here. You know that. I heard this is where they put the salt peter – that stuff that never allows you to get a woody. And here we are, bathing in the stuff,” Larry responded. “Hope we don’t end up getting the same shot Bill had to get – the big shot in the left testicle with the square needle.”

“Oh shit. If the Old Man finds out we are responsible for destroying the latrine, a big shot with a square needle in the left testicle is going to be the least of our worries. I’ll bet they’d send us to Army prison – probably one located on a secret island where there is no escape. The guards will all have it out for guys from engineering units; they’ll torture us relentlessly, and probably chase us around the island with hunting dogs. All over one little accidental grenade explosion – leave it to the Army to blow things out of perspective.”

“It seems to be getting quieter outside, Larry commented. “I’m going to stick my head out and see what is going on.

Wow! The latrine is gone ...there are just a few embers left. Where are we going to poop tomorrow?”

“I don’t know, but I hope it is not inside this water tank,” declared Perry. Let’s try to get out of here and blend in with the natives. Besides, I got to look at my knee.”

“Can you get out by yourself,” asked Larry?

“No, I’m going to need some help. Maybe you can just push me up through the hole...but watch out for the baffles.”

“Can you get the rest of the way through the hole?”

“Yah, I’m about there...son-of-a-bitch, it’s good to breathe some regular air. I’m just about there – OK, I got my legs through. Need some help?”

Another Step in a Long Journey

"You just get down without falling, Perry. I can get out of this tank myself. Don't let anyone see you...we don't want to have to explain what we were doing in a water tank together – this could look a little gay!"

"Wow, I did bang my knee up – I'm bleeding like hell," Perry whispered.

"Live with it," Larry replied. "Let's get our asses back to our tent and pretend we don't know anything about what has gone on. I'm not admitting anything to anyone."

"Eventually Perry had to go to the aid station to get it stitched up," reported Latrine. "You can only imagine the bullshit story he had for the medics."

"I guess I never realized everything that was happening that night," I responded. "We all heard about it later, of course, but the official finding was that your destruction was caused by somebody leaving a cigarette burning...of course we all knew better."

"Well, the guys involved can thank your old buddy Sergeant Joe "Pineapple" Tancayo for that one," Latrine reported. "Do you remember Joe?"

"Absolutely," I replied. "Joe is from Hawaii - he was at our 2010 589th Association Reunion, but I didn't hear him talking about this story."

"Well, lucky for these guys that Joe was on CQ duty that night," explained Latrine. "Joe was the kind of guy you could count on to cover your ass in a bind – that's exactly what he did for Perry, Larry, Bill and Manuel. Joe made up the story, even documented it in the log, that the explosion and fire was the result of somebody leaving a cigarette burning on my bench. I wonder what the brass thought you were smoking?" Latrine chuckled.

"So, no one got into trouble for causing your demise?" I asked Latrine.

"That's right," Latrine responded. "It was the perfect crime. All the evidence was destroyed in the explosion and fire. Nobody was talking, especially the four of them."

"I also remember the night of your story," I commented. "Would you mind if I shared what I remember?"

"That would be great, Bob. This sharing stories and talking about old times is something I have never been able to do. Based on what you remember, am I getting the story right?" Latrine questioned.

"I'm not sure if there is such a thing as getting it right; 45 years is a long time," I responded. "We all walked away from that night and Vietnam with different perspectives...I think we are like the witnesses at the scene of an accident. Ten people can watch the same shooting and each report a different version of the same event. It is human nature – we remember what we want to remember. I'm not sure what the truth

Another Step in a Long Journey

is anymore, nor does it matter. Besides, when did we ever let the truth get in the way of telling a good story?”

“Good point, Bob! The ‘truth’ is always the first causality in every war – war pushes men too close to the edge. There are those endless hours of boredom, broken only by brief periods of chaos and fear– and everything just gets all mixed up. And then you try for years to put it all out of your mind, only occasionally gaining the courage to try to make sense of it all.”

“I know exactly what you mean, Latrine. The story you are telling has been buried deep in my memory and is only now beginning to come back. Let me tell you what I remember.”

“I remember the Korean show you referred to.” I recalled. “Well, maybe I don’t remember the exact show, but I remember what USO shows were like. And your comment about watching us watch the girls on stage as they continually bent over as if they were picking something off the stage... that wasn’t anything. They weren’t picking things off the stage, the heat and humidity was causing their leg muscles to cramp-up, so they were bending over in an attempt to stretch the cramps out of their legs. The hollering was simply a way for us to encourage them to work out the cramps.”

