



WHEN WE WERE SOLDIERS

Personal Stories of Our Vietnam Veterans

September 20-November 9

DALE COLLEDGE

Corpsman Up!

I enlisted in the Navy in September of 1966 because I didn't want to go to Vietnam. I figured that in the Navy, I would be assigned a ship and be safe from having to go there. We picked three things that we might want to do after we got out of boot camp, which was called our military occupation specialty or MOA. The advisor who was helping me said I had to make a fourth choice. He suggested a Hospital Corpsman. He said it was in the medical field and assured me I wouldn't get that job. Well, you guessed it, I became a Hospital Corpsman. After boot camp I basically walked across the street from boot camp to hospital corps school. I think the training was about four months long. Then I was sent to Little Creek Naval Amphibious Base in Norfolk, Virginia. I worked there in a dispensary, tending sick and injured marines. This was a base where they kept ships and landing craft to land soldiers on the beach. I think I was there about five months. Then I was sent to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, a Marine base, where I received combat training. We crawled under barbed wire, while live rounds were fired over our heads. You learned how to keep your head and body down. In retrospect they should have sent me to combat training before they sent me to Vietnam. Then sometime in early 1968 I was sent to Camp Pendleton, a Marine base on the California coast. I was there for a year and a half. I worked at dispensary there too, tending marines who were sick or injured.

One time I went on maneuvers with the marines near San Diego. That was a change of pace, but it turned out I couldn't stand the sound of water lapping against the ship we were in, and it made me feel seasick. When the ship went out to sea, I had no seasickness. I was fine. In the beginning of August, 1969 I received my orders to go to Vietnam. I would spend my last year of duty in Vietnam. After some leave, I reported to San Francisco and flew by passenger aircraft to Hawaii. The jet refueled, and then went on to Midway Island and refueled again. We then flew to Okinawa. I went from Okinawa to Vietnam on August 22, 1969. I was finally in Vietnam, where I didn't want to be. I'm sure there were other soldiers around me who felt the same way. I reported to a Marine Battalion, 7th Marines. The unit was near Da Nang and Quang Nam Province. I got settled into my unit. A few days after I arrived our battalion was ordered to a nearby mountain to look for the enemy. They flew us by helicopter to the top of the mountain and as soon as we landed we swept downward. In no time it started getting dark. We camped near where some jungle paths crossed one another. The war became very real for me in that moment, when they posted guards at the crossing. But nothing happened that night and we swept down the rest of the mountain the next morning. We marched back to base single file. One of the marines well behind me was swinging his arms and by mistake pulled the pin on one of his grenades. He didn't have time to react and it exploded and killed him. He died instantly so there was nothing I could do.

Over the next month we marched out on patrol frequently, whether by whole battalion or with a small company. In about six weeks of being in Vietnam, we never saw any action. All I can say is that when you're out in the field for a week, a can of soda tastes really good when you get



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back to base. On Saturday, the 4th of October, 1969, I wrote a letter to my mother and put it in the mail. I told her I was talking to a Priest occasionally about getting a particular marine's information so someone back home could write to him. My mother could arrange it. After mailing the letter, I went out on patrol with a squad of twelve or fifteen marines. I was in the middle of the column. Most people think of Vietnam as an endless maze of rice paddies, and we passed through a few of those that day. The lieutenant in charge stopped us near a tree-line because he must have heard something up ahead. He took two marines and went out to the right of the tree-line, and the rest of us stood waiting. After a few moments I heard at least two shots, but maybe there were more. The next thing I heard was, "Corpsman Up!" I didn't know what "Corpsman Up" meant. Was I supposed to stop at the head of the squad and wait for orders? Or should I go out and find the wounded marine and help him?

Recently, I looked this term up on the internet. From what I read, it means it is time for the corpsman to go in to action, to help his fellow marines without regard to his own safety. And that's what I did that day without thinking about it. I ran out into the open and found one of the marines wounded in the throat. I was a rookie so this was the first time I had seen this type of an injury. He appeared to be dead, but I kept thinking, "I have to do something." I started thinking of a tracheotomy, but I didn't have anything to do it with, like a piece of a pen to put in his throat. I was on my hands and knees with my back turned toward where the sniper or enemy soldier had probably fired from. I left myself exposed for too long. A bullet slammed into my buttocks and went through my colon and exited my left side near my left kidney, destroying it. I rolled over onto my back. Almost immediately the greatest pain I have ever felt began to sear through the lower half of my body. I said out loud "God, just let me die and I won't be in pain anymore." Then shock set in and some of the pain went away, which is a good thing. I really believe that the enemy soldier who shot me was a sniper. His aim was extremely accurate!

