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A Boatman's Story

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*
—T. S. Eliot

I have finally committed to tell my story. I am naked and in pain when I remember the war; yet, like all men, I must make sense of my memories or risk to go insane. As I was for a time.

Mine is first and last a story of a father and his sons. My father was an infantryman in the European theater of World War II. I cannot know for sure the effects of that war upon him, for I did not know him before he went to war. Yet I knew well the contradiction of his sensitive and bright nature, his explosive rage, and his inexplicable withdrawal from loving. I see now the same mix in my older brother—and in me. Like our father, my brother and I have seen our war and it has changed us too.

It seems fitting that the three of us were in Vietnam at the same time. Only my youngest brother was left at home with my mother and sister. My father was in Saigon, an intelligence officer. My brother and I were in I Corps, he a helicopter crew chief, flying out of Phu Bai, and I a Marine grunt—an infantryman like my father had been in his first war.

Only once did I communicate in-country with either my brother or my father. I had walked out of my jungle boots and none could be found to fit me. Rather than stay behind—how then could I prove myself worthy of his love?—I wrote my father for his assistance. Knowing that he had suffered frostbitten feet during the Battle of the Bulge, I felt he would be responsive. Three days later, a helicopter landed on a hill north of Khe Sanh. An officer disembarked; he handed me a pair of boots, no note.

My time in Vietnam seems now a dream to me, perhaps because I have striven to forget, or to deny. Primitive events call

for such primitive defense mechanisms, as I was to learn in my first killing.

I had joined a line outfit west of Danang on the day after Christmas, 1966. I was handed a flak jacket and helmet and rifle. An M-14 rifle is quite a gift to an 18-year-old boy, an entrée to the responsibilities, and the sorrows, of a man. I liked the way the M-14 felt in my hands. That first week, my platoon was on patrol in a rice-paddied area when a VC jumped from cover and bolted. I ran after him. I squeezed off a round and hit him in the back, knocking him down. The dry paddy dust rose with the impact of his body. He arose and ran; again I shot him in the back; again he fell and rose. The third time I hit him, he stayed down. When we reached him, he was still alive. We circled above him and he watched us. I could see the exit wounds in his chest. We had a staff sergeant with us we called "great white father." He cocked a .45 and shot the VC in the forehead, blowing his brains out the back of his head.

I recall my feelings that day: first, the surprising excitement of the hunt—an ecstasy that felt oddly sexual—the pride and awe at what I had done: hit my target, brought my man down. But I remember, too, disgust and shame at the shitty way the VC had finally been killed. I remember the look on his face when he was shot in the head: *Why in the fuck are you doing this to me?*

Twenty-five years later, I can see how this first killing formed the manner in which I have dealt with the ending of many intimate relationships—in effect, I shot people in the head. Maybe this way the other person wouldn't hurt so much or I wouldn't feel so shitty. Probably I just didn't want to see the dust rise when these people fell and rose, then fell and rose again.

But back then, at 18, with the concreteness of youth, I was going to try to undo what I'd done. A week later I had my opportunity. We were sweeping an area when a sniper shot at our team. He was hidden in a tree line, maybe three or four hundred yards away, and we were skirting the edge of an opposing tree line. My team jumped in among our trees and returned fire. I stood in the open and screamed at the sniper: "Fuck you, you lousy shot!" His next rounds hit the dirt a few yards ahead of me. I pointed and yelled, "Too low," and then "Too high," when the

rounds zinged over my head. The third volley was shoulder-high; a round passed by my neck. I yelled, "Fuck you," shot the sniper the finger, then strolled back into the trees.

I joked with my team that I had given the sniper the elevation, but goddamned if I'd give him the windage too. Now I know that I'd given the sniper a chance to kill me, to somehow make my killing of the VC in the rice paddy more okay. For a young man in time of war, it will always be "the best of times and the worst of times." For me, the "best"—call it pride—was ephemeral. The "worst,"—call it shame—has endured.

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Outside Danang, it was like Custer's Indian Wars with back-and-forth raids and ambushes and mutilations. In other words, it was very personal. We had names for our enemies and their lands: the sniper who head-shot sentries with his purloined Starlite Scope was a VC we called Elvis; the guy who laid the mines at night was Zorro; the area of thickest concentration of VC was Dodge City. We moved out late one night to clean out Dodge, and to kill Elvis and Zorro. I recall the feeling of powerfulness, walking in the dark, armed and dangerous, with other men. At dawn, our platoon—the moving hammer—had driven a group of VC into a river. On the opposite bank, another platoon—the anvil—awaited them. When we stopped firing, ten VC were dead in the water. We'd done our job well and done it clean, and I felt proud. The lieutenant asked for volunteers to drag the VC ashore, so a few of us stripped, then waded into the brown water for the dead soldiers. We cradled them to shore. Side by side on the red river bank, they looked more like dolls than men. A few minutes later, I walked back to look more closely. Someone had reaped their ears. I don't know whether we killed Elvis or Zorro, or if it actually mattered—we all knew that there would be others to take their places, and that Dodge City would remain a dangerous place. The only certain casualty was our own innocence.

I remember the first time I felt rage. We were riding out on tanks and the tank in front hit a mine. One guy had a leg blown off at the hip, and someone had laid him out on an ant mound. He

was alive and the ants were all over him, black on blood. I can't remember what I did—did I pull him away from the ants? I remember clearly, though, the feeling of rage. Even now, I cannot fully explain this barbarous equation: I felt rage and then I wanted to kill someone.

This feeling wasn't limited to seeing fellow Marines fall. I remember feeling the same rage when dog handlers were carrying away a VC with a big hole in his hip. Their shepherd, his muzzle crimson with blood, was snuffling in the wound while the handlers laughed at the man's terror. I yelled: "Get that fucking dog away or I'll blow it away!"

