Shadow Soldier

Editor's Note: *I met Donald Clay on a visit to prison. As a writer and teacher of writing, I accompanied a pyschologist, Robert MacGowan, to encourage the prisoners he met with to write their stories. What follows are excerpts from Donald Clay's work.*

In July 1970, Lance Corporal Torres was mortally wounded. I was not a member of that patrol. Torres had been my mentor, training me in the nuances of the lead position as pointman. In my experience, pointmen are either foolhardy and reckless or extremely courageous. It can be said that the life of a team is in the hands of this individual. Torres epitomized the qualities and skills necessary for the position. Torres' instructions were feats themselves. He had only a rudimentary grasp of English, but seldom, if ever, did a fresh hunk of grinder meat receive the full breadth of exact instructions such as I received from Torres. In the bush, as well as in the compound, he would admonish and implore me to use my eyes, ears, and sense of smell to detect the presence of enemy booby-traps and troops. More importantly, he was instrumental in my learning to acknowledge and act on my intuition as a means of recognizing potential dangers, thereby minimizing the threat to men and mission.

When I look at a cherished photograph, I am reminded of just how young and full of patriotism we were. Death, dying, or permanent disability were no concern; this sort of thing was what happened to other people. We did not know, or choose to accept, that we were all *other* people.

In time, I was given the honor of leading my own team of six. "Grim Reaper" was our moniker. Walking through the compound one night to round up my team to prepare for a patrol, I heard the

revelry of marines taking a break from the stress of war. I approached the noisy hooch only to overhear a braggart: "Can't wait till I get back to the world. Why, back home, we'd get drunk and go nigger busting for real fun."

I entered the hooch. The revelry was replaced by a deafening silence. As I surveyed the hooch I saw that two of my guys were part of the crowd. Here I am a black team leader in a battalion with no black officers and but one black staff NCO. What was it that hurt so intensely? I knew. Although daily risking my life for American principles and South Vietnamese freedom, I was to be reminded that despite any risk or patriotic conviction on my part, I would always be a nigger and Torres, an exceptional marine, now dead, would always be a spic. The incident would affect me in ways I wouldn't begin to fathom until years later.

In addition to all else I ever felt in Vietnam, I also felt like a self-conscious 12-year-old with a loaded weapon. Nonetheless, as Grim Reaper's leader, I had a responsibility to protect and insure the safety of the team: Dietrick, Miller, Knuth, Hooker, Doc, and Hughes. Grim Reaper was a collection of personalities which learned to function as a single-minded unit. I am most proud of one achievement in Vietnam above all others: Grim Reaper lost not one man.

=

I was reared in Mississippi until age 15. Our small town was a sequestered enclave, underdeveloped, and racially gerrymandered. Jonestown was a totally segregated section of Hollandale, Mississippi. The boundaries were rigid—physically, socially, and psychologically. Besides the railroad tracks, our community was bordered by interminable fields of cotton and soybean. I worked in the cotton fields at an early age. Besides the stifling heat and work, there were the ubiquitous snakes. Rattlesnakes, copperheads, and water moccasins sure helped me develop survival instincts early. Sometimes the fields would be so parched they hardened like cement. Each swing of the hoe sent reverberations through my body like vibrations through a tuning fork. Conversely, whenever it

rained, the mud would literally suck the tattered boots or worn shoes from my feet. I earned $3.00 for a 10-12 hour day.

My formative years in Mississippi were spent going to school, playing, and learning about the dos and don'ts in a segregated society. School was fun and my curriculum work exemplary. My parents stressed the importance of obtaining a quality education; they were not disappointed. I was a courteous and attentive student, and actively involved in student government.

When we were 10 or 12, my friends and I were playing a rowdy game of football on our major league field of dreams. Three white kids appeared and joined in the fun. Towards the end of the game, as we were reveling in the experience, our celebration was interrupted by the rumbling sounds of a dilapidated Ford pickup approaching. Screeching to a dusty halt with its brakes locked, the vehicle disgorged its cargo. Before the truck had come to a complete stop, the first man out yelled at the scrawniest of our new playmates.

