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Semper Fi

Robert Waldruff

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The huge C-141 lumbered to a stop at Travis AFB just outside San Francisco. The urgency of getting back to the States required enduring inside the hull of this flying monster for the twenty-hour flight from Okinawa. The only seat available put me between two large trucks returning for repairs; must keep the war machine rolling. The doors opened and I deplaned into a beautiful late May sunset. Hurrying through the terminal, the bus named Treasure Island Naval Base welcomed me aboard, sore, tired, and needing sleep. Tomorrow promised a long day.

Next morning I walked to Quonset hut forty-seven.

“Good morning, Gunny. Here’s my orders, want to pick up Lieutenant Wood.”

“I’ll get him, sir.”

I looked out the window at the magnificent Golden Gate Bridge framed in a cloudless sky and the dark blue waters of San Francisco Bay, so perfect it had to be a post card. Soon the Gunny reappeared pushing a casket. “Here he is, sir, check the tag. Let’s be sure we got the right one.”

The large white tag read: ‘First Lt. Robert T. Wood, USMCR, KIA FB Ryder, 13May70.’
“That’s him. Let’s get him on the truck. He’s going home.”

The trip from Treasure Island NB to the San Francisco airport didn’t take long. Just seven months ago Woody and I were here, marine second lieutenants, excitedly boarding our flight to the Western Pacific. Woody had orders to Vietnam, me the Rock. We said goodbye in Okinawa.
“Don’t eat all the poagey bait, Wally, you’re gonna make a hell of a clerk typist.”

“Fuck you, Woody. Just don’t kill all the Cong before I get there.”

Bob and I met at OCS in November 1968. We spent the next twelve months training to be marine artillery officers. We did everything together; ten weeks of OCS, twenty-five weeks of

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TBS, and fifteen weeks of artillery school at Ft. Sill. His wife Shirley and my wife Anne got to be good friends. Our daughters were born seven months apart.

Marines. Blood brothers. Best friends.

At the airport, we were flagged through to the tarmac to load the casket on the flight to Arlington, Texas. I wore my Summer Cs, drawing lots of attention in the plane; I overheard a guy telling his wife, "See that marine? He's only a lieutenant and doesn't have a clue what he's in for."

The flight took a couple hours. After everyone exited, I deplaned and got on the luggage cart with the casket. Driving to the terminal to meet the hearse the flag kept flapping in the wind, I held it down as best I could, hoping it wouldn't fly off.

The hearse drove to the back of the funeral home where Shirley and Mr. and Mrs. Wood waited. I hopped out, introduced myself to the funeral director, shook hands with Mr. and Mrs. Wood, and hugged Shirley. She had begged the Red Cross to get the Corps to let me escort Bob home, which they accommodated though I had just received orders to Vietnam.

"Oh, Bob," Shirley said, "thank you so much, I'm totally lost. It wasn't supposed to be this way."

The Woods, grim faced, looked at me with disdain. "What time is the memorial service?" I asked.

Mrs. Wood said, "Seven."

"We need to go get things set up, we'll see you later."

"C'mon," said Shirley, "I'll take you to the hotel to check in, then let's go see Lisa. She's already nine months old."

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The crowd arrived early and almost filled the chapel. An open casket service, I stood behind the casket at parade rest staring at my friend; he looked good in blues. Soon everybody passed by, paying respects. When Shirley got close, she screamed, "It's not him, they've made a mistake!" She grabbed her father and broke down. The Woods came next. Mr. Wood looked glassy-eyed and Mrs. Wood was in a trance. They got next to the casket, peered in, and wouldn't move.

Finally, the director led them away. I stayed stiff, trying not to move, thinking I never trained for this.

We moved into the reception hall talking quietly. From my right came Mr. Wood pointing a finger. "Your goddammed Marine Corps killed my boy." Before I answered, he slurred, "Go to hell!" turned and left. No one saw him for three days.

