SITREP: Veteran Perspectives on Combat and Peace

Western Illinois University

2017

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Dedication

This edition is dedicated to William (Bill) Gilbert for his service to our country and his family. Thank you for all those who have served or are serving and for those who have shared their stories.

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. -John 15:13

This project was made possible through funding provided by the Buchanan Center for the Arts.
Acknowledgments

In our third year of publication, *SITREP: Veteran Perspectives on Combat and Peace* continues to share the beautiful creative work of Western Illinois University veteran and service-member students, alumni, faculty, and staff. We are grateful to those who honor us by contributing their stories, poems, and photography and for the readers who will crack open the pages of our magazine and travel into the lives and worlds they represent.

This year, in tough budgetary times, we are grateful for grant funding from Kristyne Gilbert, Director of the Buchanan Center for the Arts. Our volume is dedicated to Kristyne’s father, Bill Gilbert, who served in the Army and Navy. Kristyne writes, “He always put his family and friends first. He was protective and outspoken. He was kind and caring, always willing to lend a hand, even to strangers. Although I felt I always knew my dad very well, there were many layers of his life that I didn’t learn about until his last two years, like the fact that he could play the piano or played football in high school. And, even more importantly, his military career and experiences. He began to share those stories near the end of his life, but he ran out of time.” Here’s hoping there are stories and poems here that Bill would have admired.

We would like to thank Kathy Meyers, Assistant Director of the Veterans Resource Center at WIU,
who supported this endeavor from the beginning. We are indebted as well to Mark Mossman, Chair of the Department of English; Magdelyn Helwig, Director of Writing; Neil Baird, Director of the University Writing Center; Lynne Ward, Staff Clerk, and Tiffany Dimmick, Office Support Associate, for supporting this work for the previous three years. This year, Tiffany, who is not only highly skilled but one of the kindest and generous people we know, uploaded our previous two volumes to the English Department website and thereby brought our work to a wider audience. We are grateful to Brice Shake of the Center for the Application of Information Technologies (C.A.I.T) at WIU for maintaining our website at SITREP—vv.org. The Council on Student Activities Fund paid for posters and copies for the VRC to distribute to our students. Thanks to Carol Clemons for her beautiful cover design and to Tyler Hennings, Director of the WIU Art Gallery, for providing a space for our public reading.

We appreciate our many friends who have read and shared the book and to our families for the gifts of time and space that allowed us to meet the considerable demands of this project. Finally, we are thankful for each other, for our team, and for our continued shared endeavor of supporting the creative work of those who have served.

The SITREP Team
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Here’s to You

Here’s to the ones who went first, the patriots, the minutemen, the boys at Lexington, Bunker Hill, and Yorktown, whose boots stamped out our freedom; who stared down gun barrels at tyrants and shoved hot lead on the King’s men with no remorse.

Here’s to the ones in Union blue, the Yanks, the Bluebellies, who fought their brethren to make men free, who spilled their guts in backyards and hometowns, who marched across five Aprils through Antietam, Gettysburg, and Richmond, stopping only to charge into the smoke and the steel to taste powder and blood and death.

Here’s to the ones who heard Europe’s call, the Doughboys, Teufelshunde, Hellfighters from Harlem, who sailed the Atlantic to join in the Great War; the boys with trench foot and trench mouth and trench gut, whose lungs and faces burned from gas, who charged across no man’s land in forests called Argonne and woods called Belleau.

Here’s to the ones who heard the second call, the Greatest Generation, who stood toe-to-toe with evil’s epitome and stopped its invasion of the world; who liberated France, Africa, and Italy, who poured out their blood over tiny Pacific islands, inch-by-inch,
who crawled up beaches, through heavy fire and bodies piled,
who flew in their steel coffins through flak and dogfights
to rain destruction on the enemy,
who leapt out of planes into cold, shell-ridden skies
to float to the ground behind Axis lines,
who feared nothing but fear itself, and trudged into Hell to confront it.
Here’s to the ones who went to fight the Norths with the Souths,
the boys at Chosin and Inchon and Hue City and Khe Sanh,
who faced the Red threat, and paid for it dearly,
who fought for hills and valleys and rice paddies,
who stumbled blindly through jungles,
who were ambushed and booby trapped,
who came home to hatred and contempt,
who were misunderstood and mistreated,
who followed orders but took the blame.
Here’s to the ones who went to the deserts,
the ones at Fallujah and Mosul and Helmand and Kandahar,
who fought regimes and insurgencies in mountains and villages and dusty cities,
who searched for Terror in dark corners and broad daylight,
who toiled in the sweltering heat looking for shadows,
who waited around to be blown up and shot at,
whose tears and sweat left salty streaks on stained uniforms,
whose blood coagulated in the sand and made mud
that stuck to their boots and weighed them down.

Here’s to all who have served,  
the girls and the boys who became women and men,  
who answered their government’s call  
by choice or not;  
who took up their arms and did their duty,  
who traded their lives and loves for cold tombs  
under fields of white stones,  
who watched death drag down their friends,  
who were maimed and mutilated,  
who gave away limbs and eyes and ears and brains,  
who wake up in the night and scream,  
who drain bottles and pound pills,  
who gave up everything but memories  
they would rather forget.  
Here’s to the ones who battle against their bodies  
and minds,  
who beg for help but receive none,  
who rot away in hospitals and hospices,  
whose government sucked out their ore  
and left them as shells of what they were,  
abandoned and untreated;  
a government who takes from them everything,  
then hands them some pain killers and sends them away.

Here’s to you.  
Here’s to all of us.  

Luke Cummings
In the fall of 1945, an unknown group of veterans decided to start a veterans club at Western Illinois University. Temporary officers were elected and a constitution was drafted. During the first week of January 1946, the constitution was officially approved and elections were held again to choose permanent officers for the school year. The club was officially named Western’s Veterans Association.

Due to the lack of sources, it is currently unknown what happened to the club in the 1950’s.

In March of 1961 a new group of veterans, with Herman Koester of the Veterans Affairs Office, drew up a new constitution and elected officers and chose the name Veterans Club. In 1966, the club traveled to DeKalb to play flag football with Northern Illinois University’s veterans club. The club discovered that NIU has the Cherry Blossoms,
a group of guys who dress up for school spirit. Around this time, the All University Student Government asked the club to find a way to boost spirit at football games (club members were already serving as ticket ushers at games). The club decided to bring NIU’s idea to WIU and called themselves the Peach Blossoms. The club was the largest in Illinois with 73 members in the mid-sixties. By 1969, membership was up to 150 members. Herman Koester resigned as advisor for the club and stated that the most significant achievement of the club was the United Way Campaign that forced a change to Article 30 Sec. 5 of the School code of the State of Illinois. This change allowed veterans to use state scholarships and the GI Bill concurrently.

Then, as it does today, being a Peach Blossom entails wearing a red mop top on the head, a skirt (although now we wear kilts), a club shirt, face paint, combat boots—usually, and carrying around a plunger. Legend has it that club members used the plungers to drink alcohol out of at football games in the seventies, since it was a dry campus. It is
unclear why they chose plungers or why it even worked.

Throughout the 1970’s the club hosted several events, including Easter Egg Hunts and Pig Roasts. One of the biggest social events the club offered was known as “nooners,” and held on Fridays. This event was open to anyone on campus and essentially consisted of stopping by the vets’ house and drinking beer all afternoon.

In 1971, the club moved into 407 West Grant Street, a former nun’s dormitory. The vets travel club was formed in 1971, taking students from Macomb to Chicago. The same year Amtrak cut service to Macomb, leaving few travel options for students. Over the next few years, the club battled Crown Transit (a travel bus company) for the right to operate the vets travel club. Eventually, the club was found to be an illegal operation and was shut down in 1973.
In 1977, the club traveled to Springfield to petition the state not to alter the Illinois Veterans Scholarship. In the 1980’s membership started to decline and in 1984 the club was no longer recognized as an official university organization due to a lack of membership. The club remained absent from the university until 1997 when an article asking “Whatever happened to the Peach Blossoms?” was published in the Western Courier. A new club formed and started the Peach Blossoms again.

The present-day Veterans’ Club averages around 30 members per year and keeps the Peach Blossoms active, not only in football season, but also during the basketball season. Really, anytime the
opportunity presents itself. The club also raises money every year for charities such as the Peoria Honor Flight through bags (cornhole) tournaments and pancake breakfasts.

Lukas Smith
The wounded destroyer swung through the lazy swells, heeling over hard as she turned to pull along the leeward side of the huge attack carrier, white spray breaking over her bow and washing back, foaming over her decks. The damage was barely visible from the carrier, just some blackened paint near the access hatch of the forward gunmount that hung open, its gun hanging down at an unusual angle. By now everyone had heard what had happened. There had been a hangfire in the Number One Gunmount: three dead, three badly burned. The boy knew that this gun was his buddy Ronnie’s battlestation, and now all he could do was wait, wait to see the dog-tags on the injured, or, or—on the body bags. A few fearful tears came to his eyes and he hoped the Chief Boatswain’s Mate of the transfer party, who was standing close to him, didn’t notice as he wiped them away.

But his friend, his dear Ronnie, *fuck, fuck, fuck*! They had been together through bootcamp at The
Lakes, and then again for several lazy autumn weeks at the Receiving Station at Norfolk, waiting for their duty assignments. They had shared their entire naval careers, however brief those careers may have been, and now Ronnie was either gravely burned—or dead. The boy said a Hail Mary for his friend, and for all the guys who had been in that mount with their Mount Captain—a First Class Gunner’s Mate who had been in the Navy almost twenty years and had safely handled hangfires like this one literally dozens of times before without incident—when their Gunny worked the lever that unlocked the breach of the big rapid-fire five-inch gun, and all the terrible force and flames of hell-itself had engulfed them. They were roasted alive, blown back against the interior bulkheads of the mount by the flash of twenty pounds of detonating high explosive. Their burnt, blistered skin stuck to the paint on the walls of the gun mount that had been melted by the incredible heat of the explosion, where they’d been thrown or had groped for a way out, for an escape—or relief, any fucking relief,
Dear Jesus—from this instantaneous choking, blinding, deafening hell.

The destroyer was alongside them now, dwarfed by the carrier, and the Chief Bosun of the deck crew transfer party gave the order and a young Boatswain’s Mate Striker fired the rigging line. His first shot went low, splashing into the sea between the gently rolling grey warships. He fired again, and the deck crew on the tin-can caught this one, and they began rigging the heavier transfer lines. The injured men were the first to be swung over, and the boy and several other hospital corpsmen grabbed the red metal wire basket in which the first man was strapped and lowered him gently onto the deck of the immense aircraft elevator—now in its lowered position, protruding out some twenty feet from the side of the carrier, level with the gaping mouth of the cavernous hangar bay. The boy’s heart was racing and he felt faint as he and the team of corpsmen worked with their scissors and forceps in an attempt to get the burned remnants of the man’s blackened, shredded clothing separated from his
charred flesh so they could find a vein and get an IV started. As they worked he was able to glimpse the man’s dog-tags: John someone, *Oh Dear Jesus*, it wasn’t Ronnie, he saw with relief—but then he felt he might be out of his mind, might actually be temporarily insane. Would he really have rather had this poor charred being, writhing in pain before him, and burned beyond recognition, be his Ronnie?

*Oh, fuck this fucking war!* was all he could think. *How had it come to this? How had he come to this?* Chief Adams, the lead Hospital Corpsman in the medical detail, administered a syringe of morphine to the patient, and the man’s pitiful flailing slowly ceased. *Thank you, Dear Jesus, for morphine*, the boy thought as four corpsmen picked up the red metal litter and carried the man down inside the carrier to the large, well-equipped sick bay where the carrier’s medical team would work to keep the injured men alive, trying to get them stable enough to be airlifted to the closest hospital ship, the USS *Repose*, steaming on Dixie Station several hundred miles to the south.
The second transfer basket was swinging across the gulf between the ships, and the party of corpsmen were standing by, ready to grab it and lower the man onto the deck. When the boy looked at the injured man, he felt his breakfast rising in him. He fell to his knees and crawled a few feet to the edge of the elevator so that he could vomit into the sea instead of there on the deck of the elevator in front of everyone. This man’s face was hideously burned and blown apart; one of his eyes missing from its socket. The boy crawled back to the patient, trying to be of use. During all the months he’d been a Corpsman Striker on the Indy he’d taken temperatures at morning sick-call, had given plenty of penicillin injections after their R and R at Subic Bay, as well as emptied his share of bedpans. The boy had in fact flattered himself that he was becoming a competent Hospital Corpsman, but now—Holy Mother of Jesus! he’d never seen or even imagined injuries like these. He was truly thankful he hadn’t passed out, but even so he felt so
much in the way, so utterly incompetent and useless.

