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OJ

David Aldridge

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During the football season of 1967, most of my infantry company in Vietnam followed the University of Southern California football team schedule almost as if they had all grown up in the shadow of the Coliseum in Los Angeles. Most of us rooted for the Trojans no matter who they played. My fellow soldiers in the company had become rabid fans of the Trojans all because my brother was playing on the team. We couldn't wait for the next Stars and Stripes Newspaper to come to us out in the field to see if there was anything in there about USC, or specifically about my brother. I remember mail call on Operation Shenandoah II where it didn't matter if anyone got any mail as long as we received a Star and Stripes Newspaper and could read the latest college football scores.

As the season progressed, USC, my brother's football team became more and more the topic of conversation when we were out on ambush or doing clover leafs in the triple canopy jungles of War Zones C and D. Coming in from a day-long search-and-destroy mission, we met another platoon of guys who wanted to know how USC had done against Washington State.

"They crushed them 49-0!" I yelled back at them. They hooted and hollered their approval.

A week later, in the middle of a continuous monsoon rain—soaked to the bone with the unending deluge and miserable with immersion foot from five days of being in calf-deep mud and water, guys hollered out at me as they went out on ambush, "Hey, Aldridge, how did your brother do against Texas?"

I answered, "They beat them 17-13! My brother got a field goal and two extra points! You believe that shit?" On it went through the season. No matter how miserable everyone was, they were cheered by the amazing progress of the USC football team. To me and my infantry friends, my brother was the hero as USC beat Michigan State 21-17 and then Stanford 30-0.

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There was no doubt they were headed to being number one in the nation and Delta Company Second Battalion Twenty-Eighth Infantry was firmly behind them. My infantry friends cared about USC because they cared about me and they knew I cared about them. Of that they had zero doubt.

Most of the infantrymen assigned to our company had played football in pee-wee leagues or in high school, or even college, so they understood the game. We all understood how difficult it was to make it on a college football team and how athletic you had to be to excel at that level. We understood the sacrifices of time and energy you had to make to train all year round and the incredible punishment your body would have to endure to make it through a season without being seriously injured. We talked about our football coaches and which of them had devised the most tortuous workouts for us. We talked about playing with injuries, and “walking it off.” We talked about playing both ways, offense and defense, and having to be helped out of bed the day after a game because we were so beat up. We talked about the games we had played against our most bitter rivals, and the glory of days gone by when we had been named All-State, All-County, or All-League. And we talked about the girls we had wooed and invited to the homecoming prom, because we were on the high school football team and everybody in town knew it and wanted to rub elbows with us. We spoke of the small-town mothers and fathers who, with an overabundance of team spirit, had actually encouraged their daughters to go out with us. We talked about the good old days after a football game, of getting lucky in the back seat of our old man’s car and later sweating bullets until her blessed time of the month came around and we could continue the illusion of planning our lives until the draft caught up with us.

On October 8, 1967, while we were in our night defensive position, we listened to KLIK, also called Radio Lai Khe the Big Red One radio station, and we heard that USC had beaten

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Stanford on October 7. The news went around the NDP like wildfire. Everyone was ecstatic, and we started talking about USC's next opponent, Notre Dame. After we woke up on October 9, 1967, the word was passed to all platoons that we were going on a search-and-destroy mission that day so we should start getting saddled up as we would leave right after eating C-rations for breakfast. I was the Radio Transmitter Operator (RTO) for the second squad of the second platoon. I had finished eating and was getting my rucksack ready with an extra battery for the AN/PRC-25 radio I carried. I stood by my equipment rack, facing our Artillery Forward Observer, 2LT H and his RTO, who were ten meters from me. The FO took out his standard issue Colt .45 caliber pistol; he jacked rounds into the chamber, ejecting them by hand. His RTO, PFC Doug Atwood of Utah, sat on an upside-down helmet in front of the FO tightening straps on his own rucksack.

