

The First Step in a Long Journey

The Rain

The rain. I thought I knew about rain, and cold, and being miserable – but I have never known anything like this. There is no way to describe it...no terms anyone back in the world would be familiar with. Attempting to describe monsoon rain in a letter home would be fruitless. The term monsoon rain means nothing unless you are standing in it, cold, soaked to the bone and covered with mud from head-to-foot.

I have only been in country for a few days...can't believe I have nearly a year left. To say the thought is depressing...well, it goes beyond depressing, to something I can't even comprehend. I think the reality of my situation is sinking in; the same reality that thousands of veterans face as they begin their tours of duty in Vietnam.

Our reality is uncertainty. I thought I knew what my reality would be, but I realize now I was clueless, totally incapable of imagining such a place. We have given Uncle Sam the right to do with us what he feels necessary. We have given up our privacy, our independence, our rights, and our freedoms. We are pawns in a game of chess, played on a chessboard the size of Vietnam. We don't make many decisions – at least none that seem meaningful.

It is a helpless, hopeless feeling. At this moment, I feel as though I have nothing – absolutely nothing – except this very second in time. No, it is worse than that – to have nothing means you are even with the world. I have less than nothing, because I have an obligation to do my time in Vietnam. Having nothing is taking on a new meaning; I would rather have nothing back in the world than nothing in Vietnam. I reach a new emotional low as I contemplate being 19-years old, new in Vietnam with “less than nothing.” What the hell!

As I think about my memories of Vietnam, the details are blurred but the feelings remain. During the past 43 years, I believed I would lose the feelings that had been irreversibly etched in my subconscious, just as I had lost the details of my memories. I have told myself many times, “Don't think about the memories and the feelings will go away. Forget about yesterday and focus on tomorrow; after all, that is where you are going to spend the rest of your life.”

Vietnam veterans have been good at that – put the memories out of mind and cover up the feelings of anger, depression, anxiety and self-doubt with drugs, alcohol, and isolation.

That strategy hasn't worked for me. Those feelings are like a wound that has scabbed over. I no longer see the wound under the scab that time has created, but I know the wound is there. Some of the wound has healed, as I believe I have improved over time. Some of it is still healing. Based on my feelings, some of the wound is still raw. I need to pick away at the scab to expose the wound, starting around the edge where the picking is less painful.

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At this point in my life, I am anxious to pick away at the scab. By exposing it to the light of today's reality, I think the wound will finish healing. I don't want to forget; I don't want to become numb to how I feel about the events. However, I do want to understand how and why those events have changed me. So, I will begin picking away at the edges – learning to be comfortable with what I find under the surface.

We have been in this bunker for about 30 minutes now...just the three of us. The bunker is on the ridge of a large hill overlooking our base camp. It is a work in progress – part in and part out of the ground. A pile of sand bags, each one hand-filled by one of the boat people, has been stacked around the edge of the bunker. I remember thinking, "This looks great, as long as we are on one side and the Gooks stay on the other." This bunker was officially known as outpost number one; one of three outposts positioned outside the fortified perimeter, on the ridge overlooking the Battalion's base camp. The other two outposts are spaced along the ridge, several hundred yards apart. I can't see them through the rain, but I know they are there.

The monsoon rains rendered any view of the surrounding area impossible. Over the next year, I would have plenty of opportunities to take in the surrounding sights. A long green valley, very flat, ran east and west to our south. Flowing through the valley was a river – this time of year flowing over its banks and flooding the surrounding land. Off the ridge to the west was an arm of the valley...it ran north from the valley to the hills to our south. The view from the outposts stretched for miles and miles, encompassing several small villages scattered along the river.

We are in this bunker to act as a forward guard and lookout for the base camp below. The three outposts serve to hold the high ground above the camp. I try to convince myself the strategic positioning of the base camp and out posts makes sense – it must to somebody – but I can't. Maybe it is one of those ideas that look good on paper, but crouching in a bunker, wet, cold and scared to death gives you an entirely different perspective on the defensive strategy some general in Saigon envisioned. I wished he could have been sharing our bunker that night.

I am the new guy in the bunker. I really don't know the other two, but I admire their outward sense of confidence – almost cocky in their attitudes– but at this point, I don't know the difference between the normal GI superficial bullshit and my new reality. Hell, maybe there is no difference.

But they have experience – they have been here before - and I know instinctively I can trust them. After all, they have just as much at risk as I do.

