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Quang Tri Rain

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My day had finally come. Received orders! Leaving the battery and going home! Goodbye, Vietnam! But not before the army could get their last shot at me. I had spent days in a funky O-Club in Da Nang drinking bourbon with an alcoholic dog whose name is as lost as my hours there.

Then I heard, "Meier, report to the company for your boarding pass."

It was like a dream. I was getting on the Freedom Bird, going back to the world! Wow, the sensation when the plane lifted off and my body was no longer connected to the 'Nam couldn't be described, simply because it was beyond my feeble ability to understand. As the world below changed from green to blue, it was time to revisit all the plans I had dreamed of for 12 months. I wasn't sure if I could even do them all—most likely not. But I did know for sure I would hit the road running, pick up where I had left off. Life wasn't going to be good; it was going to be great. But the sad truth is you can't return to your past. Too much happened in between. I was not the same, and I didn't even know it.

When I got home, my mom was the first to notice something was not right. She thought I would arrive, get out of the uniform, and be out the door. She asked, "Why don't you leave the house? Why don't you go out with your buddies?" Of course, mom didn't know it was safer to be hunkered down with "Gentle Ben," the legendary rat of the DMZ. Mom questioned why I was staying up after the test pattern came on the TV.

But mom, I thought, *I have to be up*. The North Vietnamese night crew would be dropping in 122s soon just like they did the previous nights. I felt I had not changed. Everything was the same.

As time went on, I did get together with my best buddy, Doug. "Hey Larry, great tan there. What you been doing?"

Silence. Better not answer that one. Even so, what would I say?

Or, once at a party, a champagne cork went off behind me. Great fun to see me jump. Great fun for everyone except for me. Yeah, I knew if you heard the whistling, your name wouldn't be on it. But better to not take any chances. Why was I having cold sweats while in Woodies in Tyson's Corner at Christmas? Guess it was tough enough to keep your eyes on a few villagers, but a crowded store—can't do everything.

But hearing others berate my service, that was the worst. I felt I did what was asked of me. I was not a hero by any means. I just did the best I could. I felt pride in that, but not everyone agreed. I was asked in the Cincinnati airport while in uniform, "How many babies did you kill?" and in a job interview, "We don't hire people with your skills." But to hear it from the people dearest to you, now that's another level. Dad and his signal corps general friend mocked my service by saying the soldiers in 'Nam didn't know how to fight. If it were World War II it would have been different. How do they know? Neither ever felt a bullet go by them in any war. It just hurt.

So, over time I learned to stay under the radar. The possible exception was my old field jacket, stripped down to be as plain as possible. But, like Peter, I could not deny myself. It was who I was, plain and simple. The field jacket wanted its insignias back. Like the field jacket, the war was pushing back at me. Then something happened; those many years of denial collapsed.

Some fifteen years after leaving 'Nam, my wife Vera and I were flipping through the channels from *Moonlighting* to *Dynasty* to whatever, trying to find something to waste our time on. Then we hit channel 23, PBS, with a live forum at the University of Wisconsin. It was a roundtable of a bunch of vets who were talking about the war's impact on their daily lives. I don't know why, but I was drawn to it. These were regular folks, as far as I could tell, nothing

special. They acted like me. Not Rambo stuff, you know, heading down to the local bar and going commando on everyone there. No, regular stuff. I wasn't even sure what that meant. Maybe it was living on the edge. Why gas up when the yellow light is not on? Maybe it was just being alert. Like when I sit up against a wall in a restaurant, so I could spot trouble. Maybe it was avoiding memories. I was so terrified to visit the Wall that it took me several visits to walk past all those names in tears.

But like everything on PBS, the program had an agenda: pushing the Vet Center. I had never heard of it, but I saw the1-800 number. No way. Not for me. I discovered that the VA's answer to PTSD was handing out pills; the answer to all that ails you. As could be expected, vets weren't going back. Maybe they found a nickel bag to be a better substitute. There was definitely less paperwork. So, the VA began "storefront" counseling centers. On a lark, I called the Richmond center on Franklin Street. I thought, *Why am I doing this*? I was ready to hang up if anyone answered. *What am I getting into*? I made the call and stayed on the phone.

"I'm, Larry, and I am a vet." That had a nice ring to it.