“That’s pretty fucking stupid!” I said to my friend Joe Crutcher. I was just going to holler at the FO to stop what he was doing and to point the pistol towards the jungle when, POW! The pistol went off and time froze. I prayed no one had been hit. “Oh, no! Oh, no!” I said as I sprinted for the lieutenant. No such luck. The FO had shot Atwood in the stomach. No one moved. Slowly the RTO keeled over and clutched his belly. I ran over to the FO, a fairly new second lieutenant who had not been with us very long, and grabbed the pistol from his hand. He had a death grip on the pistol and his face had gone completely ashen. He stared, unblinking, at the RTO and stuttered nonsense. I told one of the other medics that the FO was in shock and he should treat him quickly.

Doc Gomez rendered first aid for PFC Atwood, but there was nothing to be done. The .45 slug had torn a huge hole in Atwood’s liver. The RTO died as the medics held his hand. I can

still hear his last words, “I’m getting cold. I’m getting really cold.” He looked pleadingly around. I wanted so very badly to comfort him, but he was gone before I had a chance.

Within twenty minutes, the battalion commander ordered the FO back to Lai Khe. He was whisked off by a Huey along with PFC Atwood’s body for the fifteen-minute flight. The whole battalion was in shock from the senseless killing, but we had to continue with our search-and-destroy mission as if nothing had happened. As we did so often in Vietnam, I just put it all to the side and focused on the task at hand: surviving. Some staff sergeant hollered, “Get your shit on and move out!”

I yelled over to Crutcher, “I pray we don’t hit the shit today, brother, because with no fucking artillery support it will be time to fix bayonets!”

Two hours later we hit the shit when we ran into a company of North Vietnamese Regulars and I was shot in the left shoulder. Doc Gomez earned his pay that day as he worked on me while we killed eighteen North Vietnamese just fifteen yards from us on our right flank. The firefight lasted half an hour. After the firefight was over, all of the wounded, myself included, and one dead soldier (Specialist Four William Edgar Anderson Jr), were loaded into a medevac helicopter and returned to Lai Khe. The doctors in the battalion aid station back in Lai Khe probed my wound for half an hour trying to get the bullet and other fragments out of me, because parts of the bullet had fragmented after hitting bone and the copper jacket had unwound. When I say “probe,” I mean they shoved an ice-cold surgical steel bullet-hook down inside my wound and poked and prodded with the tool at least eight inches into my chest. Each time one of the doctors would take another turn at trying to get it out, I got nauseated again. There was no time for anesthesia as they went right to work. I finally asked if there was any alternative to the probing. I had had enough. The doctors said they could send me to the Twenty-Fourth Evac and I

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could get operated on or they could just sew it up. I said, “Well, hell, sir! Sew it up then!” They put in nine metal wire sutures to help close the gaping hole up. The reason the doctors couldn’t get the bullet out was that it had split into three different fragments. It remains in my chest to this day.

I was put on light duty back in the company area until the sutures were due to come out around the twenty-fourth of October. I still had my arm in a sling on October 15, 1967, when we found out that USC had beaten the Notre Dame Irishmen 24-7 on the fourteenth. Everyone in the rear company area in Lai Khe was happy and made sure we got the next day’s Stars and Stripes out to the field so the whole company could celebrate the latest victory. I heard back from the field on the afternoon of the 16th that my whole platoon celebrated USC’s victory over Notre Dame.

I didn’t realize it at the time, but it was easier to focus on the success of my brother’s team than on the chaos immediately around me, which assaulted me and my comrades every day. SP4 Anderson’s and PFC Atwood’s deaths had bothered me a great deal. Atwood was a gentle soul who just wanted to do his job right and go home to Utah. Unfortunately, he was stuck with an idiot for a boss and went home the hard way. Anderson and I had served together in Bravo Company before we had been transferred to Delta Company, back in August. He was a good soldier killed instantly on the ninth of October by the North Vietnamese as he walked point for his platoon.