I remember, too, my rage whenever someone stepped on a mine and got trashed. When I turned in a prisoner to the ARVN's for questioning and they wired him to a field generator to torture information out of him. When we were test-firing LAW rockets and one blew the arm off the guy next to me (I was sure the weapon had been sabotaged in the States). When I carried an old woman away from her home so we could have a free-kill zone, the sound of her death rattle in my ear. When an army helicopter dropped us ("Jump!") into a hot LZ from a cowardly thirty feet above the deck (I fired off a few rounds at the pilot before he sped out of range). When a worthless slacker in the outfit tried to draw me into the racial violence that came to us. I held a cocked .45 to the man's head and squeezed the slack off the trigger. Later, the slacker stepped on a mine, one with a sharpened 20-penny nail that went through his foot. The mine was meant to blow when you lifted your foot. I screamed at him: "Go ahead you bastard, lift your foot!" I let this man know to beware my rage and then felt ashamed for it—I extricated him from his predicament.

I felt rage when I stepped on a "bouncing betty" mine with a wet fuse that only sizzled at me. When I fell in a punji pit (wide and deep enough for a helicopter) and clung by my forearms to a cross-tree that held, my feet thumping against the tops of sharpened stakes. When I found one of many scores of trip wires. When I saw in the regimental morgue dead Marines hanging to drain. When the orderlies dropped a wounded man out of the helicopter we'd brought him in on. When we couldn't relieve a recon squad being wiped out, and we could hear in the comm

bunker the voice of the last guy being killed, after the NVA removed the sandbags off the bunker to get at him.

In the air at dawn, we flew to that bunker, killed off NVA stragglers, bagged the squad of dead Marines, then packed them in a helicopter—in which the dead and alive were thrown against one another when the copter tilted, overweighted with the dead. When we were held back from relieving a Special Forces camp being overrun by NVA tanks. Whenever I saw or expected to see people burned, shelled, shot, abused, or when I feared someone was working to do the same to me, I felt rage. With the means of murder in my hands it became a murderous rage.

In the war that rage kept me alive, but now I look back at this time with very different feelings. I will trouble you with a poem I wrote twenty years after I left the war:

On the Plain of Jars I see men retreating,
leaving only wisps of smoke
in evidence of passion passing.

Now stunted oaks stand the sentinel
while the grasses sigh their duty
and cover the remains of men,
no eyes to see nor lips to speak.
All awaits a spark to become a flame
and uncover these fearsome frames
on the Plain of Jars.

And now, I am one of these men
returning, through smoke,
to hold these bones in older hands,
in awe and shame.

I have said that I only communicated once in-country with my father or brother. That's not quite true. A few years ago, my older brother and I were in the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum in Washington DC, when we spotted a UH-34 (what we called a "shuddering shithouse" because of their vibration in flight). When my brother got within about 20 feet, he muttered "they cleaned it up," then turned and walked out of the museum. I caught up to him a block away; he told me he'd read the serial number on the fuselage, and that he'd been crew chief on that

helicopter. He told me then that his outfit flew Khe Sanh Marines around during my time there and that I must have been on his ship more than once, but that he had never recognized me.

I forgave us both, for I suspect we all were anonymous and the same in our smells and scared looks. To celebrate our discovery, my brother and I did what most Marines would do: we got drunk together. And that's when he told me, my decorated older brother of three tours in Vietnam, of so many missions to attack the enemy and to retrieve dead and wounded Marines, all actions of which others might have thought he should have been proud—that's when he confessed his shame.

He said he'd been ferrying dead Marines from a hill battle one day and that somebody had thrown in a roped NVA prisoner among the bagged Marines. During the flight, the prisoner bit my brother's ankle and my brother went into a rage. He laid a heavy chain on the prisoner's head, pinning his face to the abrasive floor (embedded with grit so you wouldn't slide on water or blood or gore). My brother stopped his account then and would say no more. I can only guess at the damage done to the prisoner, and marvel at what was done to all of us in that time and place. Our humanity was abraded, our human faces changed.

My brother, my father, myself—in some fundamental way we are now the same. My brother went to war three times to gain our father's love; I went once and put the hope away. I knew that in a dream: my father is standing beside me and we are looking down on Khe Sanh Valley. He does not look at me, nor I at him. We are both looking down at the battered red earth below us. He says: "Now that you have returned, I can love you." I respond: "It's not worth it."

Had my father gone to war to gain his own father's love? I wonder, too, can anyone come back from a ground war without the albatross of shame about his neck? I never learned of my father's shame from his war, for he would only suggest by what I have since taken to be a metaphor. "They broke up priceless sets," he would say, and look saddened in his memories. Yet I do know his greatest shame since his war, and it is certainly mine: the failure to save the life of the youngest son, the one who did not go

to war—what became the breaking up of my father's "priceless set," his children.

I left Vietnam during the early stage of the siege of Khe Sanh, running up the strip to jump into the back of a rolling C-130 (the pilots wouldn't stop for fear of being hit by NVA rockets or artillery). Maybe I should have paid attention to an event which happened shortly before I returned to the States. The First Sergeant had gathered the company together and was screaming at us about the loss of two Marines—shot in the face, bayoneted in the chest—killed by one old man NVA because they were "out of their gourds on dope."

I was thirty pounds lighter when I hit the States, and my legs were still weeping from jungle rot, but I'd gotten back alive, though I hadn't fully inventoried the baggage I'd brought. The heaviest item was rage, and I was alarmed when it arose. I was apt to blow at the slightest provocation. It didn't take long before I nearly killed a man with my fists, because I "felt" he'd insulted me. I suppose that is when I decided to put it all away, to tell myself that Vietnam never happened, for I felt far too dangerous for my own and others' good. In truth, for 20 years I suppressed Vietnam, never spoke of it.