> "Boy, what ya'll do'in pla'in wit dem dar niggas?"
>
> "We's jest playing football, mister," the child answered. The child was clearly shaken.
>
> "Well ya'll ain't a pla'in no mo. Com'mer and we's gon see yo folks 'bout dis. Hey", he continued, now directing his vehement disapproval at us, "Ya'll nigga boys a bettin not never play wit these har boys a'gain—ya'll har me!"

We didn't say a word. I wonder why? Fear? Whatever, I have never forgotten the vile epithets and degradation of that moment. Why do I believe that isolated incident belongs here? Among the many influences in my life, that one remains a poignant reminder of a social lesson I had to be exposed to.

My parents divorced about the time of the football game. Mom moved to Michigan and we—my two sisters and I—joined her nine months later. Upon arrival in Michigan, I experienced a severe case of culture shock. Change is always difficult, especially with the loss of childhood friends. Still, I wasn't prepared for the challenge of attending a high school with a black enrollment of less than 10 percent. Up to this time, I had spent my nine fruitful school years in the security of a totally black student body.

Dowagiac Union High School was an exceptional school, however, and I again excelled in my school work, graduating with honors in 1968. Moreover, I was skillful enough in sports to garner the attention of many Mid-American Conference colleges and universities. (One of my classmates, Chris Taylor, went on to earn an Olympic bronze medal as a heavyweight wrestler.)

In dire need of an identity check (having come of age in two disparate environments left me with a host of unanswered personal character questions), I volunteered for a four-year enlistment with the United States Marine Corps. The date of enlistment was September 19, 1969, a month shy of my 19th birthday. It is important to note that the decision to enlist was based solely on a means of defining my worth and character. That is to say, there was no juvenile misconduct which precipitated the decision.

I survived Marine Boot Camp! Oh my, the indignities one faced. Another story for another day. Suffice it to say, and this is worth repeating: *I survived Boot Camp*. This quest to become a man wasn't progressing as well as I'd anticipated. I still lacked self-confidence. After a few additional weeks of Advanced Combat Training, I volunteered for Reconnaissance School, Camp Pendelton, California. This training was even more physically and mentally exhausting. So tough, in fact, that I gave serious consideration to withdrawing from the service. But, despite any personal reservations I may have been harboring about my military abilities, I gave all I had.

Upon successful completion of Recon school, I had earned entry into an elite fraternity. Later, while in-country, I would attend another recon school. But before that, I had begun to feel and think like a Marine. It was a feeling of incomparable mental and physical readiness and toughness. In a word: INVINCIBLE. It was then when I first heard this philosophy: "Challenge your fear. If you sense a threat, close and incapacitate the threat." Without a doubt this mode of thought is directly responsible for the survival and call to duty of me and my men. It has also been the bane of my civilian existence.

War by its very nature—designed destruction—is a traumatic experience, even for the professional participant. I arrived in Vietnam as a cocky red-white-and-blue 19-year-old. A year later, I left as a disillusioned bundle of perceptions: a psychological and

social liability. As I look back I can see that there were indeed a set of situations and circumstances which contributed to my inglorious metamorphosis into a shadow soldier.

=

As a pointman in Vietnam, I had gained considerable respect and notoriety. Grim Reaper was standing down for a well-deserved rest, so Sgt. Fink, a veteran of two prior tours, approached me with a proposition. He asked if I would walk point for his upcoming patrol. I declined. As insistent as he was over a three-day period, I was equally adamant in refusing. On his way down to the LZ for insertion, Fink stopped by my hooch: "Claymore, if anything happens to me I am coming back to haunt you." We laughed, I reassured him that this patrol would be, in the vernacular of the day, a cake-walk.

Soldiers often experience premonitions, most of which are only flights of fancy. Less than three hours after being inserted near a VC enclave hidden in the Que Son Mountains, Fink was felled by a single AK-47 round. He had just deployed his team and was moving to cover when the sniper struck.

I felt responsible for his death. If only I had walked point, Fink would be alive. In my mind I heard the whispers: "Clay is a coward; Clay should have helped out." Like Poe's character in "Tell-Tale Heart," I thought surely everyone was convinced of and aware of my guilt. Unlike the fictional man driven mad by shame and guilt, who at least screamed out, I bore the visceral imprint of cowardice. Doubt, particularly of one's competence, is devastating.