Though this second man was not conscious, Chief Adams administered a syringe of morphine anyway. After all, the man might regain consciousness. If he did, his pain would be off the chart. Or if he didn’t, it might help him die more comfortably. The boy had no opportunity to see this victim’s dog-tags, but he was sure it wasn’t Ronnie; the man was definitely more heavily built. The boy closed his eyes and in that brief instant he could see in his mind’s eye the photo taken by a bargirl at the Enlisted Men’s Club on the Norfolk Naval Base: He and Ronnie at the table, their white-hats pushed back on their heads like a couple old salts, cans of Schlitz on the table in front of them, smiling and carefree, only a few weeks out of boot camp and just assigned to their ships. The boy had been assigned to the aircraft carrier Independence, and Ronnie to a destroyer, the Turner Joy. They looked so happy, so young. So naïve. This poor suffering
charcoaled man before him couldn’t—no—this just couldn’t be his Ronnie.

At Subic Bay, in the Philippines, they met up again. Their ships had been steaming on Yankee Station in the South China Sea off the coast of North Vietnam—had been on the line for six weeks—the longest period of their deployment so far; the carrier’s planes flying sorties and Ronnie’s destroyer and another destroyer, the Maddox, escorting the carrier and conducting endless fire missions as well as screening the coastal shipping; stopping and checking the junks passing up and down the coast for munitions meant for Chairman Ho’s Red NVA Army. Now the three ships were anchored at the U.S. Naval Base in Subic Bay for much needed resupplying, and R and R for their crews. The base was very large and there were shops and clubs and restaurants and bars, and the boy and Ronnie sat at a table outside a bar shaded by a Cinzano umbrella and drank ice-cold sweating cans of Budweiser. Early that afternoon they were soaked by warm monsoon rains as they sauntered
shoulder to shoulder across the wooden bridge that separated the Naval Base from the village, with the ever-present hawkers on the sides of the bridge offering roasted monkey meat, as well as pimping for their “sisters.” This was the first foreign town either of them had seen, and they eagerly walked off the base into the shabby, dirty, muddy little town of Olongapo, sightseeing. By early evening the Philippine heat had dried their white tropic uniforms and they had found a relatively quiet bar where they sat together at a dark corner table and ate tough thin steaks and drank shots of Johnny Walker Red chased with glasses of San Miguel Beer until they were comfortably shitfaced. A couple Philippino girls came and sat down with them, and they each bought their girl a drink or two, but the girls soon saw that they weren’t overly interested in them, and they left to find other swabbies who might be.

“Nelson, are you okay? Take over the injections for me,” Chief Adams said, shaking the boy’s shoulder, and handing him the kit of
morphine bottles and syringes. The third transfer basket was already swinging over, almost to the carrier elevator. This man was conscious, and moaning in agony and crying out for his mother. It wasn’t Ronnie, the boy knew. He sank the needle into the man’s arm and pushed down the plunger of the syringe. The man grabbed the boy’s arm, begging weakly: “Doc, doc, don’t let me die! Please don’t let me, doc—I—I don’t want to die.” His hand left black smudges and crusty bits of burned flesh on the boy’s arm where he had gripped him, and his voice trailed off as the morphine took hold. His grip slowly loosened and fell away. The boy gently placed the man’s arm back into the litter. It wasn’t Ronnie. And he knew then, for certain, and he felt his heart sink into the pit of his gut. A chill passed through his body, and he shivered despite the tropic heat. There was no longer hope. He let his tears come, felt them flowing freely down his cheeks, blinding him. Ronnie wouldn’t need him or the other corpsmen to be standing by: when Ronnie was transferred from the destroyer he would be
coming over to the carrier zipped in a body bag. Another young medic, Bennet, saw the boy break down and came over and hugged him while he cried silently. “Thank you, Bennet,” the boy whispered.

“It’ll be okay, Nelson, it’ll be okay,” Bennet said.

But Bennet didn’t know why the boy had lost it, didn’t know that it wouldn’t be okay. That it would never be fucking okay again. Then Bennet took the boy’s hand, and said: “C’mon Nelson, we gotta get down to sick bay and get to work,” and led him stumbling down the passageway to the carrier’s sick bay, to tend and to nurse; to administer to those yet living. For this was their life, their chosen profession, their very purpose of being. They were Navy Corpsmen after all: Navy Fucking Corpsmen.

**Katherine Meloan**
Cupid Loves a Gangbang

They didn’t want order, but privacy—and time to figure things out. It was a nervous, downhill feeling, a mean kind of Angst that always comes out of wars . . . a compressed sense of time on the outer limits of fatalism.

—Hunter S. Thompson, from Hell’s Angels

With that cunning subtlety of nature that splices the seasons, the unbridled ambience of the desert subsided, and like a damp burlap shawl the humid warmth of the South Carolina shores now cloaked Flu instead. He could feel and see the scalding sun ruling the skies directly above even before he opened his eyes.

The nap, if it were, he assumed was the product of too much alcohol consumed throughout too short a morning and couldn’t have been long. However, his body worn and his thoughts frayed as an ensign flown for too long in all weather, as he tried to stir from his place on his back in the sand, he felt as though he were trying to rouse himself from a state
of comatose—while fighting the urge to drift back into another.

Next to him Spirit sunbathed in an Adirondack beach chair, once painted olive drab, wearing nothing more than knockoff Wayfarers; bilateral sterling silver nipple rings; and a crucifix on a chain, also silver but for a 24k gold miniature-suffering-Jesus soldered to a tiny silver-plated cross. Remarkably, in mid-day the beach was deserted, offering the entire Grand Stand to just the two of them. Also absent was any trace of a breeze, leaving the water’s surface stagnant. Denying them the soothing serenade even the calmest of surfs are apt to compose. The general stillness accentuated the balmy warmth of the air and it felt, to Flu, as though the sea had surrendered to something greater than itself. And, like the landscapes of Twentynine Palms, where they had conducted much of their pre-deployment training, would eventually dry up to leave nothing more than the stain of old life on its lunar-like bottoms.
A bead of sweat slid down from behind Spirit’s ear, paused as it found a shallow groove, and then ran the full length of her neck as it made a dash for the valley formed by the flanks of her clavicle, trapezius, and shoulder girdle. Flu tracked its journey with his eyes hidden behind the mirrored lenses of cheap aviators until the droplet slowed and came to a rest. His eyes then dropped and fixed on her breasts. She had the breasts of a natural redhead. The kind Flu imagined on a pinup girl painted on the fuselage of a WWII bomber: cones that swooped like cornucopias hoping to one day offer their plenty to a hungry newborn; prodigious and pinkish areolas, oblong as though they were slapped on at high speeds and protrusive like volcanic islands viewed from the open cargo bay of a highflying C130; and nipples aimed slightly upward, like missiles arranged for launch. Pistils beckoning southbound butterflies. Flesh summoning flesh.

Flu couldn’t zoom out far enough to catch both in a single perspective, so he took time to give each
breast careful consideration. They were the first he’d seen in more than six months, he thought, and only the anticipation of surveying a furrow further down below, one etched at the inferior base of the Mound of Venus and tucked under the pudendal cleft, commanded his attention away from her many other curves, freckled and glistening, in contrast to the steely waters beyond. Nonetheless, this short sight of heaven could only suppress the reality of hell for so long; and thus, just as he had forgotten it, he remembered his active duty status.

Flu studied Spirit’s sculptured pubis with starved curiosity. Trimmed to form an inverted triangle, its image put his mind to the nature of his chain of command, a pyramid not inverted, and standing now tall as ever. And, though he appreciated how the idea her version of the model of hierarchy positioned the grunt closest to a critical checkpoint—where he imagined the duty of defending and serving the blooming bud beneath would be trusted to him, upending the natural order of angles seemed to position the grunt alone. This
seemed nonsensical to Flu. No matter how it all, or anything, takes form, or what social formula is used to construct a pecking order, the grunt gets the bottom; and the way the world works, those at the bottom, he thought, are seldom alone.

Flu wanted to make love to Spirit. In an attempt to give, if for even just a tick of the master timepiece, what she gifted him every waking moment before he left—before the letter. He would make his affection and adoration so overwhelmingly known it would quash any perceived ambivalence and employ any unspent endearment he had kept in savings to be drawn from in a more perfect future. He thought back to the letter. Could he change the way she felt? Could any level of frivolous love making rescind the plans she wrote about in her last, her only, letter? Could they destroy the Jodys not in the suck, those back home free . . .

With a concussive BOOM, the stagnant salty air dissipated much quicker than it had formed for Flu, only to be replaced by the rusty hue of a blood
soaked sun shining through the fine powder-like dust of the lower desert, stirring as it settled around him. Flu’s eyelids collapsed under their own weight, and he labored to open them again. The dirty light flickered and danced against the backs of his eyes and the front of his brain, creating a kind of kaleidoscope effect and making Flu nauseous. When his sight and mind came into focus he saw a shiver of his brothers headed straight for him. Q was putting his awkward form to a full-on sprint, while Danish and The Batman followed close behind in a loose patrol double time. Suddenly they all stopped and quickly surveyed their environment in a uniformed and controlled hint of chaos. Then, they all ducked into their surroundings along the walls of the building adjacent to the one where Flu now found himself lying on his back in the open foyer. Flu locked on to the two faces he could see. They were those of Danish and The Batman. The Batman was shielding Danish by holding him against the building where the wall met the road. Danish half-resisted for wanting to get to Flu before
the strike. Their expressions and body language startled Flu for one deafening beat, like a clap of thunder directly overhead, and though he felt it, he heard nothing. He turned to share his shock with Spirit. She was not there. Her chair was gone, too. In their stead lay the dummy-like remains of his enemy in a singular and lifeless form.

Flu watched as Q stood from where he’d taken cover during that last burst of artillery support. He crossed the street toward where Flu lay stuck in his shell, most of his gear stripped and placed in a pile near his head. Q stopped and leaned over Doc, who was busy filling out his nine-line. Flu could see that whatever Q was asking was disrupting Doc’s focus. Confused, Flu reached out to Q. Q reached out and took Flu’s hand in his.

“I’m strugglin’ arn’t I?” Flu asked, with as much indifference as he could assemble.

“It’s your right leg. You caught one right on the shin!” Q responded, nodding with an, almost, air of satisfaction.
Flu’s memory started to return to him like that of a last second dream. Having both a fresh recollection and sound context in which to frame it, he was almost relieved to learn he’d been hurt. The last thing he recalled, before finding himself on the beach with Spirit, was spotting and recognizing his target: a thin male—like Flu, probably in his early twenties—wearing navy blue slacks, a light silky cotton shirt, and checkered shemagh wrapped to conceal his head and face. His target moved like a tortured house cat, stuck to the walls, stopping and starting again. Flu half-concealed himself among a pile of old electrical wires leading to a massive generator that hadn’t been operable since the invasion. He carried a Mossberg 550 twelve gauge service shotgun. At the end of the barrel was a single bee bee and Flu raised and fixed it on the man. When his target was too close, just as their eyes locked in recognition, Flu whispered a prayer of no real words through an exhale meant to calm him, and squeezed off a round.
He saw it. However, a retention gap existed that detached Flu from the finer details. His target fell forward and Flu felt as though he had drilled into a stranger’s perfectly good tooth. His strange but very real fear was that he had passed out due to some overwhelming empathetic response, which, in his mind would’ve been humiliating despite it being his first known kill.

“Topher was right there, man. He saw the whole thing,” Q informed with dejected excitement.

Topher, short for Kristophers (they called him Tophers for a while, but the Company Gunny said it bugged the shit out of him so they dropped the “s”), appeared looking nearly as miserable as Flu, but with more color in his face. He gave a slight nod and wince to acknowledge what Q said was true.

“I saw it. You got ‘em in the face,” Topher said, then, looking Flu in the right eye and with a bent sort of nod and grin, admitted, “You probably guaranteed my unemployability for life.”

“How’d I get hit? Who?” Flu asked.
“Whom,” Doc corrected while removing his Oakleys and carefully placing them in their silk sock and then into a front pocket of his vest. It was the most surgical movement Flu had seen out of Doc in his entire time with the unit.

“Oh, fuck it, WHOM?” Flu surrendered. “Whom? Whommmm, fuck-ing shot me?!”

“That fucking Billy shot you, dude,” Topher replied. “I don’t know because I couldn’t hear a Goddamn thing over every Goddamn thing and it happened so fast and I saw too much to see any one thing,” he stopped, cocked his head and stared off for a second as though he heard his mother calling for him, then added, “Yah, I think you caught a ricochet, dude.” With his friends now flanking Flu on both sides, Topher had an attentive audience. Acknowledging all, he continued, “You hit him right in the face and he reached up,” Topher pantomimed using his own hands, “for what was left of his face. Then fell.” His arms dropped in front of him.
There was a moment when no one said anything and Flu just stared at Topher, waiting for him to finish his story. And with a slight shrug, he did. “I looked over and you were on the ground holding your leg and look’n like shit, so I hollered for Doc.”

“Sounds like ya’ll did ever-thing you’re supposed to,” The Batman said with a sharp edge of sarcasm. Edward Bateman was from Grand Rapids, Ohio. A place where, he swore, nothing grand or rapid ever happened. He had spent the summer while waiting in the Delayed Entry Program (DEP) working with one of those traveling carnivals that target small towns, setting up in the grocery’s parking lot around the county’s annual Hog Fucking Festival (or, whatever they called it). For the first year and a half on active duty Ed was called Carny. Then, in a drunken attempt at flight, he tied a poncho liner around his neck and arms in the middle of a hurricane passing through Camp Lejeune from the south and jumped from the third deck catwalk of the 8th Marine’s barracks. Though he dropped like a clump of hard shit in a loose
camouflage wrapper, somehow he landed unharmed; and—despite the fact his name had long suggested it—he was The Batman from then on.

