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The Company

David Aldridge

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I made up my mind on the twenty-second of April 1968 to go back to Vietnam. It was my birthday. There wasn't anything to celebrate as I turned twenty-three, but the nightly repeating dreams I had been having for six months ceased right away. The pressure I had felt internally just vanished. With crystal clarity I could see my path ahead. My intent was set; I would not turn from my course. Though I otherwise felt at peace with my decision, the one remaining aggravation would always be there. The pain in my heart was ever present because I got nothing but grief every time I wanted to see my son. That's just how my relationship with my ex-wife was. Powerful emotions generated powerful hatred, too.

My job at Zody's Department Store in Huntington Beach was a bona fide dead end. There was no future there. The one bright spot in my life at that time was my college grades. They were all As, but my heart just wasn't in it. When I told one of my professors I was dropping out of college to go back to 'Nam, he wept in front of me unashamedly. He shook my hand and walked away. He was a good guy. He told me that I helped him to understand Vietnam a little better by our talks in class.

I didn't mean to upset anyone by deciding to go back. I was pulled inexorably back to Vietnam by everything in my life. It was my destiny to go back. Sometimes you don't control your fate. Your fate controls you. So, if I was going to constantly have pain in my heart concerning my son, I may as well go back to Vietnam where there are real reasons to grieve. Before I went to the recruiting office down in Santa Ana, I decided to go visit my friend Ronald Domoneck. He had been horribly wounded 17 October 1967 and had died five times on the battlefield. Thank God, our medics brought him back five times, too.

I called the number I had in Beaumont, Texas and talked with his father. He gave me the telephone number at Fort Bliss where I could reach Ron on his medical ward and I called

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immediately. Talking with Ron was like having a healing balm rubbed gently on my heart. When I told my girlfriend I was going back 'Nam she was highly pissed off, but she relented.

I packed up my sleeping bag and some extra clothes. Then I rolled up my brother's single-shot 12-gauge shotgun in the sleeping bag so it was plainly visible. That was just in case anyone tried to run me off the road again. Bikers in the '60s got fucked with all the time. I put twenty extra shotgun shells in my fatigue jacket pocket and jumped on my motorcycle. It was bitterly cold in the desert, but I managed to sleep for 4 ½ hours that night after I found a safe place to lie down.

I pulled into Fort Bliss, Texas late the next afternoon. The MPs at the gate just waved me on through to Beaumont General Hospital. I forgot about the shotgun! I found Ron's ward and we had a great reunion. I stayed there on the ward with Ron and other Vietnam returnees for three days. The nurses let me park my bike up on the ward, but I had to surrender my shotgun. I got to know all the guys on the ward. One guy was blind from catching shrapnel in the eyes. Another guy with an amputated leg led him around to the dining hall. The blind soldier walked to the side, holding the crutch as they moved along the hallways. Other guys on the ward were in various stages of healing from all sorts of wounds. They would get operated on and then go home for sixty to ninety days for convalescent leave then come back and get more operations. The last night I was there Ron and I tried to go to a nearby bar for a drink, but they didn't allow Blacks in the bar. I was outraged, but Ron just stayed cool about it and we ended up going into Juarez where we had a great evening.

It was even colder driving back to California and finally at 4 a.m. I pulled into my girlfriend's parking space. I carried my bed roll and shotgun upstairs. My steps were zombie-like because I had hypothermia. It took me three hours to stop shaking. I went to the recruiter's office

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in Santa Ana as soon as I could. My recruiter said he couldn't promise me anything. We did the paperwork and he said to be up at Los Angeles armed forces entrance and examination station on 16 May 1968. The AFEES station was in the old Ambassador Hotel. There were homeless people everywhere. It was disheartening to see so many winos and people down on their luck.

My mother drove me up to L.A. just as she drove me up when I got drafted back in 1965. I promised to write as soon as I could. She was still crying as she drove off. In the AFEES Station I processed in and after a couple of hours a first lieutenant with a CIB and a 101st Airborne patch on his right shoulder pulled me to the side. He asked if I had already been to 'Nam. I said yes. He asked why I reenlisted. I told him to go back to 'Nam. I told him about the sixty-two soldiers who were killed on 17 October 1967, and visiting Ron in Fort Bliss, and my desire to get back to my old company.

He looked me in the eye and asked, "So, you really want to go back to Vietnam just to be with your old company?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well, you're supposed to go back through training because you've been out for more than ninety days. There is nothing I can do about your rank. They always drop you one pay grade when you stay out for more than ninety days. But if you really want to go back, then I will bypass all that admin shit and give you orders sending you straight back to 'Nam. Good luck."

I received a "chit" for a free meal at one of the local greasy spoons just around the corner from the old Ambassador Hotel. The chili I ordered had half an inch of fat floating on top, so I scooped it off and asked for three extra portions of soda crackers to help me digest it. An hour later the first lieutenant caught up with me again. I had finished processing and the physical. My

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old scores from all the testing I had done back in 1965 were still good to go. The first lieutenant handed me my orders, my medical file and my 201 Personnel File.

He said, “Here are your orders assigning you to Ninetieth Replacement Detachment in Long Binh. When you get there, you will have to talk your way back to the Big Red One and then to your battalion. I had the travel section print up a plane ticket to San Francisco for you. You can take the bus from here to L.A. International. It leaves at 1800 hours. When you land, catch the shuttle over to the Oakland Army Base. They will issue you a ticket for Vietnam. Good luck to you, Aldridge.”

