

M I C H A E L L U N D

How to Not Tell a War Story

They all knew they were going to die. Not by the occasional rocket, less frequent mortar round, or stray bullets from hot firefights across Cam Ranh Bay, but because of some stupid, fucking accident.

Show-Me would be reading a letter from Sandra back home in Fairfield and step in front of a deuce-and-a-half, not going so fast but with such momentum that he felt only a slap on the side of his head. High on a dozen Falstaffs from the E-4 club, Bernard the Jew, having survived the projects in Brooklyn with no father at home, would fail to see the warning tape and fall into a construction hole. He lay in the shape of a crowbar for two days, his neck broken. And John-john, who had not yet grown up, was convinced he suffered from undiagnosed allergies. He was stung by a scorpion and died in his bed, genitals swollen to the size of a bowling pin and ... well, bowling balls. So they prophesied.

It didn't happen, despite past events that inspired such likelihood. And, naturally, they wanted their own stories to stop short of tragedy.

There had been, after all, Janowsky and Sharp. Well, several tours back, but, still... dead, dead, dead they were.

It was Tet one year later, and some mad sapper, recalling what had been perceived around the world as a victory for the North, got through the perimeter and heaved a grenade before the flares went up and he was obliterated by the towers. But Sharp and Janowsky, so they said, came apart in their bunker. It could happen again, or nearly so.

And Smith, plain old Smith, the Smitty. Two weeks from DEROS, he was hand-carrying his papers—the safest way, as they, the United States Army of Clerks, knew—and couldn't believe the siren was for real. They were giving drops, for Christ's sake!

Nixon was determined to demonstrate that the war was winding down and troops were coming home, so tours were being cut short by a week, two weeks, three. Smith, suddenly a short-timer, would be on his Freedom Bird almost a month before he had expected. At the siren's scream, he scanned the sky to prove nothing was there. He must have seen the damn rocket itself as it slammed into the ground in front of him and then detonated. "Don't mean nothin'," said Bernie.

But Butterball's story was the worst. Volunteering out of boredom to ride the mail run to Nha Trang, he was hit somewhere west of Na Tia, a lone rifleman firing blindly at the roar of a chopper above him. Butterball had passed Day 183 and could see nothing to hope for, now that his week in Bangkok was over. "What the hell, see some of the country," he shrugged, pulling on a beer the night before. "What the country, see some of hell," they parodied in the bar who-knows-who had built at one end of the hootch. Butterball didn't see much.

What pissed them off, of course, was that, in the end, they had no war stories to tell. "Is that all there is," they heard; "is that all there is?"

At first, back in the World, they didn't want to talk. They were mostly draftees or men who enlisted to get (they were promised) better assignments (either they didn't get them or didn't keep them for long). So they had never anticipated their veteran status. In-country, they didn't know what to look for that, recounted later, would inspire awe. And, then, after it was over, they had no audience. This war was so unlike others, they came to believe, that it couldn't offer heroes; and mere service was nothing.

Most of the REMFs had at least some college; a few were graduates. When Congress went to a lottery system instead of the draft, local boards met their quotas with the more educated, older men added to their depleted pools. For many, getting drafted was a failure of education, of social standing, of sophistication.

"There's a college in my home town," an almost embarrassed Blessing explained. "A lot of professors' kids are in school or graduate school. When they stopped deferments, they came after my ass."

"Most of my buddies got in the Reserves or the National Guard," lamented John-john. "But I didn't have the connections. I signed up to play clarinet in a marching band, but here I fucking am." It had taken him longer than most to get used to

using “fuck” in every other sentence. Now that he had the hang of it, he seemed to believe it granted him maturity.

Bernie could not quite squelch a sense of duty to preserve the country that had rescued his mother, if not the rest of his family, from the Holocaust. He thought Vietnam a terrible lie, but he wouldn't take the medical deferment his mother hinted he could get from “a friend of a friend, Doctor Dontkilloursons.”

Of course, lifers were not so pleased to have soldiers who proved more difficult to manage than fresh high school graduates or dropouts. True, basic training quotas took the majority for 11-Bravos and other combat MOSs, but the less unlucky former college students joined a far-reaching network of clerks who figured out the system and often used this knowledge for their own ends rather than to complete the mission. Even in Vietnam, paper pushers wielded power. However, their ability to misfile folders, to ask for more signatures, to inspire a review of procedure later made at best cocktail chatter, not war stories.

So, back home and in the career paths from which they'd taken temporary leave, they knit together pasts that jumped over their military years. Mostly, they were pleased few asked what it had been like. The glimpses they'd had of the real thing could not be assimilated into civilian conversation with their old friends or new acquaintances. Woken from troubling dreams, they told their wives, girlfriends, family that any screams or cries or whimpers were unrelated to their Southeast Asia experience, a mystery to themselves as well. Vaguely, though, they wished there were connections, war stories they could tell.