“Holy fuck, dude,” Danish appeared covered in sweat and spilling beads of it on Flu’s face as he leaned over him. He was, as usual, sounding as American as possible.

“Jesus, Danish, you’re spilling Muslim juice all over me!” Flu bitched.

Danish ignored the insult and instead displayed a broad, ecstatic smile. “I thought you were dead, dude!” he said, then, looking straight ahead, added, “I thought you were fuck-ing dead.” Danish, or Danick Hussein Al–Nasser, was an Iraqi born citizen. When Iraq threatened to invade Kuwait, an act that would ignite the first Gulf War, his father sent him and his sister to live with their uncle in Egypt. Danish stayed and received an English education there, and found good employment in Southern Europe before returning to Iraq to serve as an interpreter for the “Allied Forces.”
“No doubt by the time you get back to the unit we’ll all be,” Q said, looking around for a laugh but finding none.

“What is going to happen to me now?” Flu asked Doc.

“Your leg is busted up, man, so I’m guessing you’ll end up, sooner or later, at the KAFH,” he replied. The KAFH, or Kuwaiti Armed Forces Hospital, in a suburb of Kuwait City, had a team of orthopedic surgeons and staff, as well as the equipment and OR they needed to function. Doc often wondered if there were piles of arms and legs stacked outside the facility, like the cannonballs of the old forts. “How’s your pain?” he asked Flu.

“Starting to ache something bad, dude. And it seems like it’s spreading to my hip and stomach,” Flu replied through locked teeth.

“Is that bad?” Danish asked.

“Fuck, for all I know it could be good. I don’t know how many times I have to tell ya’ll, I
don’t know what I’m doing,” Doc replied, holding his attention to assessing Flu with another full sweep of his hands. “Here, keep sucking on this,” he said, as he lifted Flu’s right hand by the wrist and draped his arm across his chest.

Flu saw the oral fentanyl citrate lozenge, or “lollypop,” secured to his right thumb in a hasty wrap of white medical tape. Though the dream still made little sense to him, the fact he’d had it was now much clearer. He had sucked on the narcotic sap until he surrendered fully to its spell, at which point his hand would’ve fallen and pulled it from his mouth. A trick Doc learned to avoid any overdoses. He started sucking on it again as Doc ordered, and though it tasted like a bitter fruit cocktail poured through an old boot sock, he struggled with the temptation of biting into it.

“I had a dream about Spirit,” Flu confessed.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Flu, at least don’t call her by her stripper name if you’re gonna declare your love for her again!” Topher remarked.
“I can’t help it. That’s how she introduced herself to me and that’s the girl I fell for,” Flu said, stubbornly.

Danish quickly made a “shooshing” noise through his teeth while waving his hands in the air as though he could brush their words away. “Do not mention that sharmuta! Especially now!” he demanded.

“Well, what the fuck, Daney, I can’t help that I had a dream about her. Or that I want to be with her again…still,” Flu pleaded.

“From what I hear, my friend,” a rare break from the Americanesque demeanor Danish carefully shrouded most of his sentences in when speaking to the Marines, “all you have to do to be with her again is to go back to the end of the line of Christians also waiting their turn.”

“Damn, that was a burn!” Q celebrated. “Shit’s starting to come to you quick, Danish.”
“Fuck off, Q. I’m quicker than you,” and with that he reached out and tapped Q on the armor plate covering his genitals with the back of a fist. Q reacted with an overreaction, and a laugh.

“Is it irony that you can only think of the girl that busted your heart while you suck on that lolly for a busted leg?” The Batman asked. The issue of ironies had been an ongoing conversation among the unit since the flight over, when Topher read an article in *The Onion* to those around him. The Batman still wasn’t getting it.

“No, irony is Stevie Wonder beginning ‘Boogie on Reggae Woman’ by saying he likes to see the lady dance across the floor,” Danish returned swiftly. It was well known that The Batman was a huge fan of the Wonder, and he quickly took that insult to heart.

“How long you been hold’n onto that one?” Flu asked with a genuine smile.

“Doesn’t matter. It’s fucked up, and he has no right talking that kinda shit to us about our
fuck’n music,” The Batman argued, but saw most were still enjoying Danish’s last crack.

“I’m as much ‘us’ as any Carny from Ohio and his earthly idols,” Danish added, and stepped a long pace back and to his left to escape any physical retaliation by The Batman. There was none. He took the jest on the chin and quietly acknowledged his entertainment with bent brow and a stubborn grin.

Doc returned from a short trip to see the company commander and RTO. “Bird’s en route. Shouldn’t be long,” he announced.

“Is it okay I go with?” Danish asked Doc.

“Fuck no,” Doc replied.

“Why not?” Danish begged.

“Because I’m sure there’re orders addressing the idea of a unit’s only interpreter getting on a bird and leaving them behind,” Doc said.
“And what does that order say?” Danish asked.

“I don’t fucking know, Danish! What the fuck, dude?” Doc pleaded.

“Well I’m sure they’re like those lines painted on the roads in Italy,” Danish appealed.

“How’s that,” Doc asked.

“Only suggestions,” Danish retorted. He knelt back down at Flu’s side and—despite knowing Flu had heard everything—declared he wanted to go with him on the bird, but there was “simply no way.”

“So what now, then?” Flu asked, his speech slurred as the effects of the fentanyl strengthened and his sensibilities weakened.

“You do the only thing that comes natural to you, dude,” Danish suggested.

“What’s that?” Flu asked.
“You mix the truth with lies so to make yourself out to be a hero,” Danish said, gleefully.

Adding in approval, Q said, “Yea, make some shit up so this all sounds exciting and meaningful.”

“Try and get ‘em to allow us visitations,” Topher begged.

In his best, but still lame, Daniel Day-Lewis, Danish addressed Flu, “No matter what you hear, no matter what you see, stay alive—I will find you.” Then, just as Flu’s awareness had all but left him, added, “Besides, I want to be there when Spirit greets the unit back in The States.”

Flu took in the crowd around him, sluggishly. Though their training ensured a skill and foundation of consciousness typical of the Marine rifleman, their experiences and the heavy taxes they had already paid gave them more of a look of some Posse comitatus formed from the crew of the Pequod several years into a nasty brawl. Flu knew
they helped him to feel something—made him more aware of the part of him that was still alive.

Ryan Bronaugh
An American Airman Foresees His Death

I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere many years from now;
Those to whom I dedicate my life shall wait
Until the last drop of sweat drops from my brow;
My country is the red, white, and blue,
My countrymen have died for the men next to them,
No end could bring them closer to so few
Or happier for something they do not shy away from.
No law, nor force made them fight,
No cheering crowds, no wishing well,
An impulse deep out of sight
Drove these men to face the depths of hell;
I gave my time, and it was cut short.
The years since have passed with one short breath,
No waste of time but I will always support
In this life, this death.

Jared Worley
The Floating Opera

That last summer, the one before you deployed to Afghanistan, we had one month to fill with memories.

We shared banana splits at the Tastee Freeze outside of town, rode our bikes along the towpath, and sat on the porch swing at your parents’ home drinking lemonade. We grilled thick steaks on the grill in the backyard and in the evening watched purple-mottled heat lightning in the west. There was corn on the cob and cotton candy at the Mendota Sweet Corn Festival and breaded pork tenderloin sandwiches as big as a Frisbee at the Igloo.

On the Fourth of July, we sat on the banks of the Illinois River and watched the fireworks, but the sound and the fury of the colorful explosions across the summer sky reminded you too much of the war you would soon join.
We laughed, we cried, and we made love a dozen times. For your going away present I bought you a heart-shaped pendant on a gold chain. I placed it around your sunburned neck and told you how much I loved you. One year wasn’t long.

One hot, humid night, you kicked off your shoes and danced across the high school athletic field. I chased after you and watched you leap into the air, your long white dress flowing in the wind and just before your naked feet touched the cool, wet grass, I caught you. And as I remembered you that night—and every night afterward—floating in the air, your dress billowing around your body like a parachute, I shuddered when I wondered what it must have been like, that moment your Humvee hit that IED, sending you in the air.

I wished I could’ve been there to catch you.

Jeffrey Miller
Bring Out Your Dead Shit

He was always yelling to us from the shitter, or shitter stall, describing the foulness of it through extraordinary comparisons. Typically, it was a food or food product: pumpkin, pumpkin spice, White Castle, beef stew, all varieties of adobo, or just cold MRE.

One morning after getting inebriated on Saki bombs at Miso Gourmet, a soup and sushi bar owned and operated by a retired Marine and his Japanese American wife, and placed just a few miles from post, out the back gate, he swore his wipes smelled like soy sauce. Not just any soy sauce, he said, but the off brand shit they were trying to pass off as name brand by setting out name brand bottles filled with the cheap shit. He tossed a small bundle of white shit-paper from an MRE over the shitter stall door with a portentous sample smeared across it. He wanted us to waft a bit in the air around our nose and then make our olfactory sentiments known, which, he was so certainly certain, would agree with
his own. It never crossed his mind that his request could offend.

Only once, that I can remember, did it smell, to him, like genuine shit; however, not of human, but of beast. He swore, the day after sneaking in through the back and spending a drunken afternoon near the stables at the Kentucky Derby, *his* shit smelled like horse shit. I can say, though, if that were true it would not have been shit from any off brand anything, as I was there that day and those horses were fit.

One morning following a night of terror in May, Doc walked the perimeter of our defenses with L-T and found him resting dead against a pile of sandbags, his arms and torso tangled in Concertina wire from where he had wrangled in the booming darkness, dying of the wounds of glowing hot shrapnel that piloted past his body armor and entered his chest cavity through his left axilla. He drowned when his lungs filled with blood. The heat of serrated steel, burn’n like coal, cooked the meat
of his ribs. In the chaos no one even knew he was hit. He died unable to scream for help.

The body bags had been stretched across the pavement in a ribbon of black polypropylene and vinyl, absorbing the heat of the desert sun. As a PFC and Private zipped him up, one remarked he had clearly lost continence, a last offering from a life usurped by death. The coffee-like stain soaked the crotch of his trousers. When the Company Gunny—a man much closer to his rifleman than most in his position—heard this, he asked, “What does it smell like?”

Between the desert buildings scarred and stained black from the previous evening’s conflagration, those of us closest laughed like Mad-Hatters.

Ryan Bronaugh
Back in Viet Nam Again ... Today

my memory of that time and place
sometimes wild ... eludes me
sometimes cruel ... assaults me and
never I fear ... shall leave me
the burden of your spirit nearly fell me as we
placed you on the cold-steel-slick floors of hueys
some a name a face remembered ... some a friend
to me
others .. unknown ... just young soldiers
as your memory haunts me still we share the bond
of brothers
I yearn still .. to gently lay you down to rest

John Tolle
I Don’t Like Pigs Much

I don’t like pigs much. I never thought about the *Sus genus* much before I went to Viet Nam. I knew what they were, of course. I once visited a farm in Iowa as a little tyke and chased them around with my buddies.

I didn’t encounter pigs a lot when I lived in Illinois, either. I was a city boy. There weren’t any swine running at large in my neighborhood in Springfield, where I grew up as a teenager. The State Fair always produced a few from 4-H clubs and other pig-projects. I barely gave them a glance. “Lots of pork chops there,” my dad would remark, philosophically. He was a Capone-era guy from Chicago. No pigs in Cicero either.

Our small ranger team had inserted at dusk the night before and set up in a flooded rice paddy to monitor a narrow canal. We moved to a second position after nightfall and plunked down in a foot of water at the intersection of two rice paddy dikes. If the enemy came, we’d blow both claymores, engage in
a fierce, short-lived fire fight, and beat feet to an extraction point for pick-up. But nothing happened that night. The chorus of frogs and crickets never broke rhythm and nobody tried to kill us.

Dawn arrived with still no enemy contact. We burned off a few leeches with cigarettes and headed for the closest hooch, a tiny dwelling built of mud and thatched roof, like every other hooch I’d seen in the vast Mekong Delta.

The family living there was comprised of an old man, a mother, and two children. They answered our interpreter’s questions in mono symbols, and kept their eyes on the ground. Nhan, our mercenary scout and interpreter, killed a chicken and commenced to use his culinary skills to make us a warm soup. The rest of us took positions around the dwelling to keep an eye on the converging tree lines bordering the small rice field. The Viet Cong were out there. We just didn’t know where or how many.

I was wet, tired, and hungry, the usual status of a long-range patrol soldier at any given moment
during the monsoon season. I moved to a corner of the hooch to catch the already warming rays of the morning sun and to monitor the jungle for movement. And that’s when I encountered the hog.

He was an ugly brute, tethered to a stake by a sturdy rope attached to one of his rear legs. His world was a ten-foot circle, strewn with pig manure and mud. He smelled worse than any hog I’d encountered in my young life and tipped the scales at three times my skinny body weight. Lots of pork chops there, I thought, echoing my father.