We shook hands as I thanked him for everything. He just saved me two to six months going through some bullshit MOS producing school. By 10 p.m. I was at the Oakland Army Base and going through the mess hall for a late dinner. The next day I was handed a ticket and my personnel files and told to catch the bus for San Francisco International. When I got to the gate, I saw most of my fellow passengers were in uniform. I was still in civilian clothes. There were soldiers, sailors, Marines, and some uniforms I didn’t recognize. My only luggage was a small AWOL Bag with extra underwear, toiletries, and a carton of cigarettes. Some senior ranking officers were ready to board with us. Finally, the flight attendants called for us to board the plane. I wasn’t sure why, but everyone told me to go ahead of them in the line. I moved to the front of the line and moved down the gangway to the plane. As I stepped inside the plane the stewardess standing there said for me to move into the first-class area.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Step this way and welcome aboard!” She pointed to the front of the plane.

I stepped past her and moved into the first-class area. The seats were all leather and I found an empty one right away. A colonel asked if he could sit by the window, so I let him by.

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As soon as we were fully loaded, we took off. I fired up a cigarette. The colonel introduced himself. He said he was going to some MACV assignment and was looking forward to getting back to Saigon.

I said, "I have fond memories of Saigon. Especially down on Tran Hung Dao Street in Cholon and down on Tu Do Street by the embassy."

He snickered. "Yeah, I almost got into trouble down there once."

"Well, if you go back down there, always carry a pistol. A .45 caliber cannon is the only thing the cowboys respect."

"Yeah, I'll remember that."

I started reading one of the many magazines available. The stewardess asked if we wanted drinks. I asked how much it cost. She laughed and said the drinks were complimentary. The colonel had one after the other. I had two and was feeling no pain. The seats were luxurious. I could stretch out completely. Before I knew it, I was dozing away. I awoke after a few hours and the colonel was on his fifth.

When he noticed me wake up, he leaned over and whispered, "So, how do you like working for The Company?"

I thought he was asking about my Infantry Company, Delta 2/28th Infantry Regiment.

"I like it just fine."

Conspiratorially, he asked, "You get in many shootouts?"

"Yes, sir. I did."

"So, in your line of work you had to kill for The Company?"

"Yes, sir. Regretfully, I did."

After a while he asked if I had ever been wounded.

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“Yes, sir, I was hit twice. Nothing major. But I can’t say that about the guy who shot me.”

The colonel roared with laughter. “How long have you been with the Company?”

“A year. I’m going back for my second tour now.”

“Wow. Your second tour? Wow! So, you’ve been to the Farm?”

I had no idea what he was talking about, but I distinctly heard my Inner Voice say, “Don’t answer.”

So, I merely nodded my head and said nothing. He asked me more pointed questions about training for the next few hours, but I just nodded my head and never said a word. Later the colonel alluded to “Colby and Plan F” and the “Phoenix boys,” but still, I just nodded my head slightly and smiled like I knew what he was talking about. I didn’t have a clue. When we deplaned at Binh Hoa Air Base, the colonel shook my hand.

“Maybe I’ll see you around Saigon some place. Then we could go get a drink together.”

“Colonel, I don’t think that’s going to happen, but you never know.”

I caught the bus for Ninetieth Replacement. I was the only one on the bus in civilian clothes. When we got to Ninetieth Replacement it was lunchtime, so I headed for the mess hall. Standing in line, all the soldiers insisted I go to the front and get served first. This went on for three days. Every day they would hold formations and I would stand to the rear. Names would be called and not hearing my own name I would just wander around aimlessly biding my time. Mess times came and I would rush over, only to get the same VIP treatment. “Move to the front of the line, sir.”

On the fourth day in the afternoon the command sergeant major of the Ninetieth Replacement Company stopped me and asked to see my military ID card. He had been

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addressing me as “sir” for four days. I had not had a haircut since last November when I got out of the Army. As he read the card his face became red, then purple as he realized someone had been bamboozled. He screamed in my face,

“PFC Aldridge! You will get a military haircut and be in the proper uniform with all the right patches and rank by 1700 hours. You will report to the commanding officer at 1700 hours with no excuses. Do you understand, PFC Aldridge?”

“Yes, Command Sergeant Major!”

At 1700 hours I reported to the major who commanded the Ninetieth Replacement. I could tell the CSM had already briefed him.

“Well, PFC Aldridge. What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Sir, I think the problem started back in Oakland Army Base.” I told him about having no uniforms but being treated like I was a VIP everywhere I went. I told him I just wanted to get back to my old company in the Big Red One. I told him about riding first-class on the plane and some colonel that kept asking me about The Company, and I didn’t know what the hell he was talking about. I told him about being ushered to the front of the chow line every meal and I guess I sort of got used to that. By the time I finished he was laughing so hard he almost fell out of his chair.

The CSM was also laughing right along with him and said, “I thought he was some kind of civilian big shot for four days!”

The Major laughed some more. He said, “That’s the best story I ever heard around here, PFC Aldridge. I’ll tell you what. Sergeant Major, give him orders assigning him to the First Replacement Detachment in Di An. Maybe they will see things your way and send you on to Lai Khe. Be on the bus for Di An tomorrow after first formation.”

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“Yes sir! Thank you both and I’m sorry for the mix-up.” I saluted and did an about-face to leave his office. When I left the orderly room, he was still laughing. The next day I was back in the First Infantry Division in Di An. Two days later I walked back into the orderly room at Delta 2/28th Infantry in Lai Khe. My new company commander, Captain Gerard S. Grosso, appointed me as the first PFC platoon leader in the history of Vietnam. It was a good year. I didn’t have one man killed my whole tour. Only two of them were wounded. Thanks to God, we all made it out of there.