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Rosario

David Aldridge

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In November 1968, the commanding general of the 1st Infantry Division commanded all soldiers fit for duty to go to the field. That meant no more slacking, or malingering tolerated by those who were slightly injured, lame, lame-brained, or just plain lazy. I have no idea where he got the 'Gung-Ho' idea from, perhaps because in World War II every soldier was considered an infantryman and was used to pulling their own weight. The 1st Infantry Division was the only one as far as I knew that made their finance clerks and REMFs (Rear Echelon Military Folks) go outside the wire at night on ambush. It was not unusual to see a finance guy with a Purple Heart or Bronze Star with a "V" device.

A rifle company should have 132 men assigned to go on operations. We rarely had more than 75 mustered for fighting the enemy. Normally, there were always a few guys on R & R or recovering from wounds. Once in a while someone went on Emergency Leave to the States, but divorces didn't count. Dear John letters were so plentiful that the Army never allowed a soldier to travel back home to try and mend the marriage. All soldiers whose wives had moved on were supposed to tough it out. In Vietnam, there were many ways to sham, fake injuries, or simply disappear when it was time to board the choppers. Fear was the main reason; I had even heard of soldiers injuring themselves to avoid field duty.

When the CG put the word out it was welcomed by those of us who had never sought ways to avoid combat. Our own company, Delta Company of the 2nd Battalion 28th Infantry Regiment, was on stand down in Lai Khe, our base camp, when the CG gave his imperative. My company commander, who I called Captain Zap, said to round up all stragglers and bring them to Battalion Headquarters to have a chat with our battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Vernon C. Coffey, Jr. I loved LTC Coffey. He was as tough as they come and had been an Instructor at the Ranger School. We called him 'The Black Moses' because he always walked with a seven-

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foot-long wooden stave as his 'walking stick.' I once asked him why he didn't carry a CAR-15 or a rifle like many of the Officers.

"My job is to command and to lead. If someone needs killing, I've got 400 soldiers for that."

"Roger that, sir." LTC Coffey knew me by name and by my call sign, Delta 3-6. He always called me by my first name. Some may have considered it unprofessional or unmilitary, but it warmed my heart to hear it. When the order came down to round up everyone for our next operation Captain Zap sent word for me to come to the orderly room. I reported in.

"Sir, Spec 4 Aldridge reporting as ordered."

"Aldridge, Rosario has been AWOL for more than two weeks. I have some intel that he's holed up at the Lai Khe Fire Station. Take some men and go down there and bring him back. The CG has ordered every swinging dick to go to the field and we're not leaving without Rosario."

"What if he doesn't want to come back, sir?"

"Do whatever you have to do to make him comply. The CG's order will be carried out. Every available soldier will go to the field or I have to personally tell the CG why not."

"Yes, sir. I'll bring him back." Rosario was one of those dark-skinned nondescript guys from Guam who could easily pass for Vietnamese. When I tried to talk with him, he would just purse his lips and look at me with a puzzled look like he didn't understand me. When he scrunched his face up like that, he probably thought it looked cute somehow. It only made me want to punch him straight in the mouth even more. He was known to be a slacker and always looking for ways to get out of the field. I have no idea why, but his nickname was Pineapple.

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I went back to my platoon and gathered up a squad of guys to go with me: Ray Schenone from Great Neck, New York, who normally carried a machine gun; Mike Fleming of Omaha Nebraska, a solid and fearless soldier; Louie Ragusa from Brooklyn, and my RTO. These were all absolutely dependable guys in a fight. I had a feeling Rosario wouldn't come back voluntarily. Along with us was Chuck Liatto, a tough little guy from Chicago. Chuck and Ray had 'borrowed' .38-caliber pistols from some helicopter pilots who'd given us a ride one time. I took Ray's .45 automatic that he normally carried along with his machine gun.

As we approached the fire department on Route 13, I had everyone wait by the main road while I went in to talk with the Vietnamese firemen. They all spoke English.

"Who's the boss?"

One of the firemen came over. "I am the fire captain."

"I'm looking for one of our soldiers. Rosario."

"No, I no know him."

"He also goes by the nickname of Pineapple. Boss, don't fuck with me. Just point to where he is and take your men away from here."

His eyes veiled as he considered his options. He slowly nodded towards the door I'd come through. He moved to the doorway and silently nodded to a room at the side of the firehouse.

I whispered: "*Di di mau!*" Go quickly!

I jacked a round into the chamber of my .45 sidearm and put on the safety catch. I motioned for my soldiers to fan out, and for one to go around to the back of the building. I kicked in the door and ran into the room. There in bed with a Vietnamese girl lay Rosario. They had both been sleeping. I'd caught them unawares.

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“Rosario, get up and get dressed. The general says you’re going back to the bush with us.”

I recognized the girl, a beautiful Cambodian named Op, pronounced ‘Ope.’ She understood English.

“Go home, Op! Pineapple is going with us.”

Rosario scrunched up his face as he always did. I wanted badly to punch him. He slowly put his pants and boots on. His movements were exaggeratedly drawn out.

“Get a move on, Rosario. Colonel Coffey’s waiting on you.” After he tied his boots, he said he had to get his shirt out of the Wardrobe at the side of the room.

“Fuck around and you’re going to die, Rosario.” He just smirked. He reached into the wardrobe for his jungle fatigue shirt. He began putting it on. He pulled a hand grenade out of the pocket and quickly pulled the pin. He clearly had rehearsed the move.

I shouted. “Everybody get the fuck out of here. He’s got a grenade!”

I leveled the .45.

“Rosario, if you let that handle fly, I’ll put five rounds in your ugly fucking ass and I’ll still have time to get away! You’d better make a decision, because I will damn sure fuck you up.”