He faced me, full of attitude. Ears laid back, his small, red eyes were pure malice as we stared each other down. The couple of warning grunts he issued were disparaging in any language. He just didn’t like me, not unlike his owners in the hooch.

The family went about their business. The remaining couple of chickens ignored us; a rat in a bamboo cage seemed unimpressed. Nhan’s chicken soup was delicious and the sun comfortable and warm. I could hear a lot of gunfire in the distance
and the groaning of Cobra mini-guns. The handset on my radio crackled that our extraction would be delayed due to a lack of gunship support at the moment. So, we waited, bellies full, steam already rising off our wet clothes. Another day in the Nam, and one it appeared I just might survive.

I felt myself drifting and stood up. Falling asleep in the field was not a recommended activity. I felt nature calling, and, being a civilized soldier from a civilized nation, decided to walk the short distance away between the hooch and the now-sleeping hog, to relieve myself. The hog grunted as I gingerly stepped over his tether, and gave me the stink-eye again. I muttered a few obscenities in return and went on my way.

My Vietnamese camouflage tiger pants weren’t made with zippers. So, I left my rifle propped against the wall of the hooch for the short journey. M-16 rifles had carry handles, not slings. What else was a guy supposed to do, with both hands occupied with buttons while standing in water?
The first green tracer bullet snapped past my head as I reached the rice paddy. The tree lines erupted with more rifle fire and the familiar *pop-pop* of AK-47s. My teammates returned the fire, a cacophony of ear-numbing rifle fire and grenade launchers.

I leaped over the hog’s tether, intent on grabbing my rifle and taking cover at the hooch’s back doorway. And that’s when the big fellow panicked.

He rose from the mud with a high-pitched squeal and ran toward the rice paddy. The rope caught my ankle in mid-leap and I fell face-first into the mucky mire of Hogsville, Vietnam. My teammates continued to fire, each blast causing the mud-mottled monster to reverse direction, cutting back across his space and tightening the rope around my ankle. We moved in tandem; where he went, I went, dragged to-and-fro by the panicked, squealing pork chop attached to my leg. I could hear the team leader calling for gunships or artillery over the blasts of automatic weapons around me. I flipped over on my back and kicked and cursed at my
adversary as he dragged me in a circle, squealing in fear with each burst from a ranger rifle. I tried to sit up to cut the rope with my buck knife. Bad idea. More green tracers and snapping bullets picked at the mud around me. The VC had to be ecstatic at the exposed American and his porky buddy offering them a helpless and tantalizing target.

The fire fight raged and I traveled in a continuing carousel, each pass of the hooch revealing my rifle, just a few feet away and out of reach. I might as well have left it in Springfield.

I don’t know how long the fight lasted. In retrospect, probably only a few moments. The artillery arrived, and exploded into the jungle. All firing on both sides stopped. I sat up and pulled myself along the rope, trying to relieve the tension around my ankle. The Hog from Hell was having no part of it. He moved back, keeping the rope taut until one of my buddies finally cut the line and freed me.
The hog took off, pursued by the Vietnamese family. I stood up, plastered with mud and manure, and retrieved my rifle. My radio brought news that our slick and gunship escort were now on the way to take us home. I looked around at my teammates. Nobody said anything, but I could feel the laughter welling inside of each one of them. So much for a band of brothers.

The slick arrived and we mounted, three on a side, feet hanging free, and headed home to Dong Tam. I nudged Bobby, seated next to me, and gestured for a cigarette. He grinned and passed me his lit one. He also pointed at me and pinched his nostrils, his white teeth shining against the washed-out green paint on his face. I thought about pushing him off his perch into the shell-cratered Delta a few thousand feet below. But he was my best drinking buddy.

We arrived at the Dong Tam chopper pad, where the Huey crew let us off. I looked back at the hovering helicopter and made eye contact with the
door gunner. He stole Bobby’s material and waved his hand back and forth across his face to clear the air. I flipped him off. I can still see his grin against his freckled face as the slick pulled away.

We began the short walk back to our company area. The team leader, a brusque fellow at any time, told me to walk well behind everybody, indicating in his Virginia accent that I “stunk like hell.”

There would be other references to the Great Hog Fire Fight. The next morning at formation, little piggy noises from others who’d heard the story. Even the First Sergeant made a crack and asked the formation if they would prefer to stand up-wind of a certain individual among them.

I live on the Oregon coast now. Each year my wife and I attend the tiny county fair. There are carny rides, balloons, and always a couple of bad country singers. In all, the best rural Americana has to offer.

My long-suffering wife loves the agricultural barn. Inside are prize-winning steers, goats to pet, and
sheep standing around trying to make sense of it all. And yes, there are prize winning hogs.

This last year a mother pig with tiny, suckling piglets captured my wife’s attention. I wandered down a few pens. A familiar odor tweaked my nostrils and I dared peek inside.

A monster of a hog lay sleeping on his side, seemingly oblivious to the two-legged attention around him. I stopped and studied him, hearing rifle fire and panicked squeals from somewhere in the deep recesses of my mind.

I leaned over and made a “pssst” sound. He opened one eye and his tail twitched. I looked around for any witnesses, then spoke to him quietly, unable to keep the malice out of my voice.

“You have any distant relatives in Viet Nam, pal?”

He raised his head, glowered at me for a moment, and then seemingly drifted off again.
I walked away, my palms moist, my heart pounding. I only got a couple of steps when I heard a mocking voice from behind.

“No relatives, soldier. But I heard all about it!”

My head snapped around like the kid in *The Exorcist*. He was sleeping again. But I swear his one visible lip had curled into a satisfied smile.

My wife and I wandered around the fair and wound up eating pulled pork sandwiches for lunch. I relished mine. Like I said, I don’t like pigs much.

Mike Calog
Corporal Clark

Allow me to introduce you to Dick Clark. No, I don’t mean that host of *American Bandstand* who never aged a day beyond thirty, though he died when he was in his eighties. I mean, the Dick Clark from the far South Side of Chicago.

I mean Dick Clark, the Marine.

I mean the Dick Clark from Marine Corps Recruit Depot (MCRD) Boot Camp in San Diego in 1965. The guy with the shaved head under an ill-fitting, oversized cover (hat) and lined up in a row -- butt to belly button, with Privates Chambers, Clark, Conrad, Czarnowski and DeVleeshower on the Drill Instructor’s “Street,” in front of the Drill Instructor’s Quonset hut.

Clark and I graduated from Boot Camp together and went on to go through Basic Infantry Training at Camp Pendleton. We separated when we went to
Advanced Infantry Training – Clark to machine
gunners’ school and I to Antitank Assault School.
By the early spring, both of us ended up in the 3rd
Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment which was forming
up at Camp Pendleton, California. Clark in Mike
Company, and India Company became my home.
We set sail for Viet Nam in March of 1966.

I only saw Clark occasionally as our paths crossed
during various operations while we were “in
country” and perhaps around the Battalion or
Regimental areas. During that time, our companies
operated mostly in “Search and Destroy” or
“County Fair” missions.

Finally, my overseas tour of duty ended, and I was
sent home in April of 1967. A long flight in a
chartered civilian aircraft from Da Nang to Alaska
was a bit rough to bear, but the “round-eyed cuties”
in their short stewardess skirts made it at least
somewhat enjoyable. Then, it was a flight to San
Francisco and a bus ride to Marine Barracks, Treasure Island in the Bay.

When I arrived there, I looked like something the cat dragged in. Khaki trousers I picked up in Da Nang which were way too short for me; jungle fatigue blouse that hadn’t been laundered in a month, worn out combat boots and no cover for my head. Add to that, I had missed a couple of flights home because I was in the NCO Club trying to spend all of the MPC (Military Pay Currency) I had. Couldn’t take it home and couldn’t trade it for “Green Backs,” so the best way to get rid of it was buying beers.

After reporting in to the Sergeant Major, I was ushered in to the Commander’s Office. He was a Full-Bird Colonel. I gave the Colonel a very smart salute, saying, “Sir, Corporal Czarnowski reporting as ordered, Sir.”
I don’t remember the Colonel even bothering to look up. He returned my salute, gave me “At Ease,” and told me to stand aside. I moved very smartly off to the right and took up the position of “Parade, Rest!” I wasn’t about to get sloppy in the presence of an O-6.

Ten or fifteen minutes went by and the door of the office opened. In walked Corporal Dick Clark. Well, he didn’t exactly walk in. Maybe “sauntered” or “sashayed” would be more appropriate a word. He was still in jungle fats and looked like a “Motivation Platoon” reject from Boot Camp. Clark approached the Colonel directly. He leaned forward, placed his left hand on the edge of the Colonel’s desk, took the Marlboro out of his mouth and snuffed it out in the Colonel’s clean, bronze-colored, glass ash tray and asked, “Hey! Colonel. When ya gonna get us paid and get us some uniforms so we can go home?”
“Geezuz!” I thought. “What the hell is Clark doing?” My head rolled back and all I could see were my stripes floating away like feathers in the wind. The Colonel pushed his chair back from his desk. He turned to his right and, with a commanding voice, called out, “Sergeant Major!”

“Aw, God!” I thought. He was calling for the Sergeant Major! My head reeled back; I had visions of busting rocks down into dust at the Navy Brig in Portsmouth. I swore to take a contract out on Clark – Chicago style – after we did our time.

“Take charge of these Marines, get them some uniforms and get them paid so they can go home.”

With that, Clark stood up, gave the Colonel a half-assed salute – actually, more like a wave of his hand, and left with the Sergeant Major. I stood there, still at Parade, Rest. I was more than stunned. I was frozen in disbelief at what I had just seen.
“Corporal!” With that, the Colonel got my attention. “You are dismissed.”

I moved to the center of his desk, saluted and said, “Sir. Thank you, Sir!” As I held my salute, the Colonel looked at me and said, “It’s nice to know that at least one of you still knows how to act like a Marine.”

I was truly flattered – this coming from a senior Officer. I said, “Sir. Thank you, Sir!” The Colonel was halfway through returning my salute when he stopped, looked at me directly and said, “I wasn’t thinking of you, Czarnowski!”

Jerry Czarnowski
The Gargoyle

Waterspout, waterspout, just a little waterspout,
A supernatural defender, you are not.
Behind your protection: Cardinals Believe,
Preaching Glory: Behind your grotesque.
Have you ever drawn a sword?
Thrust it into a gullet, twisting the blade,
A flick of the sword, freeing entrails,
Blood and bile fleeing my blade
To strike the next foe.
I am the true soldier,
Of a vast army that conquered the world.
I save people and kill them alike
Not you, looking ever Onward (Christian Soldiers).
Demons defy your grotesque,
To infiltrate the worship of some god
You’ve never met.
In every battle, I search for God.
How can he exist in this agony of hell,
Neither the just nor evil die at my hand,
Just people.
This Darkness to extinguish your light.

Dan W. Holst
Back to “The World”

October, 1967; thirteen months and six days after I stepped off a chartreuse Braniff Air Lines Boeing 707 at Da Nang Air Base and smelled Vietnam for the first time; thirteen months and six days since I jumped into the back of a truck as an individual replacement, convinced I could be killed any minute on my way to somewhere unknown, while two Marines in the front laughed and waved at kids in the streets as we sped to an installation without an official name, just the one coined by Marines, involving, of course, the “f-word.” The tent camp for armored/tracked vehicle units, tanks and Amtrak’s lay on a low hill southwest of the huge air base. I checked in and was assigned to 3rd Platoon, Bravo Company, 1st Amtrac Battalion, whereupon I became the last member of the “Original 3rd Herd.”

Thirteen months had passed. We had spent the bulk of my tour fighting in support of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment, 3rd Marine Division, aka: “The Walking Dead.” Initially, we
provided long range security for the air base. After several months, the outfit had sailed back to Okinawa and returned in January, 1967 to the Mekong Delta as part of Battalion Landing Team 1/9 on Operation Deckhouse Five, where we were part of the first wave to hit the beach in the largest amphibious landing since Chosin Reservoir in Korea. After the Delta, we moved north to provide security for a bulk fuel facility on White Beach on the South China Sea near Phu Bai, then were ordered north again, this time for my final months to Cua Viet, a couple thousand meters south of the DMZ. And today was my turn. My turn to “rotate.” To start the nearly 10,000-mile journey out of the bush and back to “The World.”

I saluted my “Tractor Rat” (Amphibian Tractor, aka, Amphibious Assault Vehicle) comrades as they set out across the Cua Viet River and north along the South China Sea on another patrol into the DMZ. I stood guilt-ridden like everyone else who’d rotated before me, thinking I was abandoning the men with whom I’d lived and fought for so long.
Then, as they disappeared up the beach, I took solace in having left my record collection behind and jumped aboard a Navy Mike 8 headed upstream toward the Marine air strip at Dong Ha. I didn’t look back for quite a while. We’d been taking pretty regular artillery and mortar fire, and I didn’t want to see what I didn’t want to see. When I finally succumbed to the nagging in my soul and turned around, I was too far away to see anything except an inky smoke column snaking up from yet another shelling of our little conglomeration of tents on the beach. By then, my guys would’ve been far enough north to be out of danger from the incoming. I turned back, relieved, and vowed to look only west from then on.