“You were a bunch of great guys – looking out for those women that way,” Latrine commented. “Is the second seat on the left still working for you? If not, they are all open – you can sit anywhere you’d like. And you don’t have to keep your pants down around your ankles...unless you want.”

“I’m quite comfortable...thanks. And its cooler with my pants down – I’d forgotten how hot and humid the temperature is here. A good cold beer would taste good right now too, but then I’m not sure drinking beer in the latrine is acceptable – it’s a lot like eating a plate of food while you are sitting in the bathroom...my wife really wouldn’t appreciate that,” I speculated.

“Shit, you asses did it all the time back then...location meant nothing to you. If I had a quarter for every beer that was consumed while one of you sat on my bench, I’d be one wealthy latrine today. But then you did a lot of things here you wouldn’t get away with today – drinking beer in the latrine is nothing,” commented Latrine.

I sensed that latrine was finally beginning to relax and warm up to me a little. This talk therapy was beginning to do him some good after all. So I couldn’t help myself as I continued with my story...I felt the need to stretch the truth just a little to keep him on his toes. So I continued with my story... “I wasn’t like all the others who continued to drink after the show that night. I was taking a Vietnamese math class by correspondence, so I spent all my free time studying and reading Vietnamese text books so I would be better prepared to tutor small children at the local orphanage.”

“I didn’t know that!” Latrine exclaimed.

Another Step in a Long Journey

“Oh yes, and I led a special platoon responsible for converting the prostitutes in town to Girl Scout leaders.”

Wow!” exclaimed Latrine. “I didn’t know that either.”

“And on Thursday evenings I taught children who had lost their sight in the war how to read using Braille – after I prepared and served a special meal featuring Midwestern American cuisine.”

“Now I know you are feeding me full of shit,” declared Latrine. “You suckered me in and had me going, just like all of you used to do with your bullshit and games. What’s the real story?”

“OK, I was drinking like everyone else. If I would have had a joint, I probably would have smoked that too – although I didn’t smoke pot frequently,” I admitted. “I was just your average ‘go with the flow’ guy that tried not to stand out from the crowd. Standing out from the crowd when you are in the Army is not a good idea – Standing out ranks right up there with volunteering, which can only get you into trouble.”

“The best I remember, I was probably just relaxing with a couple of beers, thinking about the girls on stage bending over as they attempted to pick invisible items off the stage floor.”

“Enough about the show-girls...tell your version of the story about MY demise,” Latrine insisted.

“OK Latrine, I’ll get back to it.” I replied. “Maybe I am guilty of dragging out the story like you said we used to do...talking to hear ourselves talk.”

“Well, that is partly true,” replied Latrine. “It is different when you are talking about yourself...I want to hear more about ME...the latrine...the center of all meaningful activity. I don’t want to appear self-centered, but this story is supposed to be about me and the night I was blown-up – you promised.”

“Right...moving along then – I’ll give this some serious thought. To top-off the evening, I see you, our only latrine, going up in smoke. Not going up in smoke, you are ablaze, an inferno of flames and noxious fumes.

“Noxious?” Latrine queried.

“Yah, noxious,” I replied. “I’m not suggesting YOU were emitting noxious fumes, but there was the distinct odor of burning human feces coming from the fire in your shit barrels.”

“OK, but that noxious smell wasn’t me,” Latrine was quick to clarify. “Continue, but please don’t use words like noxious that conjure up negative images. I was never noxious!”

“Sorry for my choice of words, Latrine. I can see why a latrine would be sensitive to a word like noxious,” I acknowledged.

Another Step in a Long Journey

"I'll continue. Trying to put out your fire would have been like trying to put out the fires in Hell. Latrine, you exploded as if you had been hit by a mortar or a rocket...the only possible explanation was we were under attack." I remember thinking, "I hope Latrine wasn't occupied – nobody wants to die in a latrine with his pants down."

"Bob, is that a tear in your eye?" Latrine asked in a soft, gentle voice."

"As I think back, it's difficult to hold back the tears...why couldn't the explosion have destroyed the mess hall, the headquarters building, the officers' quarters, or at least the officers' latrine...or any one of a number of canvas buildings we weren't sentimentally attached to. But no...it's our latrine going up in smoke – son-of-a-bitch. The officers' latrine would have been a much better target...at the time I wasn't sure officers found it necessary to poop anyway – I think they probably do nowadays, but not too often back then. The higher the rank, the less necessary it was. And we know that a fire in the officer's latrine wouldn't have emitted any noxious fumes!"