So much time has passed since that night, I no longer remember their names...I can barely muster up a clouded image of their faces. Maybe the clouded image I recall isn't really one person at all....it might be the combination of many. The images are young. We are all young - young enough to measure experience in terms of weeks or months instead of years. I learned they came over on the boat and are proud of it. They are also happy about being able to return to the world within a few months.

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This is the first time I remember hearing the term “short.” I quickly learn being short is the big differences between them and me. I could have been famous or had lots of money, but none of that would have mattered. They had the one thing of value that really counted...they were short, and I had 360 days left. Being short was brought up countless times during the night – by them, not me. Each time short was mentioned, I felt like my time left was getting longer and longer- until the thought of a year of nights like this seemed more like a life sentence – maybe it would be.

Names aren't necessary now – I would like them to be, but the names have left me. Names are like the clouded image of faces...just as I feel they are about to appear, they fade back into the thick fog of my memory. I'd like to believe their names aren't important – but they are. Names help provide our identity...in places like Vietnam, names help to identify us - we often become our names. On the other hand, the two other men in the bunker that night could have been any one of hundreds of young men in Vietnam during the late summer of 1967. They could have been any one of us.

Memories don't require names, but stories do. For these purposes, I will name the first individual Tex. Tex was a cowboy, although that isn't how he got the name. He was from Texas – that is all it took. I guess we had as many guys named Tex as we had men from the state of Texas. I never met anyone from Texas that objected.

The other fellow, Lefty, was a taller, slender individual who walked with a slight tilt to the left...I noticed he was also left handed. But as he stepped out of the bunker and took a few steps before relieving himself, his obvious list to the left, as he struggled through the mud, had to have been the origin of his name. Lefty spoke with a slight southern accent as he returned to the bunker, “We never had inside plumbing at home - peeing outside comes real natural to me.”

Lefty suggests we test out the M-60 before it gets too dark. “You never know,” he said. “This is just the kind of night those Gooks like...they could be right in our lap and we wouldn't even know they were coming.” The nonchalant nature of such a horrifying comment leaves me wondering...is this guy some sort of Audi Murphy? How could a person make such a comment about something that seemed so very real – about something that seemed so likely to happen? My entire body is chilled.

“What do we have to do to get approval to fire the 60?” I quipped. “Hell, you ARE a newbie,” he responded. “When you are out here, you do what you need to do.” By this time, Tex had a belt of ammunition locked and loaded. “Send a few bursts down that hill,” he said as he nodded in my direction.

Looking down the hill was like looking into a heavy fog – there was nothing but waves of rain coming down. “I can't see where I'm shooting.” “It don't matter,” Lefty said. “If there is anything out there in this weather, it deserves to be shot.”

So I let go with a couple of bursts. This wasn't at all like the firing we did during training. This was for real. The power of the M-60 was awesome. For a brief moment I thought, “Yah. Bring it on Mr. Gook.”

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Then I remembered that this isn't like hunting at home...these animals shoot back. A few practice shots are all I need.

The rain continues to come down, going from bad to worse. It was as though Mother Nature would pause briefly to take a deep breath, and then exhale wildly as the skies opened up. Nothing I know about rain and cold and misery applies here. Here, people don't come in out of the rain...they stand in it; they lay in it; they work in it; they wallow in the mud endlessly. I conclude that this is part of my new reality – a reality my bunker mates had already learned to accept.

Nothing is dry...I try to keep my cigarettes tucked in as close to my body as possible, even though I cuss every time I have to dig one out. I cuss worse after digging out a fresh smoke, only to have it soak up the rain before I get it lit. The Army is the recipient of my frustration, as it is for all of us. FTA! FTA! I repeat it over and over in my mind. The Army is responsible for everything wrong in my life right now.

I look at my Timex – this cheap bastard - through the moisture condensing on the face, I can see it is just after 6 o'clock. It is going to be a long night.

I am feeling very uneasy about the night ahead. This whole war business isn't what I thought it was going to be. I'm afraid...I think it is the unknown. I hope I get used to it. I am getting wetter by the minute. And cold – my teeth are chattering. I'm glad my mother and friends back home can't see me now.

We settle into the bunker, each of us trying to find a way to stay as dry as possible. We chat back and forth, mostly about what we did back in the world and what we were going to do when we get back. There is some storytelling, and I quickly learn that the first liar doesn't stand a chance. I would often want to declare "bullshit" after hearing a story, but what sense would that make? This is the only entertainment we have.

Tex says, "Did you hear about the experiments they have been doing back in the world?"