I snapped. Where before I had experimented with drugs, I now began to depend upon them for the modicum of solace I rarely obtained. Professional cautiousness was supplanted by recklessness in the bush. If I could die in a fierce firefight, my courage, I felt, would be unquestioned. I invited death. I wore a flesh tone Band-Aid on my forehead in marked contrast to the layered camouflage on my face and neck. During firefights I protected my men by placing myself in exposed positions. I wrote my mother:

Dear Mama,

Because you haven't written, I'd like to say—I am still alive.

Don

P.S. Only for the moment.

=

During October 1970, we were operating in the Quang Nam province, an enemy-controlled territory. I was walking point 20-25 meters ahead of the team. Signs of recent VC/NVA presence in the area were undeniable. In addition to the broken twigs and discernible sandal tracks on the trail, I felt the enemy's proximity. I could smell a faint odor of boiled rice. I moved back towards the team and gave them instructions to be extra vigilant. Moreover, I told them that we'd be in the "shit" this particular morning. "Like real soon," I said.

Again I moved out ahead of my men. As I turned down the well-utilized trail, two VC irregulars appeared. They weren't but 10 feet in front of me. The lead soldier was laughing, obviously having just shared something with his companion. Alerted by the perplexed expression on his companion's face, the lead man turned in time to see a fleeting image of me, then a muzzle flash that signaled the ejection of a 5.62mm round. The soldier's head exploded, covering foliage and his friend with fragments of skull and pulverized brain.

Never had I seen an expression such as his prior to his abrupt demise, nor do I ever wish to see it again. It was a smile of gelid terror. Disbelief and acknowledgment that life was over. The other soldier was mortally wounded with the next volley. In less than a second—from sighting to firing—I had killed two men.

After we'd secured the area, we again set out along the trail. I resumed my position at point. We wouldn't have to worry about complacency. Thirty minutes later, attempting to find the best fording route across a stream, I came under intense small-arms fire from enemy troops positioned among rocks above our position. Apparently the VC had not seen my men, who began emerging

from their concealed spot on the bank of the stream. The VC had a strategic advantage as they were behind boulders firing down. I was in the middle of a rock-strewn stream without cover. I could hear the rounds whiz past my ears and splash into the waters around me. One of the first rounds knocked me face down into the stream. The round had entered my backpack and been altered when it hit the C rations. My consequent wound was minor. While I drew the VC fire, I shouted to my men to saturate the area with fire. I was able to move from the stream.

Resuming the line of march, we set out once again. We'd traveled about 200 meters when we decided to take a short breather. I moved ahead again, taking a position some 20 meters up the trail. I was exhausted, but the adrenaline flowing through my body insured a vigilant awareness. I noticed a barely perceptible movement in the dense foliage off to my left flank. Peripheral vision enabled me to see a figure moving stealthily towards my position. As he inched closer, I casually retrieved my weapon which was propped against the tree.

In a mini-drama, the soldier rose to toss a hand grenade. I swung my weapon at the same instant and fired. Once, twice, three, four times. My victim was unable to run or walk, so he began to claw his way through the tangled underbrush.

The grenade the soldier had thrown exploded—a violent thud—further disturbing the eerie quiet of the jungle. Hearing the gunfire and muffled explosion, my team began firing in the direction of the injured soldier. I shouted above the cacophony of cursing and small-arms fire for my men to cease fire. The air was choked with cordite. I entered the bullet-torn brush. When I reached down to turn the man's small frame, the arm detached itself from his Raggedy-Andy body. I remember yelling, swearing, and weeping. I was 19-years-old trying to be a marine, a man. The child (he was 12 or 15) at my feet was simply gone.

In less than two hours, I had figured in the deaths of five human beings. Can anyone fully comprehend the effects of the power, the god-complex on a young man with a license to kill?