Latrine laughed. "I know the officers' latrine personally...you talk about "light duty", he had it. He was always clean...and he insisted the officers even pooped consistent with the regulations laid out in the Army Field Manual. I don't know what that is, or what that means...I'm just saying that's what he said– you know what I mean?"

"Yah, I know what you mean, but the best part of my story is coming up," I responded. "I'll get back on track."

"Man those bunkers down by the latrine...they may be coming through our wire," somebody shouted as the siren blared out the warning of an attack. The fire was lighting up the night sky, so there was no problem finding the way.

I remember thinking, "Oh my God - this is terrible. I have been in mortar attacks at An Khe that destroyed trucks and equipment, barracks and the motor pool area, but never the latrine. The VC must be trying something new... they are trying to inflict on us as much emotional damage as possible. The VC must be testing the old philosophy of "destroy their spirits and their bodies will follow"!

I thought the Viet Cong could be on to something –you were the great mixing pot, Latrine...the one place we can all come together, regardless of which platoon or company we are assigned. It is the one place everyone visits daily...if they aren't there, you knew they are gone 'someplace'. I am struck by the memories of countless hours, sitting, contemplating the world's problems, and visiting - all of it going up in smoke. What are we going to do? The VC have struck at the very foundation of our social structure.

"A thousand thoughts of you immediately raced through my mind as you exploded in flames," I told Latrine.

"What kind of thoughts," asked Latrine?

Another Step in a Long Journey

"Memories," I replied.

"What kind of memories," Latrine insisted.

"Memories I connect with you, such as the second seat on the left...that is where I was laying the day the medics picked me up. It was about noon, so I was lucky to have someone come along and find me – normally, the latrine would have been empty, with everyone out "doing their thing."

"Now is this part of the story about you, or about me?" Latrine asked.

"Well, it is kind of about me," I replied. "But I think of you every time I think about this event, so I think this brief diversion justifies the time it takes to tell."

"What part of the story reminds you of me?" Latrine asked.

"Poop," I replied.

"Poop?" queried Latrine. "This better be good...nobody was in more shit during this war than I was." Latrine laughed.

"No," I replied. I mean poop, not shit."

"Oh for God's sake...let's just get it over with." Latrine insisted.

OK, Latrine, here goes. We had been doing our thing that morning - welding on a trenching machine belonging to a Korean unit. The trenching machine was located at a small Korean camp way-off the beaten path...I remember what seemed like miles and miles of winding dirt road, with no other traffic. It was the perfect place to be ambushed, except the VC wouldn't have any reason to expect such an easy target to come wondering by. Our strategy to avoid trouble was to go as fast as the truck and dirt road would allow.

The morning felt more hot and humid than normal – any activity brought a hard sweat. It took little time to make the required repairs and we were off again. The Koreans were thankful for our assistance, and very hospitable in return. Several pots of what appeared to be stew were cooking over fires, but one didn't have to look in the pots to know what was brewing...the smell of fish heads and rice permeated the air for miles in every direction. The smell was awful...it set the tone for the camp, one of remoteness, isolation, primitive lifestyle, living in holes, no electricity, no running water, open sewers. Did we want to stay long enough to eat? No thanks; we have to keep moving.

"If the food smelled that bad, I'm glad you didn't eat –I can only imagine what you would have done to me when it came out the other end," Latrine remarked.

"Well, I got you anyway," I responded. "Let me continue."

Another Step in a Long Journey

Even though the Koreans offered to share their food, the small camp wasn't the kind of place you wanted to spend time. Claymore mines were everywhere...I couldn't believe the numbers of claymores scattered around the perimeter. Between the rows of claymores was strand after strand of barbed wire – they were obviously prepared for anything that came along. Topping it off, their defensive positions inside the perimeter were below ground, in trenches.

We left the Korean camp, relieved we were able to leave it behind, but apprehensive about the trip back. Our strategy going out was the same strategy we employed going in – go as fast as the truck and dirt road would allow us to travel.

On the way back to camp, I began feeling sick – muscle cramps, dizziness, hot and sweaty. My first thought was, boy, the smell of fish heads and rice cooking really messed up my stomach. By the time we returned to ChuLamNam, I knew I needed to visit the latrine - immediately. My favorite seat was open - being the middle of the day, I was the only one around. As I got comfortable, what started as diarrhea soon turned to vomiting, which turned to more diarrhea and then more vomiting. Soon, the vomiting and diarrhea were coming together, and I found myself using two holes at once. Eventually, I found myself lying on the floor, unable to maintain my balance. Someone eventually found me and called the medics.