But there was another thing I brought home with me: an infantryman's sense of smell, the knowing before it happens that something bad is about to occur. I say smell because this is as close as I can get to what it feels like, this sensitivity of the brain's limbic system to environmental cues which most people don't register. I suppose it comes from the need to know whether there is a mine under this dike, an enemy in that tree line, an ambush about to bust loose, someone somewhere preparing to kill you.

I smelled danger all over my younger brother, the one son who didn't go to war. I knew he would die, I knew it would involve drugs, and I knew I couldn't stop it.

My brother was a strong and sensitive 17-year-old kid who was acting out the pain and uncertainty of our parents' divorce by getting stoned whenever he could. I begged my parents to get him into counseling, had him live with me, even put him in jail, but all failed. Finally, while stoned with his friends, he fell, jumped, or was pushed from a 40-foot wall. He took nearly a

month to die. I would work days and stand watch over him at night. His heart stopped one night and the doctors worked to bring him back. I remember crying out for them to take my heart and put it in his chest—he'd never hurt anyone and I *had*. That night was the first time I cried since I'd left for Vietnam.

After my brother died, I quit my job, broke off an engagement to be married, and moved onto an island in a river. The police had told me that my brother had been with four of his friends when he “fell.” In my grief, I became convinced that his friends had caused his death. The old equation came back: grief to rage, rage to murder. I found out my brother’s friends’ names and where they lived. I borrowed a hunting rifle and planned to kill the four boys, each in turn. I’d like to say I didn’t kill the boys because I decided to keep death from other children, but I know better. If I had gotten my hands on a military rifle—that familiar feel—I’d have killed the boys, and I’d now be in prison, or dead myself.

The decision to help others as a way to help my dead brother came later when I ran a wilderness program for teenagers in difficulty. Ten years of working with kids finally seemed enough penance for not saving my own brother’s life. Only recently have I become aware that on a level deeper than my conscious penance, I was also leading squads of young men into dangerous terrain and bringing them back, again and again, but this time with nobody dying.

Love for a woman finally brought me off my island. We married, created a daughter, and life went well for awhile. For seven years, my wife gave me a sense of security, safeness, and normality. Yet I began to move from her, to withdraw from intimacy. It took some time for me to accept that I did not feel I deserved to be loved by her or by anyone. Once again I moved to live on an actual island, quit my job. I withdrew from contact with all others, excepting my daughter and a few friends. I still didn’t know what was bothering me, though I had a vague sense of doing time for sins I could not or would not remember.

Humans are sense-making animals; when we cannot make sense of our world or of ourselves, we begin to go mad. So it was for me. My isolation bred a deep depression. I dreamed of dragons that devoured me from the feet up, of having inadequate

arms to defend others, of bodies floating in rivers. Once on a river bank I hallucinated my wife and child floating by me, dead. I felt as if I were sliding into hell. One night I waded across the river to reach my island. The water was chest-deep and I pushed aside ice floes to make the crossing. Yet, I barely felt the cold. Instead of lighting a fire, I sat in the dark cabin all night looking at my moonlit hands. They seemed all there was of me. I was fragmenting. I began to wish for death.

There was a river falls a few miles upstream of my island. I began to go there every day to stand above the gorge and think of jumping into the deeper waters below. As each day passed, I got closer to making my leap. Only my not wishing to bring my daughter pain kept me on the cliff. One spring evening, I was standing in my place near the falls when a woman committed suicide. She had lowered herself into the fast waters above the big drop of the falls. I heard the cries of witnesses. I knew it would take the rangers time to lower their raft into the river, so I grabbed one of their old canoes and paddled up and down the gorge below the falls, now looking into the waters for the woman's life rather than for my own death. A helicopter joined the search, at one point hovering directly above me, its rotor wash threatening to capsize my craft. I began yelling at the chopper to Fuck Off. I thought it was a gunship above me.

The woman's body was not found for three months. When I returned the canoe the evening of her death, a man told me: "I saw her lower herself into the water. She tried to grab back onto the rocks at the moment the current pulled her toward the falls." If there is a time in a man's life when he can see the hand of God on his life, that was mine when I was given a lesson by the Lady of the Falls. I gave up my thoughts of death and pulled away from the edge of the cliff, at least for a time. I visited my estranged wife (on the morning after she had been with a new lover); I visited my brother's grave for the first time since I had buried him. I lay on his grave and spoke to him and cried for the second time since I left for war.

The Dutch build three dikes in a row to keep out the sea; I've come to see this architecture as a metaphor for the defenses we raise to keep out painful memories which lie just beneath

consciousness. I like, too, the names the Dutch give their dikes: the *Guardian*, the *Sleeper*, and the *Dreamer*. My own defenses, however, were not adequate revetments as they were fast crumbling and I was flooded with memories—flashbacks by day, nightmares by night. The failure of my marriage was a signal bell, the reverberations of which set off a whole carillon of losses I had striven to deny. The first flashback, triggered by the helicopter looking for the Lady of the Falls, opened the doors for others of mounting intensity and duration. These in turn brought on full blown panic attacks, which felt like heart attacks. I was back in the war. I moved West in hope of beginning again.

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I moved to a big city, in the hope that being surrounded with the stimulus of others would distract me from the war that ailed me. For varying periods, I was able to work, but then I would perceive danger about me, sense that something bad was about to occur, and I'd leave. There were a few times I experienced the twilight world of fugue, the not knowing where I was or how I had gotten there. Work became a checkered affair. I was hospitalized when one of the panic attacks looked like a real-deal heart attack. Following my release from the hospital, I went through a period of homelessness. I felt like a man in a boat strapped to the gunwales, condemned to face always the sea of the past, memories rising to the surface unexpectedly. I was unable to sense or expect any joy in the future. Once again I moved to live on a river, for only rivers made any sense to me anymore. I was determined to figure my life out on the river or drown myself in it. At the time, I felt I must be the only man to feel so alone, the only man to go to the river for revelation or for death.