=

Dennis Dietrick and I were moving through a VC base camp. Grim Reaper was part of a combined operation being used to harass and extricate the VC from the region. Lollygagging and inattentive I, the skillful pointman, felt the telltale tautness of a tripwire slacking around my ankles. As if he'd heard or sensed my stark realization telepathically, D.D. knew we would be bodybag material in a few seconds. We didn't have time to panic or run. We stood transfixed like two ducks struck on the head with a rock—dumbfounded. One second, two, three seconds . . . it was a dud. "It" was a U.S. 80mm mortar round lying prone 18 inches to my right. With a disbelieving shake of our heads, we gingerly exited the spot. Neither of us uttered a single word about what had just happened—nor did we ever.

Fifteen minutes later I walked into a disheveled structure to investigate its contents. During my search, I discovered nothing out of the ordinary. There were baskets filled with grain, discarded clothes, and an empty storage chest of varying dimensions and questionable craftsmanship. I walked across the straw-strewn floor to check a large upright vase when the floor caved in. I landed on my face in a huge open cavern filled with grain and other stores. Difficult though it was to see in the dim light, I couldn't help but notice a shadowy recess. Protruding from the earthen dugout was a barrel pointing directly at me, attached to a tripod. My weapon was lying three feet in front of me. I now knew exactly what the lead VC soldier must have experienced in the instant before I shot him.

The machine gun was unmanned. Even today I am haunted by that frozen moment; I often awake terrorized, my heart pounding, my kidneys throbbing like bellows gone awry. The one consolation was the realization that the unoccupied cavern was a cache. AK-47's, SKS's, ammo galore, and numerous other weapons were recovered.

=

Though I never used drugs or alcohol in the bush, I did use the two when not on patrol to deal with my pervasive thoughts of death and

constant danger. To further desensitize myself, I incorporated the resignation that I would die in Vietnam. My mind was invaded by morbid flights of fantasy. When I would search lifeless and often mangled bodies of VC/NVA soldiers, I would wonder whether their families knew about or appreciated the sacrifices these dead soldiers had made or the danger they faced daily or the destruction they wrought.

Because I had resigned myself to die in Vietnam, I was unprepared to return to "the world"—there had been no contingency plan for alive-and-not-well. Still, I had more than two years remaining on my enlistment. After a strained leave with my family in Dowagiac, Michigan, I was assigned to Cherry Point, NC, a Marine Corps Air Station.

At Cherry Point, the first rend in my personality appeared. The rage, repressed as it was, surfaced, and I began a cycle of unintentional aggression I was ill-prepared to handle. What happened? A fellow in a car nearly ran me down as I entered a crosswalk on base. The near collision didn't upset me—it was the driver's insolence and aloofness about almost hitting me. When I approached his vehicle, he sped away, showering me with dust and grit, laughing.

For the next five days I canvassed the base looking for the vehicle and driver. All my recon skills were employed in this hunt. On the fifth day, I spotted the car outside the base PX complex. I positioned myself next to a vehicle one row behind his. An hour passed before the man emerged from the Dairy Queen. He carried a milkshake, and a cigarette dangled from his mouth. While he fumbled for his keys, I got into a low stance and circled around to the passenger side of the car. I had hoped to catch him unaware and enter through the passenger door.

The door was secure: I'd compromised the mission. Recognition was established, words were exchanged, and a litany of racial slurs directed at me. I recall vividly what transpired next. The man attempted to flick his cherry red cigarette into my face. To accomplish this he had to extend his hand outside the driver's side window. I timed perfectly grabbing his hand. I pulled the man's arm through the narrow opening and broke it. The only reason I didn't rip the appendage from the body was the instant recollection of that

horrific moment (the arms and food cache) a scant few months earlier in the jungles of Vietnam.

My actions at Cherry Point earned me a psychiatric evaluation—the first of four before I was given an Honorable Discharge under medical conditions. Specifically, I was diagnosed and discharged as a "schizoid personality." My rage continued. The outward projections weren't as vicious as the incident at Cherry Point, but my mental disarray undermined my ability to function in a positive and consistent way. Suffice it to say I became increasingly aggressive, combative, and withdrawn.