Mrs. Wood said, "Forgive him, he's still bleeding. Bob was his favorite. I'm healing. Bob came to my bed last week, hugged me and whispered, 'Don't worry, mama. I have no pain and I'm safe.' I need to leave now and rest for tomorrow's ceremony, see you there."

Before everyone left, I introduced myself to the major in charge of the honor guard.

"I'll pick you up at 1000 to go to the cemetery and get snapped in, you don't have to do much," said the major.

"Sir, how did he die?"

"He was in the mountains calling in artillery on top of an IOD tower around 0100 in a horrible thunderstorm; Charley was moving through the Queson Valley using the storm for cover. Lightning hit his land line, traveled up the tower and fried his brain."

"No shit, lightning?"

"Dangerous place, lieutenant, lots of ways to buy some land."

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Shirley and I met for breakfast before the funeral.

“We had it all planned, he’d finish his commitment at Pendleton, we’d move back to Sherman Oaks, we’d pick up where we left off. He really loved working for Mobil. His Texas veins flowed with oil. Why’d he have to be a marine? They always get killed. Lisa and I are alone, I need a job. We’ve got five hundred in savings. I just don’t know where to start. Why did he leave us?”

“You know the answer. He loved being a marine, and felt a duty to protect America. Nothing could stop him. He was fearless. He never thought he would get killed. He loved you.”

“I know. Wish we could start over.”

“You know Anne and I will do whatever we can to help you. Woody and I vowed that to each other. I’ll try to stop over on my way home from Vietnam.”

We arrived at the cemetery at 1100. I hugged Shirley and walked over to the major.

“Not complicated, lieutenant. Stand with the color guard. When the pastor’s done and we play taps, walk the two flags to Shirley and Mrs. Wood, kneel, hand them the flags, and tell them, ‘On behalf of the president of the United States, the commandant of the Marine Corps, and a grateful nation, please accept this flag as a symbol of our appreciation for your loved one’s service to country and corps.’ Questions?”

“No, sir. I got it.”

Soon things started. There was a huge crowd. The preacher finished his remarks. Taps and the twenty-one-gun salute finished. I marched over to Bob’s family with the folded flags, knelt, and handed over each one. Shirley, fragile as a flower, hugged her flag, sobbing quietly. Mrs. Wood didn’t touch her flag, just stared at the casket. I got up, paid respects to each family member, cut a tight salute, choked up, and walked back quickly to the color guard. Before

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turning around, I chided my sorry ass. Suck it up, you goddam wuss, do not let these people see a marine cry. You owe it to Woody.

The crowd slowly thinned out. I went to Shirley and Lisa. “Remember, anything anytime, just get hold of me. We’ll get through this.”

She grabbed my hand. “Be careful, promise you won’t get hurt. I can’t lose you too.”

“Take good care of Lisa, Bob loved her. See you soon.”

After it all ended, Bob’s brothers drove me to the airport to catch my flight to LA to spend two days with my parents, Anne, and my three-month-old daughter, Paden, whom I’d never seen. They dropped me off at the curb of United Airlines. “Thanks, guys. Your brother died a hero, be proud of him. Stay in touch.”

My homecoming included lots of small talk and ended before it started. I learned to change a diaper, played with Paden, and we all avoided talking about the elephant in the room. Except for Paden, we’d been through the goodbye routine seven months ago and were not eager to repeat the ritual. This time I had orders for ’Nam and Woody was dead.

We got into my father’s car for the short ride to El Toro where I waited availability for a flight to Vietnam. After navigating the freeways, we pulled up to the TOQ. Knowing the drill by heart, I got out of the car, grabbed my bag, quickly kissed Anne, my mother, sweet Paden, and shook my old man’s hand. “Don’t worry, I’ll be home soon.” They drove off. I waved goodbye to the most important people in my life.

After checking in, I got my key, walked down a long hallway, unlocked the door, entered the small, lonely room, and dropped my bag. Grabbing a beer from the fridge, I collapsed in a chair and stared at a blank grey wall waiting for the phone to ring.