I worked as a boatman, a man who ferried others down rivers. Once, on a desert river trip with a party of neophyte river guides, we came across a cow stuck in the mud of the bank. There were more than 30 of us, all young and strong, and only the one cow. Yet as we landed our boats, you could hear the ambivalence in the party, some wanting to free the animal, others wanting to leave it to its fate. Six of us set to work in the hot sun; the rest went

to lie in the shade, to smoke pot or to make love, or to just relax in the desert. The cow had spent itself attempting to escape the mud, and the mud was mixed with the cow's urine and its feces and the blood that had dribbled from its nostrils. We dug around the cow's legs and under its neck and belly, but the makeshift tools that we had were inadequate. We cut trees as lifting poles, but all broke. We called for help from the group. A woman called back that we should cut the cow's throat so it wouldn't suffer. One of the men handed her his long knife in eloquent refusal. In the end, the six of us who had worked were too exhausted to stand. The party demanded to leave, so we did. Shortly after we had gone (we learned days later), another boating party came along and marveled at the scene of a nearly dug out cow. They committed themselves as a group to free it; they simply joined hands and lifted it out. But that night, around a campfire, a younger guide asked me what I thought about our incident with the trapped cow. Of the cow we failed to rescue, I said: "That was our country in Vietnam."

The next day we prepared to face the most difficult and dangerous rapid on the river. I gathered the party on shore and I drew a long line in the sand. I told them that the line represented how each of them felt about taking on this rapid, one end of the line being "great reluctance" and the other being "great commitment." I had them physically place themselves along the line, according to how they felt about engaging the rapid. After they had done so, only the most committed were allowed to run the rapid, the rest were made to portage their boats around it. I don't think any of this group made the connection between the line of commitment and the cow, nor were aware of the anger over the betrayal that had briefly surfaced in me, 20 years after the war.

One day, I paddled my boat downriver and, alone, came upon a large and twisted cedar, the trunk of which the river girdled at high water. I pulled up beside the trunk, leaned across the gunwale, and held on to it. I felt the force of the current against the cedar, saw how it had been shaped by that force, and identified with its twisted trunk. I looked across the river and saw an amphitheater, a curved hillside treed with cedars like the one

in the river, as if these cedars were spectators to a single drama. And then I pronounced a name I cannot recall ever having said before. I said: "Orestes," and I cried for the third time since I left for war.

To the best of my recollection, I did not know who Orestes was, but the name sounded Greek, and I guessed he was a mythic character. I looked Orestes up to find the story of a son who had gone to war with his father. Orestes' father, Agamemnon, returned from war and was killed by his wife and her lover. In a rage, Orestes killed his mother and the lover. For his crime of matricide, the Gods beset Orestes with harpies, which wheeled about him constantly and tore at his flesh—a fine description, I thought, for the guilt I felt over killing others, killing the love my wife had for me, and failing to save my brother's life.

There are variant endings to the myth of Orestes. In the version I like best, Orestes is brought before the Gods, the harpies still wheeling and screaming and picking at his flesh. The Gods expect Orestes to grovel and cry out that circumstances had made him commit his crime. He, however, claims responsibility for his crime. Struck by Orestes' ownership, the Gods leave the harpies to wheel about him, but not touch him. When I read this account of Orestes, I saw it as the sign of the conversion of guilt into remorse—for Orestes, and for me.

Knowing what ailed me, I was able to look about me, and notice I was not the only twisted tree. There were hillsides of them all about me. I began to hear about *them* about, for instance, the vet who had lived just down the road from me. He'd told his wife that he couldn't bear the nightmares of his war anymore, then drove his Harley into an oncoming semi. His wife told me this story one night as she waited on my table. She said their son was having trouble sleeping now, too.

Then I began to meet them, these men who had retreated into these western mountains. I met them in a trailer set beside the river, in empty school rooms and churches, in a room in a courthouse, and in their homes and mine. When they trusted me, they brought their wives and children to talk.

There was the man who sat in the rain at night, his claw-hand upon the barrel of a machine-pistol, defending himself from

horrors that had already occurred. There was the man who, on the anniversary of his wounding and the decimation of his company, sat in his car, alone in the mountains, gazing at pictures on the dashboard of his children, holding a knife to his own throat on the brink of decision until he was found by a policeman who stopped him. This policeman's cousin had also gone to the war and then killed himself, in the same mountains.

There was a man who had won two Silver Stars for bravery, yet thought he was a coward because he had felt fear when his team was surrounded by a large force of NVA; his arm wounded by grenade fragments, he'd called in an air strike on his own position. When this man was a boy, his older brother had returned from the war in Korea and killed himself; when he first began to talk about the trauma of his own war, the man's therapist, another veteran, hung himself. I would tell you more about these men I met, but I don't wish to jeopardize their privacy. I will tell you that they were some of the most wounded—and courageous—men I have ever met.

The largest concentration of veterans in the area I lived, however, was not comprised of men who had chosen the solitude of the nearby mountains; it was made up of the veterans who had been sent to the prisons in the high valleys. The prisoners in turn drew other vets, whose work, as guards, was to keep them there. I went to the prisons to find the vets and to counsel them. This was not a selfless mission—I went to these prisons, at least in part, to heal my own woundedness and to atone for my own sins. Anna Freud had me pegged when she said that men are not altruistic because they are so good, but because they have been so bad.