On the other end was Gloria. "Welcome Home," came back at me. The power in those words was unbelievable. I had no idea of what to do next. It was not supposed to happen this way. I was definitely out of my comfort zone. Fortunately, Gloria took over from there and she got me an appointment. I was doomed. *What had I done*? Now I had to show up.

The initial counseling was with Gloria. What was the purpose? I guess to find out if I qualified as "Nam Crazy." Evidentially, I made the grade. I was put into a group to do whatever groups do. Dan was the center team leader. He had the credentials: a PhD, Silver Star, and a Purple Heart. And what a bunch it was. The group had the usual suspects; grunts and marines. However, the tales were not all about being out in the bush.

"Gramps" was a B52 pilot tormented by the innocents who received his payload. "Top" was a marine's marine in my book. He felt that he had failed to prepare his recruits well enough. And there was Dave, whose dad couldn't talk to him about war. Later I found out that they were both Screaming Eagles–A Shau Valley, Bastogne. A true living saint was Martha, a triage nurse. What more can be said about her? Then there was Roger, with whom I had a connection. He served in the DMZ with First of Fifth Mech, "Northernmost." Roger was with P Company, Seventy-Fifth Rangers. I am sure he got up close and personal with the local bad guys along Rocket Ridge, which extended up to North Vietnam along the Blue Line. I was with Charley Battery, 5/4 Artillery. Even though I never set foot on Rocket Ridge, I knew it well. The NVA there delighted in putting as many 122 craters as possible inside the wire of Charlie 2, our home.

To put it mildly, our group was not shy about talking about our experiences. Dan was the catalyst. Had a knack about letting us feel free to let it out. And we did, maybe sometimes to Dan's chagrin, but not all of us. Roger was like a clam, but we all knew he had stories; you could see it in his face. As silent as he was, he was always there. Even if he just sat there. I wished he could open up. But that was not happening.

One dreary, overcast Saturday in February, I got a phone call out of the blue from Roger. I answered, "Hey, what's up?"

He started babbling about this, about that, and a lot of nothing. My only thought was how to end the conversation. I just didn't have time. Why did he have to be bothering me? There are other guys he could have called. Then, looking out the kitchen window, I saw it. I was hard to make it out at first. But there it was, a very fine mist. "Roger, is it the rain?"

He sort of grunted, "Yeah." And the realization was there—why he called me. It was "Quang Tri Rain." This was not the hard monsoon I lived with as a FO in the Fourth Infantry

down south. No, this rain was worse than that. It went on for two or so months from somewhere in December to February. Everything was damp. Poncho liners would stick to you when you tried to sleep. It was so bad a few gun bunnies had mama-san in Cam Lo dry their jungle fatigues over water buffalo chips. That was true desperation. Yet, going out to the perimeter at night was the nightmare. We had to cross a tank trail churned into soup by the M48s. One wrong step and your boot could be sucked off.

It was Quang Tri that taught us all about war. No more John Wayne stuff. Audie Murphy, forget it. This was the real deal. Kill or be killed. Survive at all costs. If you thought about yourself only, you would never make it home. Surviving was all about working for each other. War is the ultimate team game. The irony was that before going to Nam, some kids couldn't drink from the same water fountain in Roanoke as I. We learned to share canteens. Skin color didn't matter if we were to watch each other's back. Still, we weren't that good looking after each other. We failed. Once at Lang Vei a howitzer blew up. It was bad powder, as I understood it. The breech block went through the floor of the cab. It was buried deep into the ground. The round never left the tube. The three gunners vanished without a trace. Almost.

I heard, "LT, what do I do with this?" In his hand was a part of a jawbone. There were three guys and all I got was this. But it was the Holy Grail. The difference between KIA and MIA. We failed them. We didn't live up to our part of the deal. I couldn't change that.

We said, "Don't mean nothin'." But we didn't fail that last request. They did go home.

Roger called several more times. Unknowingly, we started to open up. Both of us. After all, I was probably no better than he was. Out came people we knew, places we'd been, and things we did. More importantly, without knowing it, we shared the deeper meaning of it all. What we said to each other and what these stories were have been lost in many years of memory.

Does it matter if we forgot? Not really. The memory of where this led us is what counts. Both of us saw a path to finding shelter from the storm; shelter from that Quang Tri rain.