Blessing did have his anecdotes to amuse colleagues in Human Resources, black humor emphasizing his mastery of irony and liberal politics. “The best dodge I knew about was Chesterfield, a fraternity brother. He had survived basic, was in his third week of AIT, well aware than in a few months his ass would in be in the ‘Nam. Straining to take a crap in one of those open stalls with half the platoon waiting their turns, he herniated himself.”

The former Show-me always looked for places to use key phrases—”bust a gut,” “crap out,” “no stomach for it”—but seldom found the right opportunity.

“They could repair it, of course?” he would be asked.

“Well, yes, but, we pointed out to him, if he declined treatment by the Army, he could get a medical discharge. He'd have to pay civilian doctors for the surgery, but...but that's just money.”

“So that's what he did?”

Blessing opened his eyes wider and looked directly at them. They would pause, then nod in understanding—ah, yes, of course, we all would.

He also liked his in-country training story. All newbies had to go through several days of orientation soon after they arrived. Blessing had the runs so bad when he was supposed to report that he ended up in sick bay instead. Several weeks after he got out, he found a certificate of completion on his desk, a gift from his fellow clerks. He could still, he would later tell his stateside audience, escape captors by camouflaging himself as a banana tree, survive in the jungle by trapping monkeys for food, travel by the stars until he reached friendly forces and/or USO Donut Dollies.

He never told them, though, that when he went on guard duty the first time, he didn't know how to assemble the grenade launcher, or keep from burning his hands on an M60 barrel, or work the field radio. And he blotted from his own memory how frightened he'd been when his buddy in the bunker, Giordano, said to wake him if he was needed, then fell asleep so hard Blessing was sure he was dead. Tony has had his throat cut in the dark by a VC machete, Blessing thought, his bowels loosening.

As the years passed, he stopped telling even these stories, believing that the Vietnam War had melded into history, become fixed in a narrative of corrupt and stupid politicians, anti-war protests, angry soldiers who came home feeling betrayed or crazed by guilt. The nation had moved on, so he and his buddies had to as well.

Then came 9/11, Afghanistan, and the Iraq wars. A new national attitude toward soldiers emerged. "Blame the war, not the warrior," the people said and held parades for returning troops. Service became noble again, and the patriotism of WWII seemed almost to have been resurrected. Blessing went downtown and applauded when a local National Guard unit marched past on the way to reunion with their families. Where were the Welcomes Home for the Vietnam U.S. Army of Clerks?

"We were spit on," John-john, now a successful, middle-aged real estate agent, wrote from Minneapolis. "They called us baby killers."

Of course, that was something he saw on television, not a personal experience. But Show-me agreed. "I can count on one hand the number of people who have thanked me for my service. And that's over thirty years' time!"

"They get all the PTSD they want while we've got Agent Orange running out our butts." Of course, Cam Ranh Bay was hardly a toxic site. John-john had suffered more from sunburn at the base's fine beach.

Recalling the fatalistic mantra of that time, Bernie wrote, "There it is."

Back in Brooklyn, he'd done better than the rest to integrate his Army years with the whole of his life. A New York City public relations officer, he joined the Vietnam Veterans of America and worked with support groups for military families.

Still, when the courage of NFL star Tillman was referred to, or Jessica Lynch was rescued, they all found themselves thinking back to their long-ago tours. Did they have stories? Giordano had gone into the burning mess hall, convinced that Blair was still in there. But that seemed more a civilian act than the battlefield valor they were trying to configure.

Had they missed something else? Maybe memory had played tricks on them, obscuring what would now come to light at last. Back then, they hadn't studied forms for the narration of danger, but now, more aware, could they reshape their experience for the new era? What, after all, about Butterball?

The details had originally fit into a standard model. When the chopper came down at 9th Field Hospital, they couldn't find an entry wound. But the man's shoulders and the back of his fatigues were soaked with blood. Finding the damage to his spine and skull, they stabilized him for immediate transport to Japan.

Word came back two weeks later that provided an explanation, whether true or not. The round had entered his anus so perfectly that no marks were noticeable. Medical personnel assumed the blood they saw there had drained from the body cavity. Butterball's memory of the event had been erased, and his mental capacity after the injury was restricted, so he could offer no account himself of what happened.

At the time, his buddies couldn't help turning it into the worst kind of story. "The VC cut him a new one," lamented Bernie.

"Screwed up the ass by Vietnam," crowed a less sympathetic hootch-mate, "just like the rest of us."

John-john, asserting his status, announced "The New and Improved Rear Fucked Mother Echelon."

Blessing heard Peggy Lee sing, "And a beautiful lady in pink tights flew high above our heads" and wondered if she had been entered.