At Dong Ha, I was instructed to join a group of other Marines in a bunker. A salty old staff sergeant slid in and growled at us:

“Okay, if you Jarheads want to make it back to The World, here’s the program. The gooks’ve been rocketing this strip on and off for several days. In fact, we’ve had to close a time or two. So, y’all’r
lucky to be here at a time when you’ve got a chance to get out. But your luck could change at any minute. So, because of the situation, your ride to Da Nang ain’t gonna be stoppin’ and waitin’ on your asses while you diddy bop across the runway, pinch the stewardess, and whine about not gettin’ a window seat. That bird’s gonna come out of those clouds in a damned near crash descent. It’ll hit that tarmac real hard and just keep rollin’. The crew’ll kick off some cargo as they head to the end of the runway. At the end, the captain’ll do an about face and didi-mau. If you’re hopin’ to see mama, you’ll be out of this hole as soon as the bird hits the ground and haulin’ your skinny asses to the end of that runway by the time the pilot gets swung around and gooses those engines. If you make it in time, you might be able to jump on and say adios to The Nam. If you’re too slow, you’ll be sleepin’ right here with us. Right where you’re sittin’ now…for God knows how long. It’s up to you, gentleman.”

His lip curled in a devious grin as he scrambled out of the hole and trotted back to the control tower.
Anxiety ran high when the C-130 Hercules broke out of the grey. Asses hauled. Out of that hole we came at full, raging charge. Helmet chinstraps cinched down. Rifles slung diagonally across our backs, slapping against the tattered flak jackets. Web belts heavy with rifle magazines, banging canteens, first-aid packs, maybe a grenade or two, twisting and chafing, all the while hugging to our chests the rest of our lives stuffed into bulging sea bags. Running, screaming, bug-eyed, hoping like hell not to fall. Doing our damnest to triangulate with the beautiful flying beast, any thought of being obliterated by a North Vietnamese rocket suppressed by the fear of being left standing on the tarmac, watching our freedom bird disappear.

Several pallets slid off the lowered loading ramp as the aircraft bounced along on the steel. It pivoted, the left wing and roaring propellers passing in front of six olive-drab, gasping men, racing with everything we had to reach the ramp. Sea bags were hurled aboard as we chased and leaped headlong. The aircrew, as if standing on their back porch,
snatched guys by the seats of their pants and slung them onto the metal floor of the cargo hold like so much baggage. Everyone was yelling; no one was heard. The ramp banged shut, and the loadmaster shot a thumbs-up toward the cockpit. Engines roared. The monster actually seemed to stop momentarily. It wallowed, shimmied and shook as if coming apart, then rose on the landing gear with exhaust and deafening noise choking the cargo bay. Shaking and shuddering, the turbo-powered hog suddenly sprang violently forward.

Bouncing, bouncing, sliding, swaying, praying “Get up! Get up! Get up!” And then…a magic carpet ride. Into the clouds and out of range we flew. As we lay sprawled on the decking in relative quiet, somebody said, “Comin’ home darlin’.”

Steven Rittenmeyer
Red

You’re a hibiscus of beauty
A sunrise – so new to me.

You’re smoldering to the touch
You’re the taste – of dust,
Accidentally inhaled from the side of a mountain;
You’re cayenne on my tongue
Musky, stale blood – a hint of
Cinnamon.

You’re the sound of bullets
Snapping me
To attention,
Yet a whisper, hot breath
On my neck
Full of tension.

You’re the music of crickets
Crawling across brainwaves,
Uneasy.
You’re blood parasites,
Swimming alive,
With anxiety.

You’re a lipstick print
Smeared, half erased;
You’re the sight of a bite mark –
With purpose,
Misplaced.

You’re my four a.m. shadow
Sleeping next to me, dreaming.
You’re full of a bee hive
Buzzing, humming,
And screaming.

You’re the crackling of secrets
In my subconscious – all mine.
You’re the deep, charming warmth
Of a fine Merlot wine.

You’re the rugged rust
Off the rock that I’m climbing,
Alarming, destructive, chaotic,
Subliming.

The fight that breaks out
Before chances of forgiveness,
You’re the thing that renders my “sorry’s” –
So breathless.

You're the sting that I'll lose
In my somber sun sets,
But I’ll wake to find you,
After each time
I rest.

Catherine Mobley

This Christmas in Vietnam was the second Christmas I would miss at home since entering the Corps. The first came just before arriving there in January, 1969. This one would really mean something because my one-year tour was almost over, only thirteen days and a wake up to go. The World was getting closer every day.

Since arriving early in September at LZ Baldy from Quang Tri, the Corps assigned me to a clerk’s position in a company office on an LZ called Baldy. Sure beat a bush job. There was very little activity there. The 80’s were busy occasionally. Other than that, we did not have much else going on. It was nice to have a chance to sleep for a change, although it was in a bunker. Shortness will allow for that.

As Christmas approached, this Marine had duty working for the Chaplain; we needed to prepare the
chapel for Christmas Eve service. The pastor asked us, since two of us worked for him on a part-time basis, to gather all the candles we could get our hands on legally.

He knew how precious candles were to us. When in the rear with the gear or at a place like Stud and Baldy, candles provided light in a rather dark place. We did not have lights in our hooches or tents. There were no streetlights either. Flashlights were dangerous. When night fell, hatches were covered and the candles lit. It seemed as though the flames gave a sense of comfort. You could read by them or gather around one flame and do something that was not smoking cigarettes, if you get my drift. Candles became friends. They did not come in those Red Cross packages; they came from home. The folks back in the World were happy to send them. They had no idea how precious those candles had become.
So off we went, attempting to make the Chaplain happy. He seemed to want to have a Christmas Eve service that would be grand, although there was a concern with this grand situation. You see, the chapel sat up on the hill next to that rock, a big, somewhat white rock. Mostly grey though, but way too bright, especially in the moon light because it reflected light, even star light. It was not a good idea to be up there silhouetted against that boulder. Why they built the chapel in front of that rock was beyond us.

There was another problem with that Chapel on that hill next to that rock. They painted it white. Why they decided to do that was crazy. No one, including his brother, up in that place in the dark with even one candle, would light it.

Now, collecting those candles would take some doing. The first order of business was how do you get a Marine to give up his candle? The exchange rate was rather high. We sure felt the Chaplain
made a mistake thinking we would find candle picking easy.

As they say, “if you don’t ask, you’ll never find out what people will give up,” or something like that. Therefore, we began to ask. It was amazing how easy it was to get candles after you told the people about the Chaplain’s plan. Marines readily gave us candles. Some were used to the point of being too short, but we took all we could get.

Up to the Chaplain we went. How many candles we had, did not know and did not care. The Chaplain was ecstatic! We saw he had some big plans for those candles.

The Chaplain’s next piece of business was to put together a bulletin for Christmas Eve. All we had to do was go to the underground bunker to pick up the copies. They had electricity; we did not know that until we stepped in there. Wow! What a crazy zoo! They planned war in that bunker, and they were
busy. After we received the freshly printed bulletins, we returned to the hill. The next order of business was to set the candles.

Now this job took a while. Each candle --we did this in the day light-- was set in a puddle of wax to keep it in place. The heated wax acted like glue once it cooled and hardened. We had a ton of candles, and the Chaplain wanted each one used. We had no idea how many we set, but it was a mess of them. Just who was going to light all those candles? Neither one of us planned to do that, so we left in a hurry; the light was getting dim.

As we worked, the Chaplain told us to return before the service to hand out the bulletins and greet those who would be coming. There was no talking him out of it. Orders are orders even when they come from the Chaplain. We figured no one would come. The plan, after we got to the chapel, was to wait for no one to arrive and then run back to the safety of the bunker.
When we climbed to the top of the hill for the third time that day, in the now dark night--it got dark early there too in December--we were awe struck by what appeared before us. It was not as dramatic as scaring the shepherds to death when the heavenly host appeared, but damn close! The Chaplain had lit every candle in the place. He also rolled up all the shades on the screening. The place was lit up like a huge flare; this light show was not going out soon. We took our positions at the hatch and waited. Man, did we want to bolt. Then they came. One after another, they came, laughing, doing Marine stuff to each other, filed into the chapel, took off their covers and had a seat. The place was stuffed! We ran out of bulletins. It was great!

The service began. We sang our hearts out. We prayed and had a great sermon. It was about light coming into the world. It surely did that night. When the service was over, most left quietly and returned to their hooches, we too. Who blew those candles out, do not know and do not care. It was a
blessed Christmas. Went back to the World soon after.

Reverend Paul Gregerson
My Life as a Veteran - An Excerpt

I was promoted to 1LT after we moved to III Corps, and soon my time in the field would be up. Officers normally served six months in the field and six months in the rear, which didn’t seem fair, since most enlisted men, including NCOs, who were in the infantry, spent their entire tour of duty in the field. My situation was a bit different though; the American powers-to-be were accelerating the “Vietnamization” of the war, a capital idea to all the grunts in Vietnam. As a side note, I later met a Vietnamese guy named Rennie, who was my age but spent the war years studying in Paris, rather than serving in the military. What the hey! Anyway, since I had combat experience and a little more than six months to go, I was selected to become an advisor on a five-man Mobile Advisory Team under MACV. I was notified in the field and on a helicopter within minutes; I only had a chance to say goodbye to my platoon sergeant, RTO, and a few of my men. That was a tough day, leaving them behind. My next destination was another one-
week orientation course. This one was advisor school in Xian. We were told how to be advisors, learned some Vietnamese language and customs, and briefed on pertinent Vietnamese military and government matters. I got a 100 on all the tests, so when it mattered I guess I could be a pretty good student after all. William Colby, who became Director of the CIA a few years later, spoke at our graduation ceremony. He was a tad bit intense.

My assignment was to MAT-17 in Sadec Province in the Delta. That meant that I would serve in I Corps, III Corps, and IV Corps during my tour of duty. I missed II Corps, which was well-known for tigers and Montagnards, the indigenous people of the Central Highlands. But that was okay with me. On the day I was supposed to fly south to begin my new MACV assignment, there was an aircraft shortage, and my flight was cancelled. Thus began an exciting but unauthorized adventure. Rather than sit around Xian for another day, I decided to catch a quick flight to Tan Sa Nut Air Base in Saigon. My old company rear with the 82nd had relocated there,
and I wanted to pick up any mail they might have for me and see how the guys were. A day of poking around Saigon would be fun, too. So, I did all that, even though I was supposed to be in Xian frittering away the day. Technically, I guess I was AWOL. So what! What are they going to do, send me to Vietnam? After some carousing on Tudo Street, I found a cheap hotel to spend the night. I knew I needed to get back to the MACV compound in Xian as early as possible, but I had some obstacles. First of all, I had no transportation, and secondly, there was a curfew in Saigon, making it difficult and dangerous to leave very early. Plus, I had no map, no weapon, and poor communication skills.

Somehow, I managed to wake up early and find a motorized cyclo driver lurking in the street. I asked him to take me to Highway 1 on the north side of the city. He agreed. That meant I was sitting in a seat stretched across the front of his motorcycle, unarmed and bare to the world, hurtling noisily through the streets of Saigon during the illegal predawn hours. We made it. Now, all I had to do was
hitchhike to Xian and get there before anybody missed me when I had to check out prior to catching my flight south, whenever that was. Problem: not much traffic at this hour in the morning and no U.S. military vehicles in sight at all. With time a wasting, the only alternative left was to activate option number two: take Vietnamese transportation. Finally, I flagged down a Vietnamese taxi. The driver was a little bug-eyed at seeing me there, and even more so when I told him I needed a ride to Xian. He couldn’t understand my pronunciation. So I showed him my new MACV shoulder patch. That didn’t register either. How about the “Big Red One,” since it was headquartered nearby? I tried to say that in my best Vietnamese. Nothing. I drew a picture of the 1st Division Patch. Again, nothing. So, I just pointed north and off we went. I was hoping to see a sign or some Americans somewhere, but nothing. He kept repeating what I was trying to tell him, and finally it seemed to click. He turned off Highway 1 onto a dirt road. This was either progress or my demise. We passed some
Vietnamese soldiers. I hunkered down because I couldn’t tell what unit they were or even what side they were on. We came to a village. The driver stopped, got out, and asked a man opening a little tea shop. I was hoping he was on our side, too. The driver hopped back in, smiled nervously, and pointed down the road. I’m thinking, “Okay, let’s go. What do I have to lose?” So I nod yes, and he zooms off. After a few minutes, he stops the car in the middle of nowhere. No rice paddies, no houses, no trees, nothing, and lets me know this is it. And asks for his fare. What? Then he points down the road again and gives me his best smile with a tinge of urgency to it. I squint and slowly a gate comes into semi-focus. By golly, that just might be the MACV base camp. So, I pay him, exit the taxi, and start walking in that direction. He spews dust, and I’m alone.

