



VCU

Virginia Commonwealth University
VCU Scholars Compass

Mighty Pen Project Anthology & Archive

Mighty Pen Project

2016

Bender

Jess Lockhart

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/mighty_pen_archive



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), and the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

© The Author(s)

Downloaded from

https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/mighty_pen_archive/23

This 1961-1980 Army is brought to you for free and open access by the Mighty Pen Project at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mighty Pen Project Anthology & Archive by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.

Bender Jess Lockhart

Mike Platoon was just finishing a scheduled three-night, two-day R&R after a month of patrol missions.

I told the platoon sergeant to form the platoon in front of the company headquarters. I stood in front of the platoon looking at a bunch of guys who could have been character actors in a hobo movie. They had ammo bandoleers, Claymore mines, and socks filled with C-rations hanging all over themselves. As rag-tag as they looked, they were my men and brothers. We had mostly arrived in country within a few weeks of each other and had learned our trade together, and we were pretty good.

I yelled in my best twenty-two-year-old command voice, "Report."

The platoon sergeant answered, "Fourteen men present. Two on R&R. One in the platoon tent."

I went over to the platoon sergeant and asked in a low voice, "What do you mean one in the platoon tent?"

He replied, "Bender refuses to come to the formation."

I told him to take charge of the platoon and stomped off toward the platoon tent.

I opened the flaps of the partially lit, large tent and saw Bender sitting on the edge of his cot, staring at the walls. As I approached Bender, I told him, "Get your gear and get out in formation."

Bender replied, "I ain't going."

I sat beside him and asked, "What?"

He told me that he had had a dream the night before that if he went on this mission he was going to die. I tried to explain that we all had moments when we were scared but we worked through it and that it had only been a dream.

Bender Jess Lockhart

Again, “I told you I ain’t going.”

“Do you know that you could get court-martialed for missing a movement?”

He replied, “I ain’t going.”

I went to the company command post (CP) and told the first sergeant that Bender was in the platoon tent. I returned to the platoon to board trucks and load on helicopters to be inserted somewhere on an unnamed trail to start our fourteen-day mission.

After we got settled in our ambush site, I asked my RTO what Bender’s problem was. He told me that before I had taken over the platoon they had almost been annihilated; only six men survived, two of whom were wounded. A man on watch had fallen asleep and the VC walked up and sprayed them all as they slept, killing ten men. Bender was one of the two men wounded. He got an AK round in his butt and was in the hospital for three months. Bender was the last of the survivors left in country and he had only two months left in his twelve-month tour.

After seven days we were resupplied. I got a note from the first sergeant that Bender was up on charges to be court-martialed. Two months earlier I had written Bender up for a Bronze Star with a “V” for pulling two wounded men back to the medic during a firefight. So here he was getting court-martialed and he had a CIB, Bronze Star with a “V,” a Purple Heart, and an Air Medal (for forty-plus air assault missions) including the other Vietnam medals. This guy was not a coward; he was just a twenty-year-old kid who got scared.

I later found out Bender did get court-martialed and was sentenced to spend the remainder of his tour in Long Bien Jail (LBJ); he received a dishonorable discharge.

The next time I saw Bender was at the platoon’s reunion in 1995. During the reunion, I got him off to the side and asked him how things were going. He told me that he finished his tour in LBJ and came back to the States where he was discharged. He returned to his old

Bender Jess Lockhart

neighborhood in Newark where he had grown up and gone to school. His neighbors ostracized him, and he was deprived of a soldier's privilege of telling war stories, or showing medals that he had earned. He couldn't even get a decent job because of the dishonorable discharge. Bender finally found a lawyer who got the discharge upgraded. He continued with his life, but with the shame hanging over him. In his mind, he felt he had let his brothers down and was a coward.

That night in my motel room, I told my wife that Bender had broken my heart because I felt I had let him down. I should have done something that morning rather than walking away and leaving him to face a court-martial. I considered myself a good combat leader, but as a twenty-two-year-old the army had not prepared me to cope with the psychological challenges of an infantry platoon leader. After Vietnam, the army recognized PTSD as a disorder and trained leaders in identifying and helping soldiers with symptoms, rather than simply kicking the soldier aside and possibly ruining his life.

Sunday afternoon at the reunion, as everyone was hugging each other and saying their goodbyes, Bender came up to me and thanked me for letting him come to the reunion. With a lump in my throat, I told him, "Bill you were just a twenty-year-old kid who got scared. You have nothing to be ashamed of. We were all scared. You just dealt with the problem differently. The army handled the issue wrong. You were drafted and served your country; you didn't run to Canada or try to avoid the draft as a conscientious objector. You will always be a part of this platoon."

Bender has come to a couple of reunions since then and I always give him a hug.

I'm now almost seventy years old and it's been forty-seven years since that morning in Lia Khe. Sometimes I ponder what I could have done differently to keep Bender from facing a court-martial. I knew most of the officers on that board and I know I could have explained

Bender Jess Lockhart

Bender's frame of mind. I wasn't there for him and I'll have to live with that decision. I never judge a veteran's service, because we're all brothers and sisters with common thread of compassion that runs through us.