"I don't think so," I respond, "but I'm interested." Tex had just sucked me in.

"Yah, you know how a cat will land on his feet when he is dropped?" He asked. "Well, they been studying just how far you can drop a cat and have him live through it."

"Really?" I respond. "That's crazy! What sense does that make?"

"Shit, you know all the money the government spends on studies – they study everything...I'm thinking the results will have something to do with this war," Speculates Tex. "Sounds to me like they are planning to drop cats into the jungle, maybe with sensors on them to detect enemy troop movement."

"You said "cats," didn't ya?"

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“Ya, how far you can drop a cat and have him land on his feet and survive. They found out that most cats will land on their feet and survive when dropped out of a 3-story window...but go any higher and most of them die.”

“Well, no shit,” Lefty says. “Some genius from Texas must have been in charge of that study.”

“You haven’t heard the best,” said Tex as he wiped the rain out of his eyes. “When the cats are dropped out of windows above 9 stories, most of them survive...it is just when they are dropped from between 3 and 9 stories that they die.”

I’m getting wetter and colder – more miserable by the minute – not even a good story can put me in the mood to debate the merits of a dropping-cats-from-windows-study. I’m content to just listen, realizing this conversation is going to be way over my head. But not so with Lefty – he demands the details.

“You are so full of shit,” Lefty says. “Where did you read this cat study? Don’t tell me a book or a magazine, cause you don’t have any. If you did, you wouldn’t read them – I don’t even think you know how to read. And how many cats did it take to prove this crazy theory?”

Tex responded, “Just because you have a little penis, doesn’t mean I don’t know how to read. I didn’t read it in a magazine; I learned it in a letter from home. And if you are concerned about how many cats it took to do the study, you are missing the point. The number of cats they used just don’t matter. This was a government study!”

Oh my God – I’ve got nearly an entire year of this bullshit to go. I wonder how many weeks it will be before I am dreaming up stories about dropping cats out of 9-story windows. I don’t know what telling such stories means, but I pledge to stop myself the first time and try to figure it out.

I look at my Timex again. I can’t see my arm in the dark of the bunker, let alone the watch. So I dig for my Zippo, lean into the sandbag wall to keep the flame dry and not expose everyone to the light, and ignite the small flame. Moisture continues to condense on the face of my watch; I can barely see it is 8 o’clock. Looking down the hill behind us, activity around the base camp is slowing down. We decide we need to get serious about what we are out here for. Lefty declares our rotation, “2 hours on and 4 hours off; I’ll be first, Tex, you are second, and Spencer, you go last.” I knew immediately I was getting the short end of the stick, simply because that is the way the Army works; it is the game of “get the new guy” carried to extremes. I realize the rotation doesn’t make any difference, as nobody is going to get any sleep in this weather anyway.

Being wet is something you can’t get away from...I am wet on the outside, I’m wet on the inside, I’m cold to the very core. Tex and Lefty have to be just as wet and cold as I am, but they don’t seem to complain. I wonder why...but I know enough not to ask. Thinking about it gives me something to take my mind off the rain, the cold and the fear. Maybe real veterans just suck it up, don’t show their emotions, and take what life gives them. That’s impressive – I hope I can learn to hide my feelings and emotions. Or

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maybe what we are experiencing right now really isn't anything compared to what they have already experienced, and what I still have to look forward to. The thought makes me shiver.

As the hour gets later, the anticipation in the bunker climbs. It is totally black. No moon, no stars, not a light anywhere, except for the faint glimmer of flood lights from the base camp parameter. With the loss of sight, the other senses take over. Suddenly, you are able to hear sounds above the pounding rain. The faint sound of a rifle safety being pushed off. The sound of someone crawling through the wet grass. People whispering. It is time to shoot off a flare.

Tex fires a flare, high into the air to our west. The anticipation of the flare finally opening is tremendous. I know for sure there are going to be hundreds of those little black-pajama bastards within yards of us. They have to be close – we could hear them whispering! I wonder, "How long is it going to take from the time we see them coming, until it is all over?" The thought and the feeling is indelibly etched into my memory.

The flare pops and illuminates the area like it was high noon. Nothing. Nothing moving anywhere. Maybe they are behind us – they could be coming from any direction! Fire another flare just in case! The second flare lights the sky before the first flare hits the ground. Still nothing. Nothing but sheets and waves of cold rain pounding the hill.