One of the senior prison staff told me that 10 years prior, over one-quarter of the inmates were Vietnam veterans (the Vietnam Veterans of America reported that over 403,000 Vietnam-era veterans were incarcerated inside the US criminal justice system in 1990). "Forget mental health care—that never happened," the staffer told me.

The VA would never come in here to provide that. So we just tried to get assistance for medical problems. We had one guy who had had extensive bridgework as the result of a combat wound to his mouth. His mouth

was falling apart and we couldn't get the VA to get this guy fixed up. We didn't have the money in our budget, so we had to remove all his teeth. We've had a lot of problems with getting new prostheses for guys who lost limbs over there—they'd have to live with what they had that didn't fit or we'd get them a cheap pegleg.

I was troubled by the stories of these men I never met. I knew them only through the recollections of staff and inmates who had known them, and by studying the prison files. Frequently, I'd find the odd note in a file: a letter from a mother to a judge, pleading with him to understand that her boy hadn't been bad before he went to war, that war had changed him.

One of the stories has stuck in my mind—a prison report about a man who'd been a tunnel rat in the war. His pre-sentence report noted a repetitive crime: to gain entrance, he'd crawl through the air conditioning ductwork of a restaurant, trash the restaurant, then wait for the police to come. The police kept putting him in jail, finally in prison. I wondered what nightmares he was reliving, what he had found in those tunnels, what crimes he must have felt he'd committed to seek atonement through incarceration.

I once asked a woman in the Public Relations office for the VA why they didn't investigate the situation of incarcerated veterans. She replied: "Wouldn't it make people sad?"

But isn't sadness a prelude to wisdom? Hers was not the only denial I encountered. I called the County Coroner one day, told him what I was doing, and that I was interested in knowing whether he had statistics on the county's suicide rate of Vietnam veterans versus non-veterans in the same age range. "No difference, none," he said. Then: "You Goddamned Vietnam vets, always crying about something. I was in World War II and we didn't piss and moan like you babies."

"What was your job during your war?"

His voice changed from an angry tone to one of deep sadness. "I was a doctor on a hospital train in Europe."

I didn't blame the Coroner for his anger; he was only trying to protect himself from his own 50-odd years of pain, and I knew

that we younger vets were ringing bells he was working hard not to hear.

I received a challenging message on my phone one day: "Just who the hell are you?" There was a number to call back. I reached a man who said he was a psychiatrist and that he was writing a book proving that Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder was a social phenomenon, not a psychological problem—in other words, that PTSD was a falsehood, "not empirically proven," a myth we chose to believe in because we felt guilt as a society over waging, and politically losing, a war. In the midst of the call, he revealed that he'd served also.

"So what did you do over there?" I asked.

Once again, I heard sadness come through: "I was in Special Forces."

Denial was found also inside the prisons. When I accompanied the psychologist at one prison to meet the warden for permission to run a vet group in his facility, the warden met us with disdain: "Yeah, I'll let you do it, but understand that these are shitheads. I was there and I didn't commit any crimes."

The warden's response was a rarity, though, in these prisons. Time and again I witnessed the reaching out of the veterans who wore blue, the guards, to those who wore green, the inmates who were veterans. A prison psychologist spoke to one of the groups one day. He'd been a battalion commander in Vietnam; in Korea he'd been the most decorated enlisted man in the US Army. There were several men in the inmate group who'd been in the psychologist's airborne cavalry battalion in Vietnam. He spoke directly to all the men: "You just have to walk away from situations where you want to kill somebody. What you learned over there you cannot do anymore—unless you want to die in prison."

I ate lunch one day with a prison minister and he told me his story:

I wanted to be a grunt over there, instead of a Padre who'd tell his guys this was a just cause and then bury them afterwards. So I'd go out in the field with them, carrying a rifle. One patrol, we were crossing a stream and I reached behind me to help a kid out of the water.

That's when a sniper shot me in the guts. I can only hold my bowels for 15 or 20 minutes since then.

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I learned that there are three codes of conduct which rule the behavior of men in prison. There is the prisoners' code, which centers around getting things over on the guards and never "snitching"; there is the institutional code, which protects the institution by punishing prisoners for rule infractions and constantly reminding them that they have lost the rights of free men; and then there is an unwritten code known as "heart," based on the integrity and courage of the individual, whether guard or inmate.

It was the presence of heart which made the veteran inmates' stories so powerful, and it was the guilt of Orestes which made these men so reluctant to share their stories. A psychologist I admire once explained the therapist's task to me. "Bob," he said, "every man has a story. Your job is to bring forth the saint from the sinner, and the sinner from the saint, and have them truly know themselves."

I met some great sinners in the prisons, and I want to tell you some of their stories. One of the first prisoners to come to a vet group was a medic who'd played God. In the group he projected a cynical self-deprecation and a lofty aloneness—"just throw my food over the wall," he'd say. The son of a wealthy rancher, he'd chosen the army as a career and gone to war with an airborne unit. When he came back from the war, he divorced his wife, the army, and the family that raised him. The crimes that led him to prison were senseless. He'd go into a store, pull a pistol, demand money. Then he'd go to a bar down the street, play poker with the stolen money, smoke a cigar and wait for the police, the trial, and finally the incarceration—17 years all told.

He was a man that other prisoners would leave alone, for they knew he'd rather die than submit to any man; maybe they picked up on his wish to die. But he'd been a medic and the other vets trusted him for that. He'd bring new men into the group and

encourage them to tell their stories, or he'd pull me aside and say things like "there's a guy in C-wing that needs your help." He made sure these other inmates were taken care of first before he told his own story. He spoke of the pain he felt over not being able to save many men, their wounds too severe. He spoke of the smell of a plane full of burned men, of watching a friend be decapitated, of the loss of other medics he'd admired. Finally, he spoke of his sin. Two men in his unit had raped a young girl, who was perhaps 13-years-old. He said that everyone knew about the incident, but that no action had been taken against the guilty.