Now there’s good and bad news. The good news is as I get closer to the gate I can see that is the MACV compound. The bad news is two bewildered MPs come walking out towards me with
weapons raised. I keep walking, and as we meet, the senior one says. “What the hell are you doing out here, sir?” As I begin telling my story, like it’s no big thing and they shouldn’t worry about it, the other MP dashes back to the guard station and makes a phone call. When I get there, he tells me that I have to go report to Major So-and-So right away, and he is hopping mad. So I thank them and amble off in that direction. In a few minutes I’m standing at attention in front of the major’s desk. He’s ranting and raving and telling me that they’ve been looking all over for me, and yakety, yak, yak. He really has his panties in a wad. He goes on to tell me that he’s going to report me to my next unit and I will be in deep doo-doo there, etc., etc., etc. When he’s finally out of threats and in danger of a stroke, he tells me I’m dismissed and to get out of there. I render a snappy salute and belt out “All the way, sir!” He jumps up and says, “What did you say to me?” So, I told him, “I’ve been in the 82nd Airborne Division for the past year, and that’s what we say when we salute a senior officer.” That
really sets him off. He yells at me, “I’ve been a straight leg infantryman for 25 years, blah, blah, blah!!!” I wanted to say, “Gee and you’re a major already!”, but I figured that could definitely lead to some dire consequences, so I kept that retort to myself and stifled an ear-to-ear grin. Later that day, I caught my flight south and never heard another word about it.

My flight was to Can Tho, the largest city in the Mekong Delta and a bit south of Sadec. Among the other advisors on the flight was a senior NCO who was a World War II vet. We had to get a hotel room and spend the night prior to being picked up by somebody from our new unit the following day, so, we did what all G.I.s do, we hit the bars. Going drinking in a combat zone with a WWII vet was yet another surreal moment for a 21-year-old stump-jumping, ridge-running hillbilly from the Midwest. We had a great time. I hope he made it back okay.

Life as an advisor was much preferable to being a platoon leader. Not as much time sleeping in the jungle, and a district team house with cold beer,
warm showers, sit down toilets, and poker games that we could visit from time to time. Most of the time, though, we lived in small buildings in villages or in compounds that we and our Vietnamese counterparts constructed along the strategic forks of a river. A Mobile Advisory Team consists of five Americans and a Vietnamese interpreter. The five Americans are supposed to be an infantry captain, an infantry lieutenant, and three sergeants, one for light weapons, one for heavy weapons, and a medic. We also had an interpreter from the Vietnamese Army. He was a young guy named Nguyen Von Sang. He was married to a very pretty young lady who visited him from time to time. They had a baby shortly after I returned to the U.S., so I sent them a big box of baby supplies. Hopefully, SGT Sang and his family were spared the reeducation camps after the war, but I doubt it.

I took over for the MAT team from a captain whose father was a general. He badly wanted to command an infantry company, which is what he got. He also got killed about a month later. My other team
members were Rick Biondo, a paratrooper from Philadelphia, Jose Rivera, a machine gunner from Puerto Rico, and Oscar Smoot, a medic from Brooklyn. They were all interesting guys and excellent soldiers. 1LT Frank Gheoli from Boston had date of rank on me, so he became the MAT Team leader. Frank was an artist, a big Italian guy with a huge mustache. He wore a non-regulation black beret like in the Old Country. Frank hated the Army, with a capital “H.” Fortunately for him, he also got a case of the hemorrhoids, with a capital “H.” This was his ticket home. So, regardless of any future consequences, Frank did all he could to make them worse, and he succeeded. In fact, he took the term “grunt” to new heights. A couple of months later, he got medevac’d for “roids,” and, hopefully, lived happily-ever-after sitting on a donut in front of an easel. That made me the Team Leader of MAT 17.

Just before Frank left, he made a series of charts depicting the strength of the Regional and Popular Forces (RFs and PFs) we were advising in the
Lapvo District of Sadec Province. They were beautiful and should have been hanging in the Louvre. Very artistically done and covered with plastic, with green tape as borders. He even made an easel to set them on. Boy, did they come in handy. Shortly after I became Team Leader, we were notified that Senator Ted Kennedy would be visiting our team and I would be giving him a briefing. “Yo boy, more fun and games.” So we practiced the briefing, spiffed up our team room in a concrete building in Long Hung village, and staked out a landing zone for three choppers that would bring the Senator and his assorted hangers-on and military brass. Then it was abruptly cancelled, as he was sent somewhere else a bit less dicey. Oh well, back to our normal routine.

Then, not much later, another alert. This time we would be visited by Vice Admiral Elmo Zumwalt and Vice Admiral Walter Baumberger and their entourage from CINCPAC in Hawaii. Gee, couldn’t we save them a trip and just go there instead? Never mind. This time they arrived in a
cloud of dust with helicopters blowing crap everywhere, and bug-eyed lackeys and security forces running around all over the place. I greeted them and brought them into our humble abode. They sat on stools placed in front of the easel, and I whipped through Frank’s presentation charts at warp speed, exhibiting supreme confidence and mastery of the situation. Admiral Zumwalt, he of the bushy eyebrows, asked me a couple of questions, which I luckily was able to give a quick and accurate response. Then he said, “Well it looks like you know what you’re doing.” Then everybody high-tailed it for the choppers, we stood still, salutes at the ready, inhaled a couple of pounds of swirling dust, and watched them disappear like a puff of smoke. It wasn’t a fair fight, six huge shiny silver stars versus one tiny weather-beaten silver bar, but we won anyway.

A big part of our mission in Sadec was to advise the Hoa Hao Army. They were a separate unit from the Vietnamese Army. The Hoa Hao were a sect of Buddhism that had been persecuted by the
Vietnamese government for various political and economic reasons. They lived in the Mekong Delta, and were, to some extent, their own little kingdom. For a while during the Vietnam War, they fought everybody. They were finally lured to the American side by a huge pile of greenbacks and other means of support. They were good soldiers. In contrast, most of the RFs and PFs, known derisively by American troops as “Ruff Puffs,” were citizen soldiers who lacked military discipline and will. Going on operations with them was frightening because they talked, smoked cigarettes, shot birds out of trees for lunch, and refused to stay in the tree line along the canals and rivers, making them (and us) easy targets. After being with the 82nd, which had “strack” troops, the Ruff Puffs were like Boy Scouts, but they still carried weapons and drew fire. The Hoa Hao were much better and much more serious about fighting the war. They actually took it to the enemy, whereas it was said the RFs and PFs had an understanding with the VC that they would make their presence known so they
could avoid each other and everybody could live another day. Whether this was true or not was impossible to verify, but their military actions certainly left much to be desired. They were basically just simple farmers pressed into service in a war that did not interest them. All they wanted was their rice paddy and their village. The rest of the world didn’t concern them. Unfortunately, that was not a two-way street.

I still have a photo of an RF lieutenant who was the commander of a small detachment that we helped build a three-sided mud fort along a river. My MAT Team lived there also and advised them on operations in the surrounding area. While building the fort, the RF lieutenant showed me around the perimeter. As is Vietnamese custom among male friends and colleagues, he wanted to hold my hand while we were touring the fort’s outline and discussing where to place the concertina wire, flares, booby traps, claymore mines, and other necessary items. As an American, holding hands with another guy made me very uncomfortable, and
doing it in a combat situation made it seem even more bizarre. So, I took to doing lots of pointing myself, picking up things, and sticking my hands in my pocket, while simultaneously trying not to offend my counterpart. He appreciated what we were doing for his people and understood our sacrifice, so he gave me a small photo of himself and wrote an inscription on the back of it. The RFs and PFs brought their families with them: wives, kids, the elderly, dogs, everybody. We were a Mobile Advisory Team, and they were a mobile military community. It was extremely sad when he was killed a few days later, and we heard his family wailing in the hooch next to ours for days on end.

Occasionally, my team would go into the city of Sadec for supplies or military powwows. There was a small military club there, known as the Lucky Nine, where we could get cold beer and greasy cheeseburgers, a real treat. Back in our hooch we subsisted mainly on C-rations and on Chinese noodles we bought off the local economy. Once we were supplied with several cases of spam and some
big blocks of cheese, kind of a generic Velveeta. It was different and tasty, so we lived off that for a few weeks. Not sure how many years that will take off each of our lives. Since we spent lots of time with local military commanders and government leaders, we also ate what they ate. Among my least favorites, as I recall, were duck’s head, duck’s feet, and blood pudding made from pig intestines and assorted other entrails. The only recourse was to say, “Sorry, it’s against my religion,” and then quickly hand it off to my appreciative interpreter. The worst, though, was when you were so hot and dehydrated you were about to crumble to dust on the spot, somebody would bring you a large glass of ice water. It looked so good, until a closer look revealed unidentified organisms swimming in it. All you could do is say, “No thanks. I’m not really thirsty.”

Dr. Stan McGahey
In my apartment, alone, I sit
Isolated from everything
Memories I try to forget
Losing myself in the process
A shattered mirror on the floor
Still I make progress
A statement meant to implore

Not everyone is lucky like me
To achieve one’s aim so easily
For others, it can stretch into years
Full of self-deception and fears
A piece of the mirrored glass
Reminds me of who I was once
Another piece uplifts me…
If only, because…because…

There is trepidation
In saying what needs to be said
I have fought in war
And lost in heart and soul
A harrowing experience
This new one, tenfold
There are many veterans
But not all are like me
I wrap myself in disguises
My identity a mystery

I am afraid to say it
Afraid of what might be said
Like an oncoming thunderstorm,
I approach the words with dread
Yet I stand here today
Ready to be dismembered
I am a veteran…
I am also transgendered
Only five thousand of us exist
In a country bold and free
We ask only for your acceptance
And to embrace our true identity

Rowan Mooney
Replacement

He was on an air-conditioned USAF bus with about fifty other GIs just out of training. Popular American music played on the radio speakers. The windows were covered in metal mesh or grating. He heard a DJ say, “This is the AFVN network.” He had a good idea what that meant but not the window covering. Later he would learn that was to prevent the enemy from lobbing grenades or other explosive devices into the bus. Good idea. He had recently completed an eighteen-hour flight to Vietnam. He flew commercial, on Northwest Orient Airlines. They had stopped somewhere in Alaska and in Tokyo. They were allowed off the plane in Alaska. There were sure a lot of MP’s around! Was escape a problem? He and some other guys had a beer during the layover. In Tokyo he had to remain on the plane. All-in-all it was better than travelling to Southeast Asia on a Navy transport ship.

They were all tired and burned out. He knew or heard they were around Saigon at Long Bihn or Tan Son Nhut Airbase. It was cloudy, hot, and humid.
The landscape rolling by was foreign. He saw palm trees, rice paddies, canals, tree lines, rich and verdant shrubbery. There was an abundance of tropical vegetation like elephant grass. Many shades of green and brown painted this Asian palate. It looked oppressive, steamy outside. There were few buildings, just some ramshackle huts the bus driver called hooches. In the distance, the northeast he thought, he saw some larger buildings; maybe that was Saigon. They were headed to a troop replacement center of some kind. It seemed like late afternoon but he had nodded off before he could ask. Getting a weapon seemed like a good idea. For some reason he couldn’t put his finger on, there was a sense of foreboding.

They rolled up to their apparent destination. A staff sergeant in jungle fatigues who was assigned to them said they would process here for a few days and then be sent to an outfit or duty station. A bunch of haggard young men, in their state-side olive drab work uniforms, trudged slowly off the bus. It was a multi-cultural and multi-racial group.
Most of their individuality stripped from them in basic training. Youth, lack of hair, identical green fatigues, and an apparent wide-eyed expression is what they had in common; not their color or their hometown. They were all newbies or FNGs (fuckin’ new guys).

Suddenly there was a commotion! He heard yelling and some people started to run. Then he heard, “INCOMING!” He knew what that meant. He joined the group in a dash as sirens blared. They were headed to a bunker for protection. Most just dropped their heavy, cumbersome duffel bags and made a run for it. He made it to a low structure encircled by sandbags. Somebody said, “Charlie is lobbing rockets at us again.” He sat on an uncomfortable, low bench in the deep darkness. There wasn’t a lot of conversation. He heard, “What’s going on?” “It’s a mortar attack you dumb shit,” somebody else said. He saw a match or lighter flare up. In a few minutes the guy next to him gave him a nudge. “What?” “Take it. Either hit it or pass it on.” It slowly dawned on his tired, over-
stimulated mind. It was a joint. He took a puff and passed it on, not wanting to cause a stir. Soon the bunker was filled with the pungent, sweet smell of marijuana.