I feel like the death row prisoner who just received a last-minute stay of execution from the governor. I am not going to die right now, but the night is long, I am cold and wet, and I still have nearly a year to serve on my sentence in Vietnam.

Where are they? I know we could hear them moving.

Looking back on that night, I realize I had already started learning the lessons many of us would take home from Vietnam: like just suck it up; you don't have to talk about it; don't show your emotions; and don't show your fear. Tex and Lefty were great role models...they started teaching me the lessons of Vietnam – the same lessons I would help teach dozens of others. Keep it inside, after all you are a soldier, a man (although most of us didn't feel like we deserved the title), you are tough, mean, willing to do anything you are told, uncaring except for your own.

We settle back in; by this time I am on watch. Before assuming the fetal position in an attempt to stay warm, the other two give me the short sermon about what will happen if they catch me sleeping – they will summarily cut my balls off and use a bayonet to hang them from the bunker wall - I believe them. I'm glad it is my turn on duty, as I can't rest anyway. I need to be watching with my own eyes, not that I can see anything, but I can't rest not knowing.

I get a sense of pride knowing the other two are trusting enough to take a break while I stand guard. Looking back, they probably realize I am too scared to doze off...and they had to trust me...they were just too exhausted to do otherwise. Nobody ever passed up an opportunity to sleep. Not that they

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slept – sleep was impossible. The tension was just too high – even for them. They were up and down, looking, listening for those unidentifiable noises in the night.

The rain continues to come down in sheets, no wind, just rain. I think about the cold North Dakota winters as a kid, but I don't ever remember being this cold. It wasn't the frostbite kind of cold, but a numbing kind of cold that chilled through to the bone. It was the kind of cold that starts you shivering and never lets up. A painful kind of cold.

But maybe it wasn't so much the cold as the fear and anticipation during that first night at an outpost. Everything is so unexpectedly real, not like the movies. The location is real – we are actually in Vietnam. The threat is real – there are actually people out here who want to kill us. It is dark, and cold, and wet, and scary – and I have a whole year left.

Seeing anything is impossible, so you automatically revert to your other senses of smell, touch, taste and sound. I was so new the smell of Vietnam still burned my nostrils and throat. It is a repulsive odor – thick and heavy – the smell of rotting waste, fish, flies and mosquitoes. On this night the monsoon rain helped wash some of the odors away, although the air is never completely clean. Sound is the only sense left to rely on.

On a night like this, once the sounds of the enemy approaching begin, they are likely to continue until morning. My hearing was much better then, and so was my imagination. Or maybe it wasn't my imagination; maybe it was a strong desire to survive. Those noises are still out there. There are the sounds of the enemy crawling through the grass; equipment rattling; the noise of heavy breathing; whispering.

There are more flares during the night - each one no less exciting than the last. The anticipation of what may be out there, headed in our direction, grows until another flare is the only weapon in our arsenal that can satisfy our need to know.

“But what about giving away our position?” I ask. “Are we going to help them identify exactly where we are?”

“Shit,” says Tex, “They already know exactly where we are. We're not showing them anything.”

Lefty agrees. “I just want to make damn sure we see them before they are dropping grenades in this bunker.”

I am easily convinced...I like the relief from the unknown the flares provide. If the truth were known, I would shoot one flare after another until they are gone. I want to survive this night. I realize I have a lot to learn...a lot of growing up to do. I am glad that the folks back home, and especially Tex and Lefty, can't tell what I am thinking – how I am feeling. I am not as brave as I thought I was, but I pledge to never let it show.

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Throughout the night, the faint glow of flares being shot by the other two outposts appear, and then fade in the pounding rain. I wonder what they are seeing, what they are hearing, how they are feeling.

Our senses stayed on high alert until about 4 o'clock in the morning, when another round of GI logic took place.

Lefty says, "If the gooks haven't hit us by now, it is getting too late for them to come."

Tex says, "You're right. It is going to be morning before too long. I think we are in the clear."

I take that as great news, although I don't comment one way or another. Just believing that the worst of the danger is over is a great relief – even if it may not have been. I want it to be over. My body had been pumping adrenalin to the max for the past 10 hours - I have experienced enough anticipation for one night. I am totally exhausted. If I could only go to sleep.

"It's 4 o'clock – Spencer, it is your time to stand watch." Says Tex. Tex and Lefty reassume the fetal position in their respective corners of the bunker and find sleep almost immediately. I realize once again why I was chosen to stand third watch.

I stand my watch, constantly looking in a 360 to make sure I have all directions covered. I am still wet, cold and miserable, but something has changed. The largest part of the threat is over. We are going to survive.