When the unit went back into the field, one of the men who had raped the girl took shrapnel in the groin, tearing his femoral artery. The medic ran to him under fire, as medics do. But when he saw who it was, he did not treat him; he cursed him and told him to die, then watched him die.

He reminded me in his way of another man—one I did not meet—one to whom all war veterans owe a debt. He won the Medal of Honor in Vietnam and came back alive with it—a rare combination. He was killed robbing a liquor store. The committee that puts together the diagnostic manual used by all mental health workers heard of his death and asked themselves how this could have come to pass. I like to think that his death may have tilted the balance in favor of the inclusion of the diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the revision of the diagnostic manual—that his death helped finally give the condition a name.

Two of the men the medic brought to the inmate group had been in-country neighbors of mine. One was a fellow Marine who'd spent time in Dodge City. He said that his unit had lost a lot of men in that area. He told of a new guy in the squad he led, of how he told this new guy not to take a trail because it was possibly booby-trapped. The new guy ignored the warning and the VC triggered a buried artillery round. The squad leader climbed a tree to rope down what was left of the torso. In a rage, the platoon swept a nearby village as a free-kill zone. The squad leader found a family in a hooch. He asked his lieutenant what to do. "Kill them all," was the response, and so the squad leader did. Even then the rage didn't end. The lieutenant brought in an

amtrac. The bed was rigged with a catapult of sorts, and it hurled roped blocks of C-4 into the village, detonating all the blocks at once. When the smoke cleared, there was nothing left but charred ground. The squad leader went to prison first as a guard, then as an inmate, convicted of assault in a dispute over a car battery.

The other Marine inmate was a neighbor of mine from Khe Sanh; we'd both watched a "duster"—a quad 40mm—blow during a rocket attack, either from a direct hit or because its overheated barrels cooked off a round. We figured out that we were no more than 200 meters apart back in Khe Sahn. Now he's in prison for murder. He sat in the corner in our group for months, wordless because he didn't trust anyone. One day, another man spoke about his own paranoia, which had resulted in his killing a man while in a cocaine psychosis: "Have a little Vietnam," the man said he had yelled. Dressed in camos, armed with an AR-15, he'd shot his "enemy" 23 times. The fellow from Khe Sanh, to our surprise, then spoke for the first time:

I was wounded in the leg there. I lived in the mountains with my family. I don't like people. My dad was a cop and he used me as his personal punching bag. I did the same with one of my boys. I feel bad about that but I can't change it. I've made a decision to never hurt another human being. I only wish that I'd made that decision a long time ago.

A few months later, an inmate at the weight pile struck this man in the head with a free weight; the Marine didn't kill the inmate who'd struck him; he let him go. Then they sent the Marine to another prison, where they were collecting all the lifers. The rows of cutting wire around the perimeter evoked Khe Sanh for him and he decompensated into psychosis. We got him back. He'd lost a lot of weight, but we put him back together again.

Sometimes in the prison group, it was just plain scary. Once, two vets from rival biker gangs showed up and it got very tense. After glaring at each other, one stood up: "I'll be goddamned if I'll sit in the same group with him—too many of my brothers have

been left face down in the street because of his guys. I won't deprive any vet of the right to be here, so I'll come back when he's not here." Another time, when a vet shared that he was in prison for molesting a teenage girl, another vet put his finger in his face and screamed: "I'll kill you, pervert."

Remarkable to a prison group, though, the vets tended to embrace rather than reject the traditional outcasts in a society of outcasts—the sex offenders. A man who murdered turned one day to a man who molested and told him: "I'm not one up on you—at least your victim is still alive." The vets even brought to the group a man who was not only a sex offender, he hadn't even gone to Vietnam; he'd buried the war dead though, in little towns throughout the South. That was good enough for the vets to include him and protect him and help him with his bad dreams. They brought in another vet, a bad cop—a bank robber—and protected him from men who wanted to kill him. And they brought in vets from other wars too.

They brought in an old man. He was having trouble adjusting to prison and dealing with his guilt about running down a hunter while driving drunk on a mountain road. He told his story:

I was in WWII as a belly-gunner on a bomber. My brother was in my squadron. I was in my turret when I saw his plane get shot down. I guess I started drinking a lot then, but I've worked all my life and never been in trouble until this happened. When Korea came around, I was fishing in the middle of the lake and I saw the Sheriff drive up. He got out and was yelling something at me. So we yelled back and forth until I heard him say something about my uncle wanting me. "Uncle who?" I yelled. "Uncle Sam," he yelled. So I got drafted and sent to Korea in the infantry. Maybe I have been drinking to forget some things. God, I wish I hadn't run that poor man over. I feel ashamed and I don't think I'm ever going to feel O.K. again.

The men in the group brought in a Korean war vet who reminded me of the Marine Corps ethic: never leave your dead on the field.

I was there at Chosin Reservoir. I was wounded and when they were hauling me out, a diesel caterpillar passed by on the road, loaded with dead Marines, frozen and stacked like cord wood. I went to the hospital in Japan. While I was there, I got a postcard of Santa and his reindeer flying over a map of Korea. It was signed by all the guys in my unit. By the time I got that postcard, all of them were dead but one [he begins to cry] Jesus Christ! I haven't thought of that in 40 years.

He next said that he deserved to be in prison for his crimes, "no bones about it."

The groups were mixed by race, too—Blacks and Whites and Hispanics—and for a voluntary group in prison, this is a rarity. Whereas the medic was the clear leader in one prison's group, a black man who'd been a recon Marine was the leader in the other. He'd killed a man in a dispute over a car radio. At his trial, the prosecutor made sure to bring up his military past; "this man's a trained killer," he said.