Outside, the attack went on. He heard explosions and felt the bunker walls shake, saw dirt or debris fly past the opening that had no door. Some lit cigarettes and some other joints found life. Now there was a low hum of conversation. Those who weren’t newbies seemed to relax. He, like most of the replacements, just sat there and waited. Of course he was scared, who wouldn’t be? A new country, a new experience, the fear of the unknown. It was a lot to digest or process after an entire day of travel and little sleep. Gradually, the commotion from outside lessened. A different-sounding siren filled the air with a plaintive note. “That’s the all clear,” somebody announced. He felt like he had been in the bunker forever. It had probably been about a half-hour.
Everyone started to file out of the bunker. It was easy to tell the in-country troops from the FNGs. They wore jungle fatigues, not the stateside ODs, looked used to the recent shelling, and had a leaner, meaner, more grizzled appearance. South Vietnamese men were part of the assemblage. He would later learn they were ARVN or Tiger Scouts. Most of the camp had been in the bunker. All of the newbies appeared to be in shock or overload. They didn’t even have their jungle fatigues or M-16s yet. “Welcome to Nam, meat,” somebody bellowed. He had been in country for a couple hours and had already experienced an attack and drug use! This initial experience came to be a metaphor for his tour in Vietnam. Things could change suddenly and drastically. Surreal seemed to describe it.

He slept on a cot in a barracks building that first night. Early the next morning there was a formation. A terse, gruff NCO filled them in:
“You’ll be here three or four days until you get orders. Then you’ll be sent to Division HQ for your outfit. Don’t ask me where you’re gonna be sent, I don’t fuckin’ know. Follow orders and don’t make any waves. Enjoy burning shit.” With that, the staff sergeant walked off. “Huh?” US 548-35-0883 thought. He soon found out.

“Alright, listen up. 11Bs and Cs come with me. 11 Hotels go with Sergeant Brooks. Cooks, clerks, and truck drivers, I don’t give a fuck where you go.”

“This is surreal,” he thought again. He was a mortar man so he went with the 11Bs and Cs.

A MOS, (military occupation specialty), or job of 11 meant infantry. He still didn’t have a weapon. What was going on? They were marched over behind a latrine. It was a shaky looking wooden structure with barrels beneath it.

“Take these empty barrels over there and switch them with the full ones.” The sergeant who
said this looked hung over, sick or both. “Bring them over here, dump some diesel fuel in and light it. Go find a stick to stir it.”

“That’s it, Sarge?” a new guy asked.

“Ain’t much to burning shit, troop,” he said. “Besides, I don’t care, I’m SHORT!”

The barrels were fifty-five gallon drums cut in half with holes for handles. He and three other guys went to work. Once they carried the barrel over and lit it there wasn’t much to do except stand or sit and watch it burn.

“This would be a good time for one of those funny smokes we had in the bunker,” he thought. None of the other new guys could produce one. Funny, nobody talked about the rocket-mortar attack of the previous day. Slowly the time passed. It was hot and humid. He felt like a damp sponge. The sun beat down on their odorous work station. “Is this what I trained in the swamps of Louisiana for?” They found out where the mess hall and
showers were. What the hell did SHORT mean, anyway?

Somebody said SHORT meant little time left in country. That seemed like a very distant goal. He burned shit for two days. No big deal. Today, studies show that about 85% of replacements had that as their first job in country. The third day he got to load and unload trucks. Besides supplies there were metal boxes that looked a lot like coffins.

“Step up there and get busy,” the NCO in charge of the work detail said. “Don’t be afraid, Harris, they’re empty,” he laughed.

“Another uncertain and surreal experience,” he mused.

The fourth day, in formation, he was told to report to the third deuce-and-a-half, or truck, in line by the gate. That was it. Be nice to know where he was going or to what unit. He asked the driver what was up.
“I’m driving to Dong Tam, that’s 9th Infantry Division headquarters,” he said. Well, at least he knew that much. It was a hot, dusty, uncomfortable three-hour drive to Dong Tam in the Mekong Delta. Supposedly, he would get a final duty assignment there. He wondered if he would have to burn shit again there. So far, Nam hadn’t been much fun, to say the least. His thoughts lingered on something he heard a grizzled first sergeant say a few days ago: “You come in this goddamn country alone, by yourself, and leave the same way.” What exactly did he mean?

Larry Harris
Wind in My Hair

A Yamaha, Honda, Indian, Triumph, or Hog are the motorcycles we read about and dreamt of owning. They were the cycles of our youth, a time long past. A time when riding was an opportunity to gaze at the wonders of nature as the world went by. We did not need a “space suit” and other technological gizmos. We just wore a pair of old blue jeans, a jacket, sneakers, and glasses/goggles or a helmet, maybe an old surplus WW2 Army helmet. Sunny days, moonlit nights, and riding for simple enjoyment were a vital part of life. I received my first Yamaha motorcycle for my 16th birthday and have been enjoying riding for over 51 years.

The sound of the motorcycle engine reverberated off of the garage walls as I kick-started my 43-year-old Yamaha RD 60 - my second motorcycle last summer. It was a beautiful day with bright sunshine, a gentle wind, and wispy clouds. A perfect day to go “ridin.” I was not concerned with how fast my motorcycle was in the ¼ mile or its top end. There
was no need for a motorcycle with an 100-HP engine mounted beneath the gas tank and a fairing designed to enhance the cycle’s aerodynamic properties. I was not racing at Daytona but riding on country roads with a posted speed limit of 55 MPH under ideal conditions and a speed limit of 25-30 MPH in town. I didn’t need a rocket on two wheels. This was just another day to feel the wind in my hair and listen to the tunes in my ear. One more joyful ride at 30 MPH or less and a chance to look at the fields of emerging grain and wild flowers while watching the critters scurry about. The tunes in my ear came from an old ‘60s era transistor radio. No need for an iPod. Just a simple radio sitting in my pocket and tuned in to the local “oldies” radio station. As I shifted into 1st gear and released the clutch handle, my cycle lurched forward and off I went down the gravel road. The sound of tires on the road and the whine of the engine brought back wonderful memories of days long past when my friends and I rode our “bikes” to the swimming hole, to a dance, or just “scooping
the loop.” As I shifted through the gears and leaned right or left to negotiate the bumps and turns in the road, I felt the continuous yet relaxing “good vibrations.” The world looks different when you are sitting upright in contrast to hugging the gas tank. The wonders of nature cannot be enjoyed if you are zipping by so fast that they just become a blur. Oh, but how nice it was to still experience two of the simple pleasures of life - wind in my hair and tunes in my ear.

As sunshine reflected off of the chrome and baby-blue metal parts of my bike, I thought about the differences between today’s bikes, the bikes of yesteryear, such as my 43-year-old Yamaha. Although the weight-to-size ratio may be lopsided, resulting in poorer overall performance, the beauty of a motorcycle with actual chrome plating over steel and painted steel parts cannot be replaced. I have spent many peaceful summer days washing and waxing my bike while “rock and roll” or “folk” music played in the background. Consequently, it
still maintains close to 100% of its original beauty. Today’s molded plastic parts just do not compare. The beauty of a clean machine has not been lost after four generations. My oldest son enjoyed going for a slow ride on my Yamaha when he was only a couple-of-years old. Today, his sons, my grandsons, show the same excitement when we go for a ride around the yard on the same shining antique motorcycle. You do not need to go fast to enjoy the wind in your hair or to feel the “good vibrations.”

Maintenance was always essential for both safety and performance. The difference between the bikes of our youth and today’s high-tech wonders is that, in the past, we, the rider/owner, could do most of the work, given copies of the owners and technical manual and a handful of tools. “Ridin’” was more than just wind in your hair; it required perfecting performance of a 2-stroke or 4-stroke engine, depending on the motorcycle that you owned. But we all worked together and that camaraderie was a rewarding facet of life and riding motorcycles. If
you encountered a problem you asked a friend or called the local motorcycle shop mechanic for help and the problem was solved. Late last summer, as I was tuning up my antique Yamaha, the same assistance that I had experienced over four decades ago transcended time. The local Yamaha shop technicians were as excited as I was about getting a 43-year-old motorcycle in optimal running condition. There is just something about motorcycles.

The joys of owning a bike and going for a ride with wind in my hair and tunes in my ear are forever part of life and the “endless summer.” May I suggest that as you read this trip down memory lane, that you think about your own adventures, the thrill of “good vibrations,” the feel of wind in your hair, and tunes in your ear. And go riding, but please take time to sit up, slow down, and enjoy the wonders of nature as you ride by.

Dr. Doug Rokke
Summer and Winter

Brother, are you grieving?
Among the turmoil around you and not believing?
Death like the hate around you,
With your brain boiling, can you?
Ah! As your days grow older
You will come to know peace, bolder
By and by, hold Old Glory close to your heart
And yet, she will fly but never apart.
Now no matter, brother, the name:
Your summer has come but never the same.
Nor winter dawns, no nor summer sets
Your sacrifice lives on in me upon my epaulets.
It is the destiny you were born for,
It is you they will mourn for.

Jared Worley
Thoughts

On Disillusions

I’ve heard the craziest things due to my military service. For instance, after I got out, I have been asked, on more than one occasion, if I had a passport. My reply was always “yes.” To which, they often added “well, did you need that for Iraq?” The first time, I just replied “no” and did not think much of it. Later, however, I gave it more thought and I now think that is an absurd question. Like, why would I need a passport to go to war? Will the country being invaded stop and say “Hey! Let me see your passport!”? Is this how out of touch society is with the war on terror?

On Brotherhood

I met Jake in basic training; we were not that close during basic and he even admitted later that he wanted to kick my ass once. We became best friends during our time at Fort Carson; although we
were never in the same platoon, we were always in the same company. After work, we were always hanging out with one another. If you’ve ever seen how really good friends in the military act around and toward one another, then the ending of this story will be no surprise. If you haven’t, well, I can only say that personal bubbles do not exist—nor does any level of acting appropriately.

One night Jake and I decided to get dinner in town and, of course, to us eating at Chili’s was a nice place at the ripe age of nineteen. Dinner was probably good; I don’t remember what I ate or even what we talked about that night. At the end of the meal I wanted dessert, but Jake didn’t, so I ordered cheesecake because I love cheesecake and my PT scores were great (I mention that for all the vets who just thought to themselves that I am a fat body). When the server brought the plate with the single piece of cheesecake, she placed it in the middle of us, saying, “I’m sorry, did you want one or two spoons with that?” We erupted with laughter and said “No, no we’re not gay!!” The waitress
started howling with laughter as well, then added an apology, “I’m so sorry! I wasn’t sure!” Jacob and I were so close we acted more like a couple than friends. That is how close the military can bring people. That is, often, what brotherhood looks like in the infantry.

On Suicide

The suicide rate for veterans is higher than any other group. This country has lost more of its Iraq/Afghanistan veterans and service members to suicide than combat.

My dear friend and platoon medic, Steven, took his life in 2012. Steven was a husband and a father to a boy and girl. To me, Steven, always had his shit together. He had troubles in life both present and past, but I never thought they fazed him. From our many long talks on guard duty, he always appeared to me to be resilient and tough. Sure, life gets rough at times, but you move on and try not to let it hold you back. That was the Steven I knew. What I didn’t know was the inner Steven, a soul that must
have been torn and damaged, which you would never have known from his exterior manner. To hear that he took his life was shocking to say the least. How could the man I knew do this? At what point did life become too much for him to handle? I will never know.

I was already discharged for almost a year when I heard the news. Although I kept in touch with several of my brothers, I had not talked to Steven since my discharge. Here was the guy that kept us all sane during our deployment to Iraq and made sure we were always doing okay, and, just like that, he was gone.

In my experience, I’ve found it is the ones you least expect that commit suicide. One example would be Robin Williams. A man that brought cheer and happiness to so many people through his acting career and life was ultimately sadden and distressed. Another example would be first sergeant Trainer. I first met Trainer when he became the acting first sergeant after my first deployment. He was a no-
nonsense kind of guy. He was aggressive and determined to make us a solid company.

One day he was inspecting my barracks room and asked if anything was broken or damaged with the room. I replied that there was a problem with the stopper in the sink, that it was inoperable. So, he goes under the sink and shows me what’s wrong (which is surprising that a First Sergeant would take such an active role) and asked “What, did your dad not teach you how to fix stuff?” At the time, I was like, *why the fuck should I fix it, regardless of the difficulty? There are maintenance men employed to do this shit. I don’t care if it is only a $5 dollar part from Home Depot, I shouldn’t have to spend my money on it.* I don’t remember my actual reply to him, or if I said anything at all, but he said I could fix it myself or wait weeks for the maintenance men to come.

I’m not sure what I did about the problem; it probably just stayed broken. However, what I learned from that experience was that First Sergeant
Trainer was a “let’s get this shit done as fast and efficiently as possible” sort of guy. He took action and was confident in his decisions. I was also shocked to hear he took his life. I never could have guessed that this confident man would make such a decision. They tell us that suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. It is hard, essentially impossible to comprehend why these men chose the path they did. I think society puts an assumption into our heads of how people who have suicidal thoughts are supposed to look or act. When in reality, we probably passed by them every day, are friends with them, work with them, and never have a clue until it’s too late.