The medics carried me out of the latrine on a stretcher – I was happy there was no audience – and took me to the aid station where I was placed on a canvas cot. As I remember it, the aid station was similar to our other buildings...a basic wooden floor with canvas walls and roof. The tent was just a basic open area, not at all like the clinic offices 40 years in the future. It didn't take the medics long to start intravenous fluids.

"What are intravenous fluids?" Latrine asked. "I don't think I have ever had one of those."

"I'm sure you haven't," I replied. "They are a people thing...the closest thing for a latrine would be somebody bringing a water hose in to wash you out. No, on second thought, the water hose treatment would be more like getting an enema...that's not something you want either. Intravenous fluids are solutions they put into a human through a big needle stuck in your arm. It is nice you are interested in learning, but it isn't really something a latrine needs to know."

The medics no sooner started the IV when I knew I was going to have another bowel movement – the stomach cramps were the kind that tied you in a knot. "You are not going anywhere," said the medic. "Just lay there and don't move."

"But I have to go," I pleaded using my most pathetic voice.

"You are not going anywhere. Just lay there – you're going to have to do what you have to do," came the rather cold, unsympathetic response.

Another Step in a Long Journey

Regardless of how hard I squeezed my butt-cheeks together, they couldn't hold back the flood of what was about to come. At first there was just a little; warm and wet under my hips. But the cramps came again, and again, and again...each time I had lost a little more ability to hold the flood back, until I reached the point where there was no longer any use trying. I knew my fatigue pants were soaking up the warm fluid, but they could only absorb so much. I remember my mother telling me to always wear clean underwear in case something happened, but on this particular day I wasn't wearing any underwear at all – it wouldn't have made a difference anyway. The liquid eventually covered the small of my back and was working its way towards my shoulders.

Where was it all this slurry coming from? I remember thinking "I have to be totally empty by now, but it keeps coming! I want to die – the cramps are horrendous...and I am lying in my own feces - from my knees to the back of my head. I have reached a new low – lying in my own feces – it is even in my hair- this is far from the movie-script death I had imagined. I wonder if someone will bother to hose me off before they put me in a bag to send my body home.

"Did you die?" asked Latrine.

"No! Shit no. I'm right here. I still haven't died yet," I responded. "If I had died, I wouldn't be talking to you now."

"But I died in the fire and explosion that took me, and I'm talking to you." Latrine insisted.

"Yah, but...but...but...that's not the way it works with people," I tried to explain. "People are good for one big go-around on earth; that's it. I know some people believe human spirits hang around after we have died; some believe humans come back as other animals or objects; while others believe we just die and are gone. I'm not sure what I believe - but I do know we are around as long as others remember us, think about us, and celebrate our lives and memories. I believe that is why you are here with me today. Latrine...you are still very much alive in the memories of those you served with...you will be alive as long as the last man is standing"

"Wow! That's nice of you to say, Bob," said Latrine as he gazed into the distance. "You know, maybe I wasn't always a Latrine...maybe at some time I was a human who died, and I just came back as a latrine in Vietnam. Maybe that is why I could always relate to you idiots – at some point I may have been an idiot too!"

"You are certainly demonstrating all the characteristics," I responded. "But let me get back to describing my shitty, near death experience at the hands of our own medics."

"But remember," Latrine expressed, "this story is about me, not you!"

"I remember, and I'm about done," I responded.

Another Step in a Long Journey

I remained on the cot, motionless except for the action taking place in my bowls, until the IVs were empty. “What do I do now?” I asked, half expecting the medics to lead me to a nice hospital-type shower, clean me up, give me some fresh cloths, something cold to drink, and a fresh bed to rest on for a day-or-two. Not here!

“We don’t care what you do now, as long as you get out of our aid station,” was the medic’s reply.

I respond by stating the obvious, “But I’m all shitty.”

“Any clean-up is up to you, Spencer – maybe one of your buddies will hose you down.”

There is no way I’ll be asking Jim Swick, or Bill Greenhalgh, or anyone else to hose me down. I could count on them to do it...but they’d have to screw-around with me first – and there is no telling what that would entail.

“But where can I go?” I am becoming desperate.

“Spencer, we know you are not as dumb as you act. We’ll tell you once more. We don’t care where you go or what you do; you simply need to get out of our aid station. You are stinking up the place.”

