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Going Back Home

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It was another gloriously hot day when we departed Bien Hoa Air Base on 8 November 1967. The big Boeing jet from Texas Airways lurched down the runway with the fastest takeoff I had ever experienced. The pilot maxed out the engines and the rate of ascent was breathtaking. Everyone applauded. The pilot went on to announce shortly after we were airborne that in celebration of our departure, we had been chased down the runway by Vietcong mortars. We hadn't even paid any attention to all the commotion outside, so happy were we to be leaving. Half the plane fired up a cigarette and settled in for the long flight home.

We landed at San Francisco International and headed for the terminal. A gauntlet of hippies awaited us. I thought they were there to shake our hands, but they had another agenda. They proceeded to assault as many soldiers and sailors as they could. Four San Francisco policemen just stood by and watched. I could not fathom what the hippies were so enraged about as they spit on us and threw stuff from paper bags they carried. It was like they were possessed. They screamed "Murderers! Baby killers! Rapists!" There was clearly no room for discussion with these people. A very large black soldier wearing a green beret threw a haymaker and a hippie went down and stayed down. The rest of the group of hippies slowly backed off and we continued into the Terminal. Still confused by what had just happened we claimed our bags and got in line for customs. Down through the years that Green Beret became one of my personal heroes but a terrible sense of having been betrayed began to permeate my being and dominate my thoughts.

Inside the terminal we were greeted by bored customs personnel wanting to know if we had large sums of money or any weapons in our bags. They also said that importing war trophies was illegal and we had to declare any contraband. I did my best to look innocent. I had friends who had mailed AK-47's and some pistols home by disassembling them and mailing all the parts

separately; now I understood why they went to all that trouble. All of us said, “No, sir,” and we were automatically welcomed to the United States and told to put our bags on the buses waiting for us. They didn’t search one bag! I breathed a sigh of relief because had they searched my duffel bags, they would have found my bayonet and a pair of Army binoculars.

When we got to Oakland Army Base they came on the bus and told us it would take a while to process us, so we had to put our gear in lockers and get bedding for some old World War II-type metal bunk beds. We were marched over to the mess hall where we were given a steak with all the trimmings and our choice of dessert. The steak was tasteless. I could not help thinking that it was a bad omen. All of us were dead tired after the long flight and we crashed in those bunks for about six hours.

After breakfast we were ushered to some huge gymnasium-like buildings where row after row of old metal army desks were lined up. Each one had a station number and name on it. There was a saying in the army that “if you ever wanted to get anything done you needed an O-6 or an E-6,” meaning a colonel or a staff sergeant. True to form, a big staff sergeant walked in. After he got our attention, he told us how we were to process through all the stations. There was a personnel record station, a medical station, a finance station where they figured out how much money was owed to you. There was also a reenlistment station where they would give you a two-minute spiel on staying in the army for all the benefits, serving your country, etc. Most guys just said “FTA, Sarge! I’m going home.” But there were a few who reenlisted on the spot for some job other than infantry. One guy wanted to go Special Forces. I thought they were all nuts. Two years is enough. I couldn’t imagine signing your life away for four to six more years.

At one of the stations, I got a plane ticket to my home of record which was Midway City, California. Then I went to the finance station. After all the calculations I received my final pay

due which was a whopping $439.83. I shared a cab with three other guys back to the airport. We made sure to change into civilian clothes the minute we got there. Four hours later I was home.

My mother exploded out the front door of our home on Washington Avenue and joyfully embraced me. She kept saying “Thank God. Thank God,” while gently weeping. She held on and wouldn’t let me go. Finally, she released me, and my father, cold and remote as ever, reached out and shook my hand. My youngest brother was crying. I hugged him and told him, “It’s OK. I made it.” I would catch up with my other brothers later.

After a good meal and a beer, we all settled into the living room. After a little chitchat, an invisible wall began to impose itself between my family members and myself. I couldn’t shake the feeling that we had lost our ability to communicate somehow. I could not tell them about my year in Vietnam. When I did try, I found myself grasping for the right words. The right words never came to rescue me from the huge chasm that stood between us. It was embarrassing to be in that living room. The silences were enormous as I just stared into space. I know that I seemed to be staring at nothing in particular, but in my mind I was seeing all my friends who had been killed on 17 October 1967. All sixty-two of them. I loved them and they were gone now.

On the evening of 18 October 1967, I had been asked to go down to graves registration in Lai Khe to identify as many of the dead as I could. I took two friends with me and we went up and down the rows of body bags with a graves registration guy who had a flashlight. We opened each bag and peered inside to identify the soldier. Some of them we didn’t recognize. They were new guys from Alpha Company. We identified all the Delta Company guys and the battalion headquarters guys. Our dead battalion commander had already been sent to Saigon for some reason. We also identified the forward observer from the artillery, 2LT Harold “Pinky” Durham, who was later awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions on 17 October 1967.

After two hours of going through all the body bags we were emotionally exhausted. A heaviness settled into my chest, like something was suffocating me. Had I been able to weep, perhaps I could have gotten some relief, but I was too numb from the whole ordeal. All the survivors ended up getting drunk for the next week. Our battalion was no longer combat ready, so we got new guys in every day. They tiptoed around all of us old guys; that was fine with me. Three weeks later I left for the states.

Being back home was anticlimactic. Something was missing but I couldn't figure out what that something was. I bought a motorcycle. It was good to feel the wind in my face. Driving fast became a bad habit. A hundred and ten miles an hour was suddenly the new normal. I met some Hell's Angels and they asked me to ride with them after a few weeks. I declined, but they were the only ones interested in Vietnam. I liked those guys because they cared about me and my experiences. We had an easy camaraderie that was probably based on the violence we had experienced. My family, my other friends from high school, and strangers in bars didn't want to hear about Vietnam and that was just as hurtful as a bunch of hippies spitting at me.