Although I have many memories of Vietnam, some more traumatic than this night, memories of this night have provided me with some answers. I believe this night was symbolic...symbolic of the events, emotions and feelings each of us have an opportunity to experience. But while we may share similar experiences, just as we are each individuals, each of our bodies and minds respond in a different manner.

There is a truism that says, once the mind is expanded by knowledge, it never returns to its original state. Just as it is true for knowledge, I believe it is true for trauma, fear, anxiety, or any other emotion we experience – especially those emotions that trigger a "fight or flight" reaction. Once our minds are "stretched" by an experience, we seem to be able to handle similar experiences with little difficulty – that is until we experience the next bigger event.

It doesn't seem to matter if the events are real or imagined...our minds can't tell the difference. When we tell ourselves an event is real, our minds believe it and respond accordingly. Our brain floods our body with adrenalin, giving our physical body the tools it needs to respond....the greater the perceived threat, the greater the response by the brain.

Of interest to me now is understanding the effect my experience has had on my life. If a night at outpost number one in the monsoon rain has made a difference in me, surely similar experiences have affected thousands of others.

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Because of that night, I have lived my life questioning my own courage – wondering if I really have what it takes. Is it natural to be so fearful on such a night, or do I have a character flaw that has denied me the ability to be a real man? What are my emotional limitations? What if, someday, unexpectedly, I find myself in a situation that will test me – will I have the courage to prove myself, or be exposed for the person I really might be?

For years I have struggled with nightmares...I seldom remember details, but I wake up fighting, seemingly struggling for my life. I scream out, sometimes fighting, other times try to strangle my wife – she is understanding, even though her patience should have long run out. What I have the potential to do during these nightmares concerns me, so we have no weapons in our house.

I wonder if other veterans may struggle with the same concern. 58,000 people died in country during the Vietnam conflict, but another 100,000 committed suicide after returning home. How many others have stopped short of suicide, but struggle with personal emotions that have kept them from fulfilling their true potential? I believe the number is great. I am saddened.

Like thousands of others, I struggle with feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness, although by every other measure I have been successful in life. I frequently feel I am just not good enough. I am just not worthy. I should have been one of the 58,000 who died in country so that somebody more deserving could have returned. Many days I feel I would have been happier if we could have traded places, and one of those we lost could have gone on to live his dreams.

I have learned that many veterans return home and find themselves seeking out that adrenaline rush they experienced during their tour of duty. Looking back, I recognize I did the same thing - I rode bareback in rodeos for a couple of years. I did it not because I was ever good at it, nor did I enjoy the trips to the emergency room. It is all about the adrenaline rush as you sit on the horse, waiting for the shoot gate to open, knowing you have absolutely no control over what is about to happen. It is all about proving to yourself that you have the courage to do what many others wouldn't do. The comparison between that feeling and the emotions I experienced that night in the monsoon rains are very similar. You know something is going to happen, or could happen, you just don't know what that something is going to be.

Throughout my life, I found myself over compensating for the feelings of self-doubt, continually trying to prove myself. I have always tried to be better – the first one to volunteer, the first one to tackle the job everyone else avoided – wanting to be better in other's eyes than I felt myself. The charade has become a viscous circle for me, raising expectations of me in other's eyes, while I struggle just to hold myself together. The result of my game has been to increase the gap between what others see in me, and how I feel about myself. The wider the gap, the more I struggle to maintain the façade of a man who has his life together. It is like running on a treadmill – I run and run, but never go anywhere.

It is obvious I need to work on my self-esteem. I am not sure my feelings of self-doubt originated in Vietnam, but the kernels seeded in childhood were certainly fertilized, cultivated and nurtured during my

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two tours of duty there. This night in outpost number one is not totally responsible; that would be too easy. I know it is the accumulation of a number of stories, very clouded in the memory of my mind, which contributed. Like pieces of a puzzle, I will continue to put them together - going as much by feelings as by memory - until I have a better understanding of my issues.

My goal is to feel better about myself, and to find peace with, and for, those that made the extreme sacrifice. I know after giving their lives, they want each of us to find the peace we deserve. They would want us to remember them and to morn for their loss, but would not want us to suffer because of them.

In an attempt to find my own answers, I intend to write additional short stories about my memories of Vietnam. After 40 plus years, this is the one strategy I have left...grab pieces wherever I can find them, as meaningless and insignificant as they may seem, and piece the puzzle together.