Marking the beginning of an imprisonment (which continues as of this writing) was my ignominious discharge from the Marines. This discharge confirmed my deepest fear that I was, indeed, a failure. The excerpt from my medical evaluation captures my despair: ". . . 21-year-old Marine is bright and articulate. Outward appearance cannot mask his profound sadness. On the ward this Marine remains withdrawn and depressed."

My depression was authentic. I had been reduced in rank twice in less than two months, from Sergeant to Lance Corporal. In addition, I'd been psychologically poked and prodded by doctors from Brunswick ME, Portsmouth NH, Bedford MA, and, now, the US Naval Hospital, Philadelphia PA. I had been experiencing severe headaches; moreover, the frightening chimerical visions kept me anxious and unnerved. Sleep eluded me, and when I did fall asleep I always saw Sgt. Fink's face or the bloodless corpses of men brave enough to dare to be men. My erratic behavior was episodic; my ability to cope waning.

Ordinarily a desired Marine attribute, my combative tenacity was now unacceptable. The crowning insult was the assertion that my detrimental behavior was a "pre-existing" condition. This diagnosis was approved. On March 23, 1973, I left the Corps.

Civilian life provided no miraculous cures; in fact, my symptoms worsened, and I vacillated between periods of extreme confidence and an almost total moroseness. Fueling my debilitating neurosis was the sixth sense to intuit danger. In the bush, this acuity had saved lives; now a life was being consumed. My intuition was a liability. Too much noise! Too many signals to process! Like the person who has only a hammer and treats everything they

encounter as if it is a nail, I treated every movement as a threat, real or imagined. Something was needed to jam the signals. In addition to the drugs and alcohol, I learned to use avoidance to my advantage.

=

Regardless of the negatives I have shared with you, the Marine Corps does build men. Which is to say I was not without some acceptable socially redeeming qualities. In fact, as a direct result of lessons learned in the Corps about commitment and goal orientation, I came into contact with sensitive and intelligent females.

During the summer of 1973, I met such a person. We had known each other as early as 1969; however, at that time, the relationship was platonic. Even the best of my many relationships throughout this time was no better than mediocre. This one with Pamela was the best. In the beginning ours was a blissfully idyllic relationship. We regularly socialized, made adult plans for the future (including the fenced yard and children). I cared deeply for Pamela then, just as I do today. I would be her security, was my thought. I would never abandon her. Although my intentions were genuine as well as chivalrous, the reality was, sadly, far removed.

I can't say with any certainty the moment our friendship began to deteriorate. I became more withdrawn, paranoid, and sullen. Compounding my problems was the specious belief that alcohol and drugs could ameliorate my depression, anxiety attacks, guilt, and sleep deprivation. At times I would weep like a widow, other times found me in fits of unwarranted rage. Nearing the end of our tumultuous relationship, Pamela had to be awakened from a horrible nightmare. When I roused her, she screamed louder. Following two weeks of constant badgering she said she'd dreamed I was strangling her. Given my mercurial nature—which frightened me on occasion—her fears were not unfounded. Was I an abusive mate? Yes, since I often intimidated her both verbally and physically. We did not part friends. This would be the heaviest monkey I'd ferry for 15 more years. My deepest regret, other than the anguish I subjected Pamela to, is not seeking professional help at

her behest. Also never sharing my Vietnam guilt with her. My time with Pamela was the only long-term relationship (six years) I've entered into. All the rest, like the jobs I've held, were short, necessary, and doomed for failure. Not every aspect of every relationship was bad. In between, displays of masochistic machismo, I was considerate, caring, jovial, magnanimous, and hardworking. However, there was no consistency, except the inevitable depression and humiliating, unprovoked fits of tearfulness and rage.

Jobs: I've held many. When I wasn't among the unemployed and homeless, I consciously limited my employment to low-skilled or unskilled jobs requiring minimal contact and interaction with others. Case in point: employment as refuse collector, laborer (farm, railroad, foundry, construction), tavern sweep, ad naseum. At the first hint of possible management consideration, I would abort employment.

Criminal conduct had never been my way of life; my parents taught me respect for life, law, and property. It wasn't until 1984 that I came into contact with the justice system. My on-again-off-again affinity for drugs earned me a controlled substance charge. I received probation.