Lukas Smith
Another Suicide Story

I do not want to be
Another suicide story,
A remembrance of old times,
Wrapped in a flag
For other people’s glory

Put me in a box?
That is fine, I can do the time,
Just do not write me off
Because I am different from you:
A veteran, a trans person,
Still defiant through and through

Some days are harder than the rest,
My suffering and pain put me to the test -
Emotional, psychological,
Familial, physical
I deal with it every day, the same as you
The needling pressure to not
See it all through

Sometimes I want to surrender,
To yield to my breaking dreams:
To aspire, to inspire,
To be a writer,
As they all fall apart at my feet
Disremembered, disfigured,
A girl gone wrong

So do not label me
Another suicide story,
Because I am trying
To keep myself together
I am a patchwork person,
Trying not to remember
The horror of my every day
Memories and casualties
I became one…
Somewhere along the way…

Rowan Mooney
All of Us, Heroes

Being in any branch of the armed forces is an honor. Most men and women sign up to serve out of a feeling of duty to one’s country. They sign on the dotted line knowing there is a possibility they may find themselves in harm’s way, and that they may end up paying the ultimate price.

For more than a dozen years the United States has been engaged in conflicts overseas that have placed thousands of our men and women in combat environments. Thousands have lost their lives in these conflicts, and all of our armed forces have rightfully been deemed heroes by an overwhelming majority of this country. That’s not to say, however, that all of our armed forces look at themselves as heroes, or even look at each other as heroes. While another paper or article might look at how those who have served have a hard time looking at themselves as anything heroic, I want to focus this piece on those who don’t view themselves as heroes because of a military culture that tells them they
aren’t heroes. I am talking about those men and women who have served, and continue to serve, in the armed forces without being deployed overseas—specifically in a combat environment.

I believe this situation to be the same across all branches of the military; however, I can only speak with certainty about the Army, because that is the branch I have served and continue to serve in. I enlisted in the Army in October of 2010 for active duty service. I was fortunate enough to be assigned to the 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) in a support role, based out of Fort Carson in Colorado Springs, Colorado. It was an amazing four years spent traveling to fantastic locations like Key West, San Diego and Destin. Being a paratrooper meant dozens of jumps from all number of aircraft including Blackhawks, C-17’s, C-130’s and Chinook’s to name a few.

Being a part of a Special Forces unit allowed me access to training and equipment that conventional units would crave. It was a wholly satisfying
endeavor and one that was near perfect. I say near perfect, because the only thing missing was my turn in the box. When I first received my orders to a Special Forces unit I thought for sure it would mean a deployment almost right out of the gate, and many more to follow. I was excited because I wanted to do my part to help and that meant heading into combat. Unfortunately, there would be no deployment for me in all four of my active duty years. Even though I volunteered numerous times, my job ensured that I would never be chosen to accompany any of the units going. This was a problem for two reasons. The first was, I felt like I was missing out on my generation’s war and had missed my opportunity to do my part. The second was because I would be subconsciously and consciously discriminated against for not having been deployed.

The Army’s everyday uniform has a space on the right arm for the unit patch that a soldier deploys with to be displayed. The patch sits right under the American flag on the arm. It is a symbol of pride
and a reminder of the time spent with brothers at arms. It can also be an instant judgment for an empty space. Most other soldiers are quick to disqualify your service or belittle your service if they know you haven’t deployed. You aren’t held in the same regard as those that have gone downrange and don’t “really know what it’s like to be a real soldier” until you’ve left America for war. Even when I got to my reserve unit I was treated as a second-class citizen compared to those reservists who have deployed. No matter that I had spent more time as a soldier or completed more missions; the fact that I wasn’t in Iraq or Afghanistan meant I wasn’t 100% a soldier.

I don’t bring this topic up to say “poor me.” I bring this topic up because I think it is important on two levels. The first: those soldiers serving who haven’t seen combat should still keep their heads high. They are still a member of the greatest fighting force the world has ever known, and the good they do in that role should make them proud and grateful that they have the opportunity. The second: for those soldiers
who have deployed and look down on and speak ill of those soldiers who haven’t, it is time we recognize that all of our armed forces raised our right hands and swore the same oath. We all wrote that blank check to America. We all are willing to do whatever is asked of us. We are all brothers and sisters in arms. You don’t get to choose where you go and what missions you are called to execute. Don’t look down upon and denigrate the service of those who didn’t see combat. Instead be grateful that you were able to make it back home to American soil with breath still in your chest. Our enemies are already great in number with a desire and focus to tear us down; don’t make their job easier by tearing each other down first.

SPC John Kennealy, US Army
Rise

Raising is the physical, emotional, and spiritual act of lifting one to a higher level. We must do this for each other, ourselves, and most importantly, we must do this for our children.

Catherine Mobley
Contributors

Ryan Bronaugh is a third year editor for SITREP, journalist, and writer. His work has been published in numerous magazines and newspapers. Ryan grew up in Kansas and Texas, and joined the US Navy as a corpsman in 1998. He was assigned to 2nd Marine Division infantry and served 7 ½ years on active duty, completing several deployments—both combat and not. He has three kids, and a dog. He currently lives in Illinois, where he continues to work as a writer/editor and pursue a graduate degree in English at WIU.

Mike Calog attended Western Illinois University from 1965-67, dropped out and joined the Army. He served with E company, 75th Inf. (Rangers) 9th Infantry Division in the Mekong Delta. He returned to WIU in March of 1970 and graduated in 1973 with a B.S. degree in Parks and Recreation. He is a retired police officer, living on the north coast of Oregon with his wife and son. He currently is a writer of mystery novels, a sport salmon fisherman, and anything else that suits his fancy!

Luke Cummings is a twenty-nine-year-old senior at Western Illinois University-Quad Cities, where he is majoring in English. He is a veteran of the Marine Corps infantry in which he served from 2006 to 2010. As he enjoys writing both for personal reasons and to benefit others, he hopes to build a career as an author or writer in some form. When he’s not poring over the endless reading of books and writing of papers that come with English
courses, he loves spending time with his wife and two children, as well as cooking anything and everything, and desperately trying to improve his golf game.

Jerry Czarnowski is a lifelong Chicagoan and a 1996 BOG Graduate. He enlisted in the Marine Corps in August, 1965 and was Honorably Discharged in 1969. He served with India Company, 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines, 1st Marine Division, Fleet Marine Force in the Republic of Vietnam and at Marine Barracks, Clarksville Navy Base, Tennessee. He entered the Army Reserve and served as a Sergeant First Class, went to Officer Candidate School, and served in Command and Staff Positions until retirement to the Retired Reserve as a Major. Woodworking, writing, and raising a second family occupy his time.

Reverend Paul Gregerson was born January 10, 1950, and raised in Burlington, Wisconsin. He joined the Marine Corps on March 24, 1968, just before graduating high school in May. He graduated from WIU in 1995 and Garett Evangelical Theological Seminary of Evanston, Illinois in 2009. He was ordained in 2012 with the United Methodist Church, and is presently appointed to Plainfield and Almond, Wisconsin.

A native Chicagoan, Larry Harris attended Western Illinois University from 1965-1967. He was drafted in 1968 and spent 1969 in Vietnam. After the Army, he graduated from Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. He retired as an alternative
education teacher in Salt Lake City. He moved west to Colorado in 1974 and on to Utah in 1988. He has been a bartender, salesman, liquor store owner, and writing instructor. Larry has two children, Andrea and Tim. He and his wife, Tina, are retired and living in St. George, Utah where he is active in local veterans’ affairs.

Eight years after retiring from the US Air Force, Dan W. Holst enrolled in the English Graduate program at WIU. Editing the poetry submissions for last three years in SITREP: Veteran Perspectives on Combat and Peace, he is constantly amazed at the quality of submissions and the pictures they create, crafted from each author’s myriad of experiences. His love of writing and reading is situated well within the narratives that words and stories create within our lives and seeks to share that love with everyone.

John Kennealy is a United States Army Veteran double majoring in Computer Science and Political Science. He was stationed at Fort Carson, Colorado with the 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne). He is the President of the Western Illinois University Veterans Club. He is originally from Waterloo, Illinois and loves St. Louis Cardinal baseball.

After expulsion from Western Illinois University as a freshman, Dr. Stan McGahey served in the Army from 1966-69. He graduated from Infantry OCS and served in Vietnam with the 82nd Airborne Division and MAC-V. Upon readmission to WIU he earned a B.S. and M.S. in RPTA, followed by a Ph.D. in
International Tourism from Hanyang University in Seoul. He taught for 25 years at universities in Asia, the Pacific, Eastern and Western Europe, and the USA, including as a Fulbright Scholar in Macedonia. He has traveled, written, and consulted in over 100 countries and is a member of the UNWTO Panel of Experts. He is a lifetime member of VVA and an honorary Peshmerga.

Katherine Meloan is a charter member of the Tonkin Gulf Yacht Club, having served with the U.S. Navy in Vietnam, 1965-67. She earned a BA in English and Art from WIU in 1975, and is now a psychotherapist in private practice in Denver, Colorado. Her contribution, “Hangfire”, is dedicated to the doctors, nurses, and hospital corpsmen who served in the 91st Navy Evac Hospital, Chu Lai, Vietnam, from 1965 to 1975.

Jeffrey Miller, a United States Air Force Veteran, received his MA in English from Western Illinois University in 1989. Originally from LaSalle, Illinois, he relocated to South Korea in 1990, where he nurtured a love for spicy Korean food, Buddhist temples, and East Asian History. He is the author of nine books including War Remains, Ice Cream Headache, The Panama Affair, and The Roads We Must Travel. He lives in Daejeon, South Korea, with his wife and four children.

Catherine Mobley is an avid writer, warzone veteran, and former student of WIU. While she attended WIU, she studied art and took part in many of its literary events. It was here that she nurtured
her love for writing and expanded her creative writing styles. Before coming to the university, she served as a US Navy Seabee in Kuwait and Afghanistan where writing poetry and reading books served as her therapeutic outlet. Although she enjoys art in many forms, she often seeks out literary festivals, public readings, and poetry slams. She enjoys connecting with fellow authors, and encourages other ardent writers to do the same.

**Rowan Mooney** is a male-to-female transgender veteran of Operations Iraqi Freedom and New Dawn. Growing up in Illinois, Rowan graduated with a Bachelor’s Degree in literature from WIU with a focus on creative writing. Medically retired from the US Army due to her disabilities, Rowan spends her time writing short fiction, poetry, and lyrics. She enjoys listening to music & movies and participating in online transgender rights activism.

**Steven Rittenmeyer** is a Professor Emeritus of Educational Leadership, WIU, 1978-2006, Law Enforcement and Justice Administration, 1978-1995, and Educational Leadership, 1995-2006. He was an attorney practicing before Illinois State and Federal courts from 1980-2003. He received Outstanding Teacher awards from the College of Applied Sciences in 1983-1984 and the College of Education and Human Services in 2000-2001. He has a BA from University of Wisconsin, a JD from Seattle University, and a MS Ed. from WIU. He was a police officer in Iowa City, Iowa from 1969-1971. He served in the United States Marine Corps from 1966-1969, receiving a Vietnam Service
Medal with Combat Star, Presidential Unit Citation, Navy Meritorious Unit Citation, Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry, Good Conduct Medal, and an Honorable Discharge.

Dr. Doug Rokke enrolled at WIU in September 1971 immediately after two years in “Nam” as a USAF bomb-nav hardhat NCO on B52s, earning a BS in physics in 1975. He then earned his M.S. and Ph.D. in education from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). Doug, a disabled veteran, served our nation for over thirty years including Operation Desert Storm and as the Army’s DU project director, retiring as an Army Major. He also retired from the UIUC. Doug is an expert regarding the health and environmental effects of military operations and hosts “Warrior Connection” on the Progressive Radio Network (prn.fm).

Joseph Sikarin served his country as a Nuclear Machinist Mate operating and maintaining mechanical equipment in the engine room of the USS Ronald Reagan for four years. While he was aboard, the ship moved its home port from San Diego, California to Yokosuka, Japan.

Lukas Smith, a United States Army Veteran, served two tours in Iraq. After he left the service, Lukas pursued a degree in Geology from Western Illinois University and graduated with university honors in 2016. During his time at Western, Lukas was the vice president and president of the Veterans Club and Sigma Gamma Epsilon, the Earth Science
Honor Society. Lukas is currently pursuing a master’s in economic geology from New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology. Afterwards, Lukas seeks a career in the field of mineral exploration and mining.

Originally from Galesburg, Illinois, John Tolle graduated from WIU in 1976 with a degree in Mass Communications. He served in the infantry under the 1st Calvary Division from 1969 to 1970, but served veterans and veteran causes for many years. Prior to retirement, he assisted and coached veterans transitioning from military to civilian careers as a veteran’s representative in the Illinois Department of Employment Security. An avid golfer and conservationist through habitat preservation, he spends his time enjoying family, gardening, and watching the Cubs and the Bears.

Jared R. Worley is a first-year graduate student in English at WIU and is currently serving in his third year as a student editor for SITREP: Veteran Perspectives on Combat and Peace. In addition to his work for SITREP and all things related to his education, he enjoys reading writing studies theory and pedagogy and spends as much time as he can with his wife and daughter. His forthcoming thesis will focus on how veterans apply prior knowledge and experience in the writing classroom.
Contributors
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Luke Cummings
Jerry Czarnowski
Reverend Paul Gregerson
Larry Harris
Dan W. Holst
John Kennealy
Dr. Stan McGahey
Katherine Meloan
Jeffrey Miller
Ms. Catherine Mobley
Rowan Mooney
Steven Rittenmeyer
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