So out the door I go, feeling like Rosie the Skunk, heading for the shower house. I have about a 50-50 chance of there being water in the storage tank – I have no idea of what I am going to do if there isn’t. I don’t want to meet anyone.

The shower house is a short journey, but the feces is already burning my skin...I already feel a rash developing over the back-half of my body. I drop my pants and boots outside in the dirt. The flies have already started to gather – some had followed me from the aid station, others had joined us along the way – it was like a parade. I go inside, turn the facet, and water comes out. Thank God!

“Thanks for sharing your shitty story, Bob”, said Latrine. “But here I am, sharing a story about being blown-up by a grenade, and you’re telling some silly story about pooping yourself. I don’t see the comparison – you get shitty and I get dead...there is a big difference there.”

Latrine, my story is about your story...the stories tie together...it seems everything in Vietnam ties together into one continuous, drawn out, long story. Our stories are like a can of fishing worms, entangled so when you pull one worm, several others come with it. The problem is not telling a story, it is telling a story without the surrounding events getting in the way. When I think back on the night you were blown up in that tragic accident, I can’t help but think about the Korean USO show and the girls bending over on stage, the guys playing with the grenade and pulling and dropping the pin, being sick and picked up off your floor, and all the bullshit in-between.

Visiting with you, Latrine, has been an interesting experience for me. 45 years ago, I could never have guessed we would be having this discussion – hell, a year ago I would never have guessed it. But

Another Step in a Long Journey

our minds and our ability and desire to cope are interesting things...once we determine where we need to be, there are often a number of roads that will help get us there. You have been a great help for me. Without you sharing your perspective on these events, I'm sure they wouldn't have come back to me in such detail...you were very helpful.

As I sat there, in a daze, memories of the past going through my head, a truism came to mind. "We live life going forward, but we understand life by going backwards". I commented to Latrine.

"What was that you said," Latrine queried? "Are you trying to be some sort of philosopher or something?"

"No, No," I replied. "I really don't know squat – certainly nothing philosophical. But it dawned on me that we seem to go through life, especially when we are 18, 19 or 20 years old, as if we have our heads up our asses, not really understanding what we are doing. At that age we haven't had the life experiences necessary to make decisions that are as good as the ones we will make later in life...it is only later, when we are looking back over our lives that we begin to understand some of what we did. My comment is just that: we live life going forward, but understand it only by going backwards. That is one of the reasons I wanted to get your story, Latrine...so I can better understand myself during that period of time and how all the little insignificant events that occurred grew to the point they would influence the rest of my life. I am trying to better understand myself by going backwards.

"Well, OK", Latrine replied. "It seems to make sense when you put it that way. I was just concerned you were trying to be a smart ass again. I don't like people screwing with me."

"I remember that...I feel the same way – and I know our brothers share the feeling – don't fuck with us! So, if you don't screw with me I won't screw with you, and together we won't mess with the others" I offered.

"You got a deal," Latrine offered.

"Having the opportunity to share some thoughts and get your perspective on the events we talked about has been very helpful to me," I confessed to Latrine. "I have learned that sometimes we put walls up not to keep people out, but to see who cares enough to break them down. Latrine, you are obviously one of those who care enough to tear walls down. All your brothers appreciate that."

"Thanks, Bob, I appreciate your comment," replied Latrine. "Are you going to be able to get off the second seat on the left, or are you going to set there all night?"

No, I have to get up and get going...reality is calling me home. But don't worry, I won't tell anyone where I've been – the afternoon will be our little secret, at least until I have time to put your words to paper. But once I put your words down, our secret is over...that's the trouble with writing; you have to expose yourself and allow yourself to be vulnerable.

Another Step in a Long Journey

Latrine had a questioning look on his face. “Do you mean expose yourself as when you pull your pants down to poop while sitting next to a dozen other guys?”

“Kind of,” I responded. “Only maybe more difficult than that...most of us could pull our pants down just about anywhere, but we are very careful about sharing our emotions or letting others know how we feel inside. Know what I mean? Sharing our thoughts, or our feelings, is viewed by many as giving up our last bastion of privacy. Writing is easy...it’s the sharing what’s in your head that’s hard.”

As I lifted myself off of the second seat on the left, I pulled up my pants, tucked in my shirt, cinched up my belt and buttoned my fly, and thanked Latrine for the visit. As I neared the door, I turned and whispered, “I’d like to return some day.”

Latrine’s only response, “Drop the toilet paper before you leave – it’s my last roll.”

The End