Whether or not anything could have turned out differently wasn’t even considered at the time. It was always, “Move it! Get your gear on! Saddle up, we’re moving out! Make sure you have enough water. Make sure you’ve got enough ammo and hand grenades!” There was no time to weep, to mourn, or to ponder all the imponderables about life, death, the meaning of all the

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fucking cosmic suffering and injustice we witnessed all around us. No time for tears or even a little grieving for the great souls who had been killed.

On October 17, 1967, one of the biggest battles of the Vietnam War occurred. Sixty-two soldiers from our battalion were killed in action that day. Just about everyone else from Alpha and Delta Companies were wounded. Two were missing-in-action and have never been found. All this crushing news was topped off by me and two of the survivors of the battle, PFC Dave Everman and PFC John Fowler, being ordered to go to graves registration in Lai Khe the day after the battle to make sure everybody got identified properly. We had to pull each soldier, our friends, out of a body bag and shine a flashlight in his face to see who it was. Protocol required at least two soldiers to identify the dead soldier. After that, everything became unimportant. I sank further into depression. The wire sutures in my shoulder fell out while I was showering one day. I had forgotten to go back to the aid station to get them removed.

Within three weeks it was my time to go home. USC won their next three games, but even that is a blur in my mind. I was still traumatized from losing so many of my friends. I barely remember processing through the Ninetieth Replacement Detachment in Long Binh as we waited our turn to get on a big jet to fly home. On November 8 my turn came and we took off in the middle of a mortar attack. Not a good omen.

Arriving safely in California, we were spit on by hippies at San Francisco International Airport. I actually thought the bastards were there to welcome us and thank us for our service. Something was terribly wrong. I felt enraged and betrayed but couldn't put any of it into words.

Because I had less than sixty days until my normal release date from the army, I was discharged. The honorable discharge date says November 8, 1967 (due to the International Dateline) the same date I left Vietnam. After flying home to Southern California, the first thing I

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wanted to do was see my four-year-old son. I had no interest in seeing his mother, who lived only three blocks from my parents' home. For the first couple of days I didn't have a vehicle, so I walked everywhere. My ex-wife and her parents said that I wasn't allowed to see my son yet, as they were "thinking it over" when the best time would be for a visit.

Walking past my ex-wife's house, I saw my son in the doorway behind the screen door. I felt a great surge of love and hurried over to say hi, so happy to see him again. Moving to the front of the house, I could see that he was shaking all over, crying. Something must have been wrong with him, and as I neared the door I asked, "What's the matter, Mike? Why are you crying so much?" I opened the screen door to embrace him. He sobbed as he clung to my neck and wouldn't let go. I asked again, "What's the matter, son?"

He said through his sobs, "Momma said you were dead. She said that you were killed in Vietnam!" I was astounded that my ex-wife would unleash so much hatred of me on our son.

When I found her cowering in one of the front bedrooms, I asked her why she would do something so evil to our little boy, and she screamed, "Because I wanted you to be dead! I wished you were dead!" I was speechless. The venom was tangible in every word. She compounded the insult by saying, "And your own mother said she wished you would die over there. If you don't believe me, just ask my mother!" This is how it always was between my ex and me. The air we breathed became toxic if we lingered too long in each other's company. I was afraid I would become just like her if I stayed and argued any more.

I picked up my son and hugged him to my chest. I told him gently, "Listen. I'm too tough to die. Nobody can kill me." I wiped his tears from his face, kissed him on his rosy cheeks, and told him I would come pick him up in a couple of days. We would cook some tacos together. My son smiled; I set him down.



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I said to my ex-wife, "I will pick him up the day after tomorrow at noon and I will bring him back around 7 p.m. By the way, while I'm here you can give me all twelve of my savings bonds that were sent to you over the last year." My ex-wife said she didn't have them anymore. "What do you mean?" I demanded. She said she had cashed every last one of the Savings Bonds and spent the money. She retreated to the corner of the bedroom as if she expected me to attack.

