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Pitchers and Catchers

David Aldridge

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The truck from the First Replacement Company dropped me off at the battalion headquarters for the Second Battalion Twenty-Eighth Infantry Regiment in Lai Khe. Four other soldiers un-assed the truck with me. The truck departed for Quan Loi, which was further north on Highway 13. It was also called Thunder Road. I waved at the soldiers still riding the truck. We had all been on bunker guard together in Di An. The sign outside the HQs building had a placard that read: **Vernon C. Coffey, Jr., LTC, IN, Commanding**. The admin clerks were friendly enough to us as they processed us in from the First Division. One of the clerks picked up my records and disappeared into an office door with 'COMMANDER' stenciled on it.

A few minutes later the command sergeant major came out of the same door and said, "The battalion commander wants to talk with you. Report in to him." He motioned at the door. As I entered, the clerk slipped by me and returned to his desk. I stepped in front of the CO's desk and stood at attention. I saluted.

"PFC Aldridge reporting as ordered, sir." The battalion commander returned my salute. He was a tall, lean lieutenant colonel with a ranger tab and airborne tab on his left shoulder. His military demeanor and haircut told me he was one of those no-nonsense officers. He had kind, intelligent eyes that softened as he smiled at me.

"PFC Aldridge, stand at ease. This is your second tour?"

"Yes, sir. I left Delta Company last November after Shenandoah Number Two. They dropped me one rank when I came back in this month."

"You were wounded twice?"

"Yes, sir. The first one was with Bravo Company last July and the second one was with Delta on 9 October 1967."

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The CO held my gaze. “It says in your records that you have a GT Score of 130 and that you withdrew your application to OCS. Is that true?”

“Yes, sir. No offense, but I didn’t want to be an artillery officer, sir. I wanted to experience Vietnam with the guys I had trained with for almost a year. We were all straight-leg infantry. So, I withdrew my application.”

The CO looked at the command sergeant major who nodded at him.

“PFC Aldridge, I want to offer you a battlefield commission to second lieutenant. What do you say to that?”

“I would be honored, sir. What would that entail?”

“Well, first of all you would have to be assigned to a different battalion within the First Infantry Division. That is standard policy.”

“I’m sorry, sir. In that case, I would have to decline your offer.”

He appeared to be thinking it over. “Well then, what about being assigned to our Recon Platoon? I think you would be a better fit over there than in a line company.”

“I am sorry, sir. I wouldn’t want to do that either. I just want to get back to Delta Company. I had a lot of friends killed on 17 October 1967, and I just want to get back to be with my friends who survived. I think I can do them all a lot of good, sir.”

The CO and the CSM just stared at me for a long time. The CO nodded slowly.

“Send him back to Delta Company, Sergeant Major.” He turned his gaze to me.

“Dismissed.”

“Thank you, sir!”

I came to the position of ‘attention’ and saluted crisply. I did an about-face and left the CO’s office. The CSM told me to wait outside while my orders were typed up. I stepped outside

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the building to stand by my duffel bag and rucksack. I lit up a cigarette and waited for the clerks to do their thing. After half an hour, an admin clerk handed me my copies.

“Is Delta Company in the same location up by the North Gate?”

“Yeah, but that’s a long way to walk.”

“I don’t intend to walk. See you!”

I put my rucksack on, shouldered my duffel bag and my rifle. I began walking over to Route 13, which ran through Lai Khe base camp, north to south. Hitchhiking, I soon caught a ride from a jeep headed to the airfield. I felt an enormous jolt of energy as I realized: I’m going home. It was as if my path from the Los Angeles AFEES Station had been made smooth all the way to Lai Khe and finally to Delta Company. Against all odds I had managed to get back to Vietnam, then to the Big Red One, then to my old battalion and then to Delta Company. I said a short prayer of thanks. When I got out of the jeep, I walked into the Operations Office and asked to use the phone. I soon had Delta Company 2/28th on the landline. I asked to speak to Lieutenant Devine. He came to the phone.

“This is First Lieutenant Devine. What can I do for you?”

“Hey, Lieutenant Devine. This is Dave Aldridge. How about sending a taxi down to the Lai Khe airfield, so I can come home?” I laughed out loud. It felt so good to hear his voice again. My heart swelled with love for this good, decent man.

“Aldridge? Are you fucking shitting me? How in the world did you manage to get back here? No. Don’t answer. Tell me when I see you. You’re at the airfield? I’ll be right there!”

Five minutes later the CO’s jeep roared up with Joe Devine at the wheel. He jumped out and ran over to me with his hand extended. I shook his hand and placed my left hand on his shoulder.

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“It is so good to see you again, Joe. Jesus, I had a hell of a time getting reassigned to Delta, but I finally did it!”

“No shit? You got orders to Delta? After I talked to you, Captain Grosso got a call from battalion. He was on the phone with the battalion commander when I drove over here. I think they were talking about you. Did you piss someone off?”

We drove away from the airfield.

“Well, that’s hard to tell. I hope I didn’t piss them off. They offered me a battlefield commission, and I turned it down so I could come back to Delta. Then they wanted to put me in Recon, and I said no to that, too. I just can’t see myself going anywhere but Delta.”