The recon Marine became the leader of his group in prison because he exemplified "heart." One day three men, including the Marine, came late into group; usually they were early. Finally, one of the men said that the recon Marine had just stopped a killing in the prison yard: a man had been striding into the yard with a sharpened spike in his sleeve, intending to kill another man. Without speaking, the Marine had put his hand on the armed man's arm, and the man let the killing go. When the recon Marine was ready, he told us of how ashamed he was, for killing a man for a car radio, for having failed to live up to his potential, for having hurt his family by withdrawing from them, for being one more black man in prison.

One day he came out with what had happened in Vietnam:

I led 38 long-range recons. I always brought my team back. I was the only black man in the outfit. There were rednecks in the outfit, including some officers. They kept sending me out and after a while I thought they wanted to get me killed. So I refused to go

out—38 times seemed enough. A buddy of mine asked me to point for his team but I refused. Yeah, he got killed cause I didn't help him out.

The black recon Marine then got real quiet, then got up and walked out of the room. I didn't see him for a few weeks, so I looked him up in his cell. I told him I needed his help with another vet. So he came back to group. Awhile later, he caught me alone and said,

This week I remembered something I'd forgotten. One day I was in the ready room to brief the chopper pilots on an area we'd just reconned. They were all officers and they were all white men and they were listening to me, a black man. Damn, that felt good.

One story led to another; the recon Marine's story encouraged another black man to tell his story:

When the Presidential elections came up, they took anybody who wanted to vote to the rear. I was the only one in my team old enough to vote. I didn't care about voting, but it was a good excuse to get to where the women and booze were. While I was in the rear having a good old time, my outfit went on patrol. Bobby got shot in the head and Terrible T got wounded from grenade fragments. So Bobby was dead and Terrible T hit, maybe because I wasn't there to help out. When I mustered out in Chicago, I was an El driver. Terrible T was living on the street. A lot of nights when I reached the end of my route, Terrible T would be waiting for me. I'd give him food and sometimes money. He'd be standing there in rags. He really looked terrible now. I felt like I was keeping him alive. Then I got sent to prison. I'm sure he's dead, just like Bobby, because I wasn't there to back him up.

The prison psychiatrist would send men to me who had not been to war, but who had PTSD from childhood beatings and sexual assaults, or assaults upon them as adults. The first man to come was too paranoid to sit in a room alone with me. He'd been

stabbed 27 times and saw the face of his assailant on those about him. He and I met beside a low wall, in the open, where he could see all who approached him. That wall became the place where men who would not come to the group, could speak with me. Regardless of the weather, they sat at the wall and spoke of their pains and their fears, of fathers who'd attempted to kill them as children, of parents who'd used them as sexual toys, of the rage they'd displaced on others, of the shame they felt.

These men reminded me of an essay William Saroyan published in the newspapers, at his own expense, during the Vietnam War. His were the only words of welcome-home I ever got, so I treasured them. In part, he wrote:

Remember that every man is but a variation of yourself; no man's guilt is not yours, nor is any man's innocence a thing apart. Despise evil and ungodliness, but not men of ungodliness or evil; these, understand.

I want to tell you one final prison story. Routinely, I'd get the men to request a copy of their military record for me. I followed this procedure to keep the "wanna-be's" out of the group, to exclude the sociopaths who'd never been to Vietnam but who would lie about serving there—frauds who wanted *in* the war, whereas the actual vets wanted the war *out* of them.

The black recon Marine's record came back. It cited his combat time in Vietnam, as well as the two Bronze Stars he'd earned for bravery under fire. There was also a notation that he'd been wounded, though no record of his having received a Purple Heart. I told him I thought we could get the medal for him. "It'll never happen," he said, "and what difference does it make anyway?"

I contacted the County Veteran Service Officer, a grizzled ex-Gunny who'd been a dog handler in Vietnam. His leg had been all but torn away when he jumped out of a helicopter onto a mine. He'd been a cop also, and he'd put some of the men in my vet group into prison. He said he wouldn't go into the prison. "I'll help these guys out, Bob, but I won't go in there because some guy I put there might want a little revenge." While he chewed on a handful of aspirins for the pain in his leg, he wrote the letter: "Dear Commandant of the Marine Corps"

Time passed with no response until one day the Marine received his Purple Heart—which, by regulation, requires a formal presentation—in a box, in the mail. “I’m a vet, I’m a black man, and I’m a convict,” the Marine said. “What did you expect?” I called the local base and got a First Sergeant. After a few excuses, he came out with it: “I’m not bringing Marine Blues into any fucking prison!” As it turned out, the Top got his way and I got mine: he sent his Gunny and a Navy Chief down. A local paper ran a picture of the ceremony, hosted by the warden—the one who’d told me: “They’re all shitheads.”

When I left my work in the prisons a few years ago, the old Gunny, the vet service officer, wrote a letter for me too. The VA agreed with him and sent me to finish my schooling. That’s what I’m doing now. Some of the men are out now, some are still in prison, some are dead, and some have returned to prison again. I just received a letter from one who’s still there—the black recon Marine—about to be released after more than 20 years of incarceration. He tells me he thinks he’s just one of many “shadow warriors,” as he describes them, from Vietnam: “you know, the prisoners, homeless, mentals; there ought to be another wall for us.”

Last year there was a ceremony at the memorial wall in DC, a gathering of the Marine defenders of Khe Sanh. I couldn’t afford to go, but a buddy told me about it:

We all read off the name of somebody we knew who died there. Then it got real quiet. Then a sound of a small explosion; a bagpiper was on the wall and he’d slammed his heels together. Then he played *Amazing Grace* and most of us began to cry.

Oh yes, the prisoners built their own memorial—it’s a helmet on a small concrete pad in which they’ve imbedded their medals from their wars. They pass by the memorial each day while they pull their time, remembering.