Somehow they felt justified in making their jokes. Butterball had boasted that it was what he did, when the price wasn't too high, to the whores they visited at the bar outside the gate. The others felt you shouldn't give details, let alone brag. And it was sick, anyway, something a fat Californian like him would think of. Was what happened to him some kind of cosmic justice?

Blessing found that he couldn't tell the story in any other way, especially not now, not when genuine commitment deserved expression. However, learning

that Tillman had probably been the victim of friendly fire, and that Jessica Lynch wouldn't confirm the official narrative, they began to wonder if Vietnam really was so different from other wars. In degree perhaps, but not in kind.

They'd all been thankful to have safe duty, what they thought of as the luck of the draw. This was the price: one REMF's misfortune didn't measure up to battlefield loss. It was more like a car accident, cancer, the act of God.

Then the Walter Reed fiasco came to light. Blessing saw it on television and was stunned. The faces of the families got to him: lost, pained, despairing. After all the public support for what the military had been called to do, the country found them in decaying quarters, in paperwork labyrinths, at treatment limbo.

His wife retold the experience of a college student in their church. Varsity soccer player, she and her team had been taken to visit patients at the Kansas City Veterans Affairs Medical Center. But there they saw only the less serious cases, those who could testify to good treatment, a functioning bureaucracy. When the story broke, the student was furious.

Some of Blessings' colleagues brushed it off as what was to be expected. They insisted that these wounded warriors had known what they were in for when they joined the "all-volunteer" military. Blessing felt that term had a vaguely distasteful aura about it, as if soldiers had asked for traumatic brain injury or amputated limbs. He knew from his own experience that many enlisted troops were looking for career training, a way to pay for college, escape from failed social systems. The patients and spouses and parents he saw had been hollowed out, used and discarded.

And he knew the crime wasn't just that we put them "in harm's way," as politicians piously acknowledged. We paid them to do what we didn't want to do ourselves, what was so horrific and dehumanizing that the latest generation could not accept it unless translated into digitally constructed video. With the brilliance of animation, the nation had substituted a bloodless slaughter and dazzling recovery for flag-draped coffins rolling down the tarmac of Dover Air Force Base. He wouldn't watch any of the new war movies.

Blessing had once gone to see Butterball, whose real name was Christopher Shepherd. Sandra couldn't understand why he went.

"It's been fifteen years. Why do you want to go now?"

"I'm not sure I can say. But I got a good flight to L.A. I'll be back the day after tomorrow, the weekend."

The surprise was how happy Chris, who had the mind of a ten-year-old, was. He couldn't move his legs, could barely operate his mechanized wheelchair, had to be fed, diapered, medicated.

“I love Saturday mornings,” he told Blessing. “The cartoons, you know. Scooby Doo and ... and Smurfs... and ...” He was gesturing with one finger.

His mother helped him. “And the Muppets—Fonzi and Kermit. Big Bird.”

“Yeah, yeah. I like Grover. He’s my ... he’s my hero.”

If this weren’t hard enough, Show-me couldn’t believe Butterball’s family. The Shepherds were so grateful he had survived, that he was back with them.

“We count our blessings every day. I’m sure your parents do, too. Are you married?”

“Yes. We have ... we have two children, a boy and a girl.”

“Will you pray with us? We have so much to be thankful for.”

He actually got down on his knees with them, astounded that they were not devastated by what had happened. In his own head, he heard a variation of what Peggy Lee asked: “why don’t they just end it all?” and her response: “when that final moment comes and I’m breathing my last breath, I’ll be saying to myself / Is that all there is, is that all there is?”

It wasn’t all there is, but it took more years before he began to find words for it.

He saw *The News Hour* on PBS. Tim O’Brien was being interviewed two decades after the appearance of his quintessential book on Vietnam, *The Things They Carried*. Blessing bought the book the next day, hoping to find out what he carried.

One chapter narrated the death of a grunt who steps on a bobby trap and is blown up into a tree—well, blown all over the tree. The event is told in stages, obliquely, contextualized among other events and later associations. Despite careful repetitions and revisions, it’s not clear whether the truth is fully realized.

Blessing wouldn’t say he understood the story, but he felt that it represented something profound. The voice of a survivor, however hurt. The refusal to bury the horror even when you want to do so. The insistence on making others look.

Their war had not been different from other wars, he concluded sadly. It was ugly, meaningless, inhuman. But there had been faith. Some had cared, but it was tragic, foolish, insane. It was pointless, revolting, ungodly. But many endured.

He called Bernie. “Remember Butterball?”

“Stupid fucking accident,” he responded. They talked for an hour.

An Army correspondent in Vietnam (1970-71), **MICHAEL LUND** is the author of *Route 66 to Vietnam: A Draftee's Story* (2004) and other novels. The short story published here will appear in the collection, *How to Not Tell a War Story*, available as an e-book from MilSpeak Books and in paperback from BeachHouse Books.