“Wait’ll you meet our CO. He’s a really good guy. He came here after Clark Welch got so badly wounded.”

“When I left, Chuck Cody was in charge and First Lieutenant Wactor was the XO. Is he still here?”

“No, he got reassigned somewhere and Cody PCS’ed. We’ve got some new guys now.”

We soon drove into the company area and pulled up to the orderly room. Joe said to just put my equipment inside and stand by. I did so and waited in the orderly room. Joe disappeared into the CO’s office. He came back out and said to report to the CO. I stepped into the office and removed my headgear. I stood at attention and saluted.

“Sir, PFC Aldridge reporting as ordered.”

“Stand at ease. So, you’re Aldridge? I’ve heard a lot about you.” He looked at me as if he was making an appraisal.

“Yes, sir. Lieutenant Devine was my platoon leader my first tour.”

“Do you want to be my three-six?”

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“Yes, sir. I would be honored to be your three-six. But I don’t have a lot of rank left over.” I pointed to my collars where my PFC rank was pinned. “They dropped me one grade when I re-enlisted to come back to Vietnam.”

“That’s no problem. I don’t care about that. Just don’t wear any rank. I’ll get you promoted as fast as possible. You’re my three-six. We have an operation tomorrow, so go get acquainted with the platoon. We’ll discuss the operation after supper.”

I saluted and left the office. After retrieving my gear, I asked the company clerk where the third platoon was located. He told me. I headed that direction. After I settled my gear in an empty bunk, I went to the supply room and exchanged my rifle for a good M-16 that had had no complaints about it. The supply guy, nicknamed ‘Goody,’ guaranteed me this was a great M-16 and had never jammed. I loaded up on extra magazines and hand grenades, some aerial flares, smoke grenades and some trip flares. I saw Mike Everman and John Fowler and some other old friends in the company street. We had an emotional reunion. As we stood there, Bob Gomez came up and greeted me warmly, too. He had been my medic the last time I got wounded in October 1967. He was now a Spec 4. I went back to the third platoon hootch and lay on my bunk for a while. It felt so good to be back. I was at peace for the first time in a long while. All the turmoil from the last six months had caused a great deal of tension in my life and I felt I could now relax before the next phase. I dozed until suppertime.

After supper and the operational briefing from the CO, I grabbed a cold beer from the enlisted club and went back to my bunk. As I was packing my rucksack for our next day’s mission, I noticed a guy looking at me like he wanted to say something. I stopped what I was doing. He approached.

“You’re Dave, the new three-six?”

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“Yes, I am.” I shook his hand.

“Schenone. Ray Schenone. I’m in the third platoon, too.”

I told him to have a seat on the bunk next to mine. We sat.

“Do you mind if I tell you something? I mean, I don’t know how to say this.”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“Well, here it goes; I was just out by the piss tube, and I saw one of the guys from our platoon out there. Another guy from our platoon comes up to him, drops to his knees and starts giving the first guy a blow job. I couldn’t believe my eyes. I watched the whole thing!”

Schenone’s eyes were wide with amazement from what he had witnessed. He was clearly distraught by the whole thing. He told me the names of both of the soldiers.

“I mean, what the fuck, Dave! I just thought you should be aware of what’s going on.”

My mind roiled.

“Thanks for letting me know. For right now let’s just keep this between us. I’ll talk to both of them and we’ll see how to proceed after that.” I shook his hand again.

I found it hard to sleep that night as I pondered the situation and what to say in what was my first test as a platoon leader of thirty infantrymen. As a platoon leader, my main concerns would be accomplishing the mission we were given and looking after the welfare of my men. Tactical solutions and logistical solutions were what I was expecting to encounter. Personnel problems were not on my radar yet. As the sun came up, I was still imagining various scenarios of what I should do. I had not slept. The manual for courts-martial listed the maximum punishment for sodomy as twenty-five years confinement with a dishonorable discharge and total forfeitures of all pay and allowances. The whole matter weighed heavily on my mind.

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I went to breakfast, and it was good to be with all my old friends. I forgot about being tired, and I held off questioning the two soldiers. Finally, we were at the helicopter pads waiting for the choppers to come in. I spotted one of the guys from the incident the night before and asked him if I could speak with him privately.

“Yeah, no problem.” We stepped off to the side of the pad. I decided to be direct.

I looked him in the eye and asked, “Last night someone told me that you and another soldier were out by the piss tubes, and that he uhh, gave you, uhh, a blow job. Is that true?”

“Yes, it is, Dave. But there’s one thing about it. I’m a pitcher, not a catcher.” Of all the answers I could have gotten, that one was the least expected. I had no retort, nor any unanswered questions. The choppers were coming in for our first flight.

I slapped him on the shoulder and said, “Well, thanks for your honesty. Let’s go get on those choppers!”

On that operation we got into two firefights. I saw right away that both of these soldiers were courageous combat soldiers and that the rest of the platoon cared deeply for them. I know there are armchair generals out there who think they both should have gone to Leavenworth for twenty-five years, and been thrown out of the army and on and on. I still stand by my decision to keep them in my platoon. They were some of the bravest men I ever saw and wherever they are, I send them my love, unconditionally.