At the time I was arrested and officially charged with second-degree murder, I had been completely drug and alcohol free for more than six months, though my mental state was far from being normal. I was still plagued by the classic symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Two weeks before the confrontation that resulted in murder, I'd willingly contacted a community mental health office in Aurora CO. I explained that I was afraid I couldn't contain my temper. Most days I couldn't leave my house. I was held captive by a fear of self and others. The doctor prescribed Thorazine. The order was filled and I took the 100mg tablets four times daily, as prescribed. Now I was a lethargic, hyper-vigilant individual with recurring nightmares, guilt, a fear of crowds, anxiety. It was impossible to shake my feelings of doom and disaster.

Throughout this time I was trying desperately to insure the success of a relationship I had been in for 13 months. It had seemed a promising arrangement. My private inner war aside, in the presence of my companion and her five-year-old daughter, I enjoyed

more pleasure and peace than I had since being with Pamela. These two people were all I had. I wouldn't betray or allow any harm to befall them. Regrettably someone would challenge my resolve. The domestic dream of middle class predictability was dashed when an individual decided my and my girlfriend's interracial living arrangements were unacceptable.

I had met Kurt twice before the July 8, 1985 confrontation. The first time was at my baby-sitter's apartment. He happened to be there when I stopped by to make arrangements for my girlfriend's child. A couple of days later we ran into each other when I purchased a late-model van from another man, obviously a friend of his. Kurt, at the end of the transaction, quite affably offered to sell me a stereo. His friend verified Kurt's contention that the stereo was indeed Kurt's own. His car had been totaled, I was told.

"Okay," I said, "$100 for the stereo. Here's $90. Can I give you the $10 later?" I told Kurt I'd probably see him at the sitter's home. He agreed.

Two days later I hear that Kurt was upset. Among other things, he's been sharing his philosophy on the wretchedness of interracial relationships. The next morning I see that my van has been vandalized, tires flattened, and the new stereo gone. Even though only my property had been vandalized, all the years of my own repressed racial enmity surfaced. Too much repressed anger! Too many unresolved issues! My rage wasn't about Kurt specifically. I now think it was far more insidious and ranging. It was about Vietnam and Mississippi, about Torres and Fink, about being a Marine and decorated vet, about being tired of avoiding, being tired of being slighted, being tired of feeling failed. It was about it all.

That sixth sense which had served me so well in Vietnam interpreted my van's violation as a dangerous intrusion, a clear and definite threat to my family's security. If, I reasoned, this person was brazen enough to commit his act of premeditated vandalism during the wee hours of the morning while I was present in the nearby house, what would this person entertain or act upon if my family were home alone, unsuspecting and unprotected. This question I sought to answer later that night when I located Kurt at his motel residence. Foolishly, I obtained a weapon. The 32-caliber automatic was in fact the first and only time I'd handled a firearm since my

military discharge, 12 years earlier. The consequences for so arming myself were predictably catastrophic.

I approached Kurt. When I asked him about my van and the theft, he pleaded ignorance. As I became more adamant, he admitted to the act, let loose with a barrage of racial slurs then swung. I blocked the blow and pulled my weapon from the pocket of my windbreaker. During our struggle, a single round was inadvertently discharged. Three weeks later, Kurt succumbed to the head wound.

Within hours after my deadly scuffle with Kurt, I would be apprehended and charged with first-degree assault. The charge became first-degree murder with Kurt's death. On the day of my sentencing the District Attorney pronounced that I was a "time bomb."

"Your Honor," he announced, addressing the court, "we believe Mr. Clay's high incidences of combat during Vietnam have made him a walking time 'bomb'; therefore, we believe he should be remanded to the Department of Corrections for 24 years." □

For his service in Vietnam, Donald Clay was awarded the following medals for valor: Bronze Star, Bronze Star w/gold star, and Navy Commendation Medal. He also was awarded the Purple Heart. During his incarceration, Mr. Clay completed an Associate Degree. Donald Clay was released from prison during the spring of 1995, the twentieth anniversary of the Fall of Saigon. He now lives in Illinois.

Donald Clay, on right, and Dennis Dietrick
Republic of Vietnam, 1971