I only remember some of what happened after that. One of the marines we called Frog came over as I was lying on the ground. "We'll get him," he said. I was airlifted by chopper to the medical center in Da Nang. I remember lying on a stretcher and seeing a crewman in the helicopter looking down at me and he had his face shield down. I felt like I was looking at myself—because of the reflection—with a wide angle lens. It looked very surreal. Then I was in the hospital. I must have regained consciousness because I asked someone to please operate because I was feeling some pain again. I don't know how long that first surgery took. The medical records that I have indicate they used at least thirteen units of blood. That's a lot of blood. They put me back together the best they could. The next thing I know I'm waking up at night time in the ward in a hospital bed. Now, when I look back on it, this must have been a week later, but at the time one week seemed like one night. Anyway, I woke up and I said something to the nurse and she said, "Go to sleep." But for some reason I put my hands at my sides and there was blood in the bed. I hollered to her, "There's blood in my bed!" Why did I wake up? Did my body sense something was wrong?



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They quickly opened me up for the second time. Apparently an artery had not been tied off properly and they fixed that and the bleeding stopped. One week later I was medevaced to the Yokosuka Naval Hospital in Japan. First I was put on a regular ward, but whoever put me in bed—nurse or corpsman—came back and checked on me later. They probably saw that I had hemorrhaged again and was white as a sheet. I guess I was out cold. I was rushed to surgery and they had to go back in to look for whatever was bleeding. I woke up in ICU again. That was the third time they had opened me up in two weeks. It was a string of miracles that kept me alive. I woke up in ICU, but I'd survived the operation. A while later I had my fourth surgery, but this one wasn't life threatening. They had to remove my gallbladder, which had become gangrenous. I attribute this to the operations I had in the field, which were not done in the most sterile of conditions. I spent another two weeks in ICU. You can imagine I was sick of being operated on by that time.

Pretty soon I started getting mail from my uncle. He was trying to cheer me up but I wasn't in the best of moods. I was pretty depressed. The doctors and nurses at Yokosuka urged me to read my mail, but I didn't feel like it. I guess my church back home, after my mother told them what had happened to me, had set up prayer vigils. Joan, my wife now, but who wasn't then, told me later on that she believes the prayer also helped keep me alive. I have always looked at it as a miracle that I survived. I didn't really perk up until I returned home. I think it was somewhere around the 20th of November, just before Thanksgiving, that I was flown back via the Alaskan route—because it was shorter—on a C-130. I was still on some kind of stretcher. There weren't many people aboard the aircraft, but that's all I remember. I do know that in six weeks since I'd been shot I went from 125 pounds down to one 100 pounds. I was brought to the Philadelphia Naval Hospital. My mother came down to the hospital to visit me. She didn't like elevators, but she came up on one to see me anyway. I think our Pastor being with her helped. My mother was divorced so it was hard for her. She received the telegrams, but went to a friend's home to open them. She didn't want to be alone when she read them. The telegrams were like a see-saw for her, because my condition would go up, then down, then up, then down. In the Naval Hospital in Japan, I would take my pain pills every six hours. When I got to the hospital in Philadelphia I received pain pills on request. I could go maybe six hours and then I'd need another dose, but when I got around familiar people, my mother, the pain I was feeling went away. It was really the power of family that aided in my recovery.

About three years ago I told our Pastor at my church about everything that happened to me over there. Last year she wanted to do a sermon on miracles and asked if I would be willing to speak. There were two other women who would also tell their story. So one Sunday, after the two women had their turn, I got up and told the Congregation my story in some detail. I hadn't mentioned to anyone in Church the specifics of my severe combat wounds, so many people were surprised when they found out. After I spoke, an older man named Gene, who had belonged to the church a long time, got up and told the Congregation his feelings when he heard in 1968 that I had been wounded. He told people I would be all right. "I've got a feeling



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that Dale is not going to die, he will come home.” He was sure of it! And he was right. You don’t know what is inside a man unless you see his scars. Even today, Vietnam is still on my mind. I’ve had to deal with pain from hepatitis C—probably from the blood transfusions I received during my multiple surgeries—and not being able to have children. On the other hand, it doesn’t bother me to talk about my experiences in Vietnam. Members of my church remember the prayer vigil they held for me on October 5th, 1969. After the regular Sunday service they left the church open all day so people could come and pray for me whenever they wanted to. Recently I said that, “God answered every prayer that was prayed that day.” That is why I came home—answered prayers and a few little miracles along the way.