I took my safety catch off and aimed at his head. I wanted badly to fill him with lead then make a dash. Threatening me, a fellow American, with a hand grenade just so he wouldn’t have to go to the field enraged me. I still hadn’t decided not to shoot him when he decided for me. Rosario slowly began walking back towards Battalion Headquarters. I told all my soldiers to keep their distance in case anything happened. I never took my pistol off him. As we approached

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the area where Captain Zap said I had to meet up with LTC Coffey, I noticed Rosario trying to put the pin back in the grenade.

“That’s your smartest move so far today, fuckhead.”

Suddenly, soldiers up ahead began screaming in unison:

“Sir, he’s got a hand grenade, and he’s shooting at us!” I thought they were talking about Rosario, but how could that be? We’d only just arrived, and Rosario wasn’t shooting at anybody. But automatic weapons fire roared out of a bunker to the side of the road fifty yards in front of us. I saw LTC Coffey take cover. Everyone around him dove for cover too behind rubber trees and bunkers. Rosario used the distraction to get rid of the hand grenade by tossing it to a guy from his platoon, Willie Davenport.

Rosario yelled, “Take this and get rid of it!” I grabbed Rosario by the scruff of the neck and told Davenport:

“Don’t do it, Willie! I need that for evidence.” But Davenport grabbed the grenade and ran off to dump the proof of his buddy’s idiocy.

I shouted, “Schenone, catch that stupid fuck and get the grenade from him!”

Schenone sprinted away with Liatto behind him. Rosario kept whining for me to let go. As we approached LTC Coffey and the rest, they were still hunkered down, expecting more fire from the bunkers.

I reported in. “Sir, this fucker pulled out a hand grenade and pulled the pin on me up at the firehouse. He doesn’t know how close he came to dying.”

LTC Coffey called over to the command sergeant major. “Sergeant Major, take this soldier and we’ll discuss the situation later.”

I asked, “Sir, if I may ask you, who’s in the bunker?”

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“A soldier from Delta named Whitcomb.”

“Oh, yes, sir. Willie Whitcomb.” This was a bad day for the Willies in our battalion. “I’d like to offer a solution as soon as my soldier gets back with the hand grenade Rosario pulled on me. We give Willie to the count of ten to come out.”

LTC Coffey laughed. “Oh no, Dave! We’ll try to resolve this in a more peaceful way.” He smiled but I was in no mood for the Rosarios and Whitcombs. LTC Coffey was clearly not as impatient as I. He proceeded to calmly talk with Whitcomb. I was simply amazed at his courage and calm demeanor. For fifteen minutes LTC Coffey spoke with Whitcomb as if he were his own son, reasoning with him as to why he should put down his weapon and un-ass the bunker before someone like me threw a hand grenade in there to force him out. Finally, Whitcomb came out and surrendered his weapon to LTC Coffey. The MPs showed up, put handcuffs on Willie and drove off with him. A few hours later we all got on helicopters at the airfield and flew out to the Iron Triangle where we established a base camp called Cantigny.

During my time in Vietnam, I was never known for being a peacemaker. When Rosario pulled the grenade on me, my normal reaction was to kill him. I’d stifled that urge only with great effort, but it remained barely under the surface of my consciousness. During our first ground attack at Cantigny on 20 November 1968, I considered leaving my bunker to search out Rosario. It was a fleeting thought; I was busy shooting at North Vietnamese most of the night. A few days later we moved closer to the Saigon River and set up a new base camp called Junction City III.

At JC III we got another ground attack on 1 December 1968. The first thought that popped into my mind during the chaos was: Where the fuck is Rosario? For the next four hours I mulled killing him but couldn’t leave my bunker as we were in danger of being overrun. When

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we ran low on ammunition, I volunteered to crawl back to our ammo bunker and retrieve enough ammo and grenades for everyone. At the doorway to the bunker, I paused. Rosario's bunker was less than fifty meters from me. Dark thoughts of revenge clouded my mind. Begrudgingly, I got busy collecting what I needed. I hurried back to my bunker and continued the fight. When the battle was over and the sun came up, I ended up talking with some soldiers from other platoons. I was told that Rosario spent the whole night holed up in a bunker whimpering and howling that he was going to die. I normally have a soft spot in my heart for people who experience fear like that. I didn't feel shit for Rosario. I still wanted to punch him in the mouth and fuck him up. I made the decision to not kill him as it would only complicate my life. A few months later I returned to the States.

As the years wore on, the anger I carried for Rosario ate away at me, as did my anger at a thousand others who'd betrayed me or my friends, or who simply fell short of my expectations.

In my search for a more meaningful and spiritual life I had a truly 'dark night of the soul' in 1993. In Ulm, Germany, I was led to a book called *A Course in Miracles*. I read the book and attempted to follow the precepts it laid out. The main idea behind the Course is forgiveness, probably the hardest battle a person will ever fight because you are going up against yourself—your little 'self,' also called the ego. Practicing the forgiveness exercises from The Course, I'd settle into a comfortable chair, relax my legs and arms, and straighten my spine. After a few moments, I would say aloud: "Okay. I am ready." Then, in my mind's eye, I'd see literally hundreds of people lined up ready for me to forgive. Rosario was always there. I would make him move to the end of the line. I wasn't ready.

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Finally, one day Rosario was the last one left in line. I'd forgiven all the rest, no others to shove him behind. I finally released us both from all my judgments about him and what he had done to me in Vietnam.

The peace I felt was indescribable. I walked on clouds for days. Out of curiosity I sat down to meditate one day to see if anyone else had shown up for me to forgive.

As I got comfortable and stilled my mind, I said once again, "Okay. I'm ready." There, smiling back at me, was me. I had my work cut out. Time to get busy.