As for me, I find that telling my own war story has diminished the weight of the memories which I carry. The harpies do continue to accompany me, but I am more trustful that they may not touch me. The river bottom sometimes still beckons, but I

believe I can resist the leaping impulse. And while I am not rid of my sense of aloneness in pulling the oars of my own boat through time, I am no longer tied to face only one way. I am now just another boatman, involved in, to paraphrase Anne Sexton, "the terrible rowing toward God."

As for my older brother, he is somewhere in the Gulf War zone, for he feels safer in the zone of war than he does in the zone of intimacy with others. His retreat from his marriage was accelerated, I think, by the death of his wife's younger brother. The boy had hero-worshipped my brother as the warrior he wished to become. The boy joined the Marines, then died in a training flight. I believe my brother blames himself for the boy's death. I think I'll try and find my brother to share my story with him; perhaps he can begin then to share his.

As for my father, he has recently finished with his rowing. I knew of his death in a dream. In the dream, my father and I were again in the war, on a hill. This time, though, I saw him attacked by his own harpies, in the form of lions. With an axe I chopped at them, but to no avail. They would not touch me, but they ate his heart while I cried.

I was never able to share my war story with my father, nor to coax his from him. But he did leave me with a map of sorts, a genealogy of the family, which he'd crafted over the years—in silence, as was his way. The progenitor of the clan, Robert, Duke of Normandy, tops the list; his son, William the Conqueror, is next. As I read the names, with dates of birth and death, and vocation—in hexagons and circles linked with lines—I note that each generation had its war. From Hastings to Agincourt, I can know that the fathers and sons of my lineage were there. Some were royal, but most were farmers and blacksmiths who went to war; as my name denotes—MacGowan—I am also the son of a smith, who went to war. Above my own name, I read my father's description of himself: "soldier"; alongside my name, I read my father's comment on my brother and me: "Marine."

Reading my father's gift jogs the memory of my father taking my older brother and me, when we were boys, to the Smithsonian, to view a general's sword, wielded at Chickamauga, Tennessee. "The river ran red with blood that day," my father said.

My brother and I, uncertain of this obeisance to the sword of our relative, looked at the sword for the blood we knew must still be on it, but they'd cleaned it up, just like they'd cleaned the helicopter in which my brother had ferried me in our war, the same machine which today sits in another Smithsonian museum, across the mall.

My father rests now, at Arlington, on the grounds of Lee's old mansion, across the river from the helicopter and the sword. We were never able to talk about our respective wars, his in the Ardennes forest, mine in the Khe Sahn Valley. There are things I wished I'd told him, and things from him I wished to know:

Were you so inured to the dead and cold
that you sat atop black hummocks in the snow—
men whose blood no longer flowed,
and ate your rations?

Was your battlefield commission gained
in those Ardennes forest and plains
because you were so brave, or
because you were one of the few alive?

Did the terribleness of the cold
and the hummocks in the snow
reach around your heart
to numb it like your toes?

Was it your memories of your war or
the unfealty of your wife that caused
those starbursts in your brain?

These I would have asked you.
Though, of all I might have told you,
listen I learned this from the river—
I am your son, Orestes. You are
my Agamemnon.

There, I have finished my war story. I have told it so that I could also tell you the stories of some other men I have known, men who went to war and then went to prison, stories you might not want to hear at first. I think their stories are part of a larger story

that needs telling—the one about why so many men who went to the Vietnam War later went to prison.

What is life, but a story? And what is our history, but our collective stories, and the ways in which we have met each other? □

The author is presently completing his doctorate in psychology. Robert MacGowan is a pseudonym, designed to protect the author's privacy and that of the veterans of which he has written. He served in Quang Tri Province as a 26th Marine rifleman from December 1966 through February 1968.



The author and his older brother, in their time of innocence.

The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting a gold star in lieu of the second *BRONZE STAR MEDAL* to

**CORPORAL DONALD E. CLAY
UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS**

for service as set forth in the following

CITATION:

'For meritorious service in connection with combat operations against the enemy in the Republic of Vietnam while serving with Company A, First Reconnaissance Battalion, First Marine Division from 1 May 1970 to 21 March 1971. Throughout this period, Corporal Clay performed his duties in an exemplary and highly professional manner. Displaying exceptional leadership, he expeditiously accomplished all assigned tasks, thereby consistently providing his command with outstanding support. Participating in Operation Imperial Lake, as well as numerous long-range reconnaissance patrols deep within enemy-controlled territory, he repeatedly disregarded his own safety to gain vantage points from which to observe enemy activities and gather intelligence information. Particularly noteworthy were his actions on 28 July 1970 when he detected an enemy ambush while walking the dangerous point position during a patrol in Que Son Mountain regions of Quang Nam Province. Reacting instantly Corporal Clay opened fire before the enemy could initiate the ambush and boldly remained in his dangerously exposed position to deliver intense suppressive fire which enabled his companions to attain covered locations. The team's mission now compromised, the patrol leader, unwilling to incur unnecessary casualties, elected to deploy the team to a landing zone for helicopter extraction. As the team maneuvered, Corporal Clay fearlessly remained in the rear of the column and sprayed the path of the pursuing hostile soldiers with fire, thereby enabling the team to be extracted safely. Corporal Clay's professionalism, aggressive fighting spirit, and steadfast devotion to duty throughout his tour in the Republic of Vietnam contributed significantly to the accomplishment of his command's mission and were in keeping with the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and of the United States Naval Service.'

The Combat Distinguishing Device is authorized.

FOR THE PRESIDENT

WILLIAM K JONES
LIEUTENANT GENERAL, U.S. MARINE CORPS
COMMANDING GENERAL, FLEET MARINE FORCE, PACIFIC