"You mean to say that the \$125 dollars a month the army sent you wasn't enough? You had to steal my \$1200.00 in bonds too? You know that you could go to jail over this? Those bonds were 'pay in the event of death only' bonds!" She said that she knew, but once her friend at the local bank helped her cash one of them it was just too tempting to cash all of them. Shaking my head, I came to an instant realization. "I just can't believe you are the same person I met and fell in love with seven years ago, Dianne. You have changed so much and not for the good." I headed for the front door to walk home.

She trailed after me saying, "You're not going to call the cops, are you?"

I could barely get the words out, but I said, "I don't know what I'm going to do. I will let you know." I turned to face her. "I will be back in two days to pick up Mike. Don't mess it up." With a heaviness on my heart, I walked back to my parents' home.

The next day, after managing to talk my dad into co-signing for a motorcycle, I spoke with my brother Rik, who was at his apartment up near USC. He was happy to hear I had gotten home safely. He said he and a friend were throwing a party for the football team on November fifteenth, before they were to play UCLA on the eighteenth at the Coliseum. Did I want to come up to it? He said all the guys wanted to meet me and I said okay. I would be there. He told me what time and gave me directions, and I hung up. I had grand visions of telling them how much my whole company of infantry guys followed every USC game right up to the day they were

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killed in the Battle of Ong Thanh on October 17, 1967. I wanted to tell the whole team that all my friends were USC fans and were rooting for them the whole season. I imagined myself explaining how the bitter experiences of Vietnam were diminished somehow by all of us knowing USC was kicking ass on the playing field.

When I was getting used to driving my motorcycle I had run into some Hell's Angels from the Westminster Chapter. They wanted to know all about Vietnam. We shared a few beers and they invited me back to their shop to work on my motorcycle and make it even more powerful. They were the only ones who wanted to know about the firefights I had been in and how I had been wounded. They cared, so I said I would come back to visit them.

I followed my brother's instructions to his place off La Cienega Blvd. in L.A. I wore my army field jacket and had a six-pack of cold Coors under the jacket. I roared up to the front lawn of his house and parked the bike. I banged on the door carrying the six-pack. I was let into the house by one of the players. He hollered, "Hey, Rik! Your brother is here!" Rik made his way to me from across the room.

All my brothers call me "Marty" and have since childhood, so he yelled out, "Marty! You're here! Great! Hey, everybody, this is my brother, who just got back from Vietnam!" The men closest to me started introducing themselves. Adrian Young, Tim Rossovich, a big tall Bill Hayhoe, and Ty Salness who I had played against in high school back in 1962. My brother hugged me. Someone made their way through the crowd behind him.

Out of the crowd stepped OJ Simpson, pushing one of the other players to the side. He shook my hand and said, "Hi Marty! I'm OJ Simpson." He fixed his eyes on me and asked, "How does it feel to kill someone?" The room fell eerily quiet. I felt just like I was in a roller coaster that had just reached the top of the ride; the bottom fell out of the world as we plunged

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from 0 to 100 miles an hour. That falling sensation hit me in the gut. That was a totally fucked-up question. It put me on the spot and forced me to talk about something I wasn't really ready to talk about. I was still trying to come to grips with the fact that all my friends had just been killed. But since everyone was listening for a response, I would give an honest answer.

I drew a deep breath and said, "Killing someone else never makes you feel good. You always wonder if you couldn't have been friends with the person in different circumstances. I never wanted to kill anyone. But they were shooting at me and I had no choice." His eyes glazed over, and he immediately lost interest. He headed back to the other side of the room. I gave my brother the six-pack, took one of the beers out of it, and popped the top. I fired up a cigarette. I told my brother, "Sorry, man, but I can't stay here. Good luck with UCLA, brother!" I hollered over to everyone, "Nice meeting you!"

I fired up my motorcycle. I found the freeway again and before I knew it I was doing 100 miles an hour. Not even the Hell's Angels had asked such an insensitive question. Anger sucked bile into the back of my mouth. Some people just have no fucking manners. Never have. Never will.