I got back into college and maxed out every test. I had clarity of mind and studying was easy for the first time in my life. But getting all A's didn't satisfy me either. I got along with all my professors but had nothing in common with any of my fellow students. I began to feel even more alienated from everyone. I thought about my friend Ronald Domeneck who had survived what is now called The Battle of Ong Thanh. He had died five times on the battlefield on 17 October 1967 and had been brought back to life five times. With horrible wounds, he had been medevacked to Japan and finally ended up at Beaumont General Hospital in Fort Bliss, Texas which was near his home. I had tracked him down and called the ward he was in. We had a great

conversation. I told him not to be shocked if I showed up to visit him. We laughed and hung up the phone.

From the time I had been discharged back in November 1967 until my birthday in April 1968 I had been having some disturbing dreams. I would have recurring dreams about being on certain trails in the jungle, holding a conversation with unseen beings. The dreams would repeat themselves sometimes as many as ten times and then another series of dreams would begin. Some dreams were about ambushes that were blown and events in the dream were set out in a certain order. I had dreams about ground attacks. In them I was issuing orders like I was in charge. I would wake up sweating and confused, wondering why I would be having the same dream time and again. The stress of it all was becoming unbearable. Finally, the thought hit me like a tsunami: I have to go back to Vietnam. As soon as I thought it, I felt a peace descend over me like a benediction. It felt right. I told my family, my professors, one of whom started crying, and I told my new girlfriend, who did not take it well.

I told everyone that I would visit Domeneck first and then go down to the Santa Ana enlistment office and ask to go back to Vietnam. My mother was beside herself, but I could not be deterred. I borrowed a single-barreled shotgun from my younger brother because motorcyclists were not treated very well in those days and, with a rolled up sleeping bag and some clothes, I hit the road for El Paso, Texas. After two days I pulled up to the military police guarding the entrance to the hospital and they waved me in. I had forgotten about the shotgun strapped unconcealed behind me with my sleeping bag. I found my way to Domeneck's ward and parked my bike. When I found him, I was so happy I embraced him and my eyes got moist. Domeneck introduced me to everyone on his ward and then to the nurses, saying, "This is my friend Dave I told you all about from Vietnam." All the guys on the ward were Vietnam

returnees who would get operated on, then go home for recuperation and then come back for more operations. Some were amputees, some could not sit up without help and a couple of them were suffering from head wounds. One of the guys was blind and was helped about by another wounded Vet. I went around the room and shook their hands, asking who they had served with.

One of the nurses told me I could bring the motorcycle up into the ward and park it in the hallway, but they would have to store the shotgun in the office for now. Everybody thought it was just too cool that I had a shotgun with me for the ride from California. I said, "You should have seen the M.P.'s face at the gate. He didn't know whether to shit or go blind." The whole Ward started laughing.

Domeneck got a pass and put on some civilian clothes and we walked out the front gate. We headed to the first bar we came to and walked in. The guy behind the bar was white, about fifty years old and balding. He nodded at me and said, "You can stay but your friend has to go. He can't drink here." I couldn't understand what he said at first. When I finally understood I felt the same crushing weight in my chest as back at graves registration in Lai Khe. Then a surge of white-hot anger hit me and I headed for the bartender.

I yelled, "We were just in one of the biggest battles of Vietnam and you say he can't stay here? He died five times back there and he can't stay here?"

Domeneck grabbed my arm and started ushering me out of the bar, saying "It's OK, Dave. That's just the way it is here in Texas. We'll go somewhere else to drink."

Seething, all I could say was, "God! The ignorance."

We finally decided to go over to Juarez, Mexico and I am glad we did. We had a wonderful time there in a little cantina where they had dancing and a live band. Some of the

Mexican men actually made us dance with their wives and girlfriends. I have rarely encountered such generosity of spirit. We left Mexico that night with nothing but pleasant memories.

When I said goodbye to Domeneck and his buddies two days later, I didn't know if I would ever see him again, so it was a joyless parting. Everyone knew what my chances were of surviving another tour.

Three weeks later I was back in Vietnam. I managed to talk my way back to the First Infantry Division and then back to my old battalion. The new battalion commander of the Second Battalion Twenty-Eighth Infantry Regiment asked if I would accept a battlefield commission and I declined because he said I would have to go to another unit if I agreed. I wanted to be back in my old company. Delta Company. He shook my hand and told the Sergeant Major, "Send him back to Delta."

Over at Delta Company, Lieutenant Joe Devine took me straight in to meet our captain. I brought myself to the position attention and reported to Delta's C.O. I said, "Private First Class David Aldridge, reporting sir!"

He said, "You're Aldridge? You're the one who just left Second Platoon?"

I answered, "Yes, sir. Lieutenant Devine was my platoon leader."

The C.O. just stared at me for a few seconds and said, "I've heard about you, Aldridge. You want to be my three-six?"

"Three six" was a call sign. Three meant Third Platoon and the six meant the Leader, the guy in charge. It was a position normally held by a second lieutenant or a first lieutenant. I was stunned. All the stars seemed to align in that moment and I immediately said, "Yes, sir. I would be honored to be your Third Platoon leader. But what about my rank? I'm only a PFC." The

captain said, “Don’t worry about the rank. Just don’t wear any. I will promote you as fast as battalion will let me. You’re my 3-6.”

He stood up and offered me his hand. We shook hands; I saluted and left the orderly room. I looked around the company area. It was a familiar place alright, but it also just felt right. I breathed deeply and headed to the arms room to get a weapon. It was good to be back home again. Home is where the heart is. I was right where I was supposed to be and for the first time in my life, I knew it.