

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/1

Paul Ziek
Napalm

I

MY FATHER NEVER SPOKE OF VIETNAM. There were no movie-like moments where he would tell stories around the dinner table or venture down to the VFW to recount his tour of duty. The only remnant was a dusty olive-green jungle fatigue that hung in the back of my parent's closet which contained his name, sergeant stripes and division insignia. When asked why he never talked about his time in the country, he would simply say "there is no reason to talk about it." To say we knew very little about this part of my father's life was an understatement. Fortunately, this all changed one summer in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

II

A few years after college, I took a job with a major media organization helping move a book distribution center in Grand Rapids, which was a thousand miles from my home in New Jersey. In the first few months, there were only a few of us working on the project and it became clear we needed help. After struggling to find experienced and trustworthy individuals, I asked my father for advice. Without hesitation, he suggested Ed, a fellow Vietnam Veteran. Although my father did not explain why, he told me there would be no one better to help with the project. All he said was "you can trust Ed." Hearing this was strange considering up until this point, I wasn't aware they were still in contact. To this day, I couldn't say why I didn't need to hear more but I didn't. After a brief phone call, Ed agreed to leave his home in Seattle and meet the team in Grand Rapids.

The move was only across town, but the scope of the project was enormous. We were moving thousands of products to the new location while making sure the old facility maintained normal operations during the day. We were also adopting and implementing up-to-date systems and technologies which required extensive employee training. Although we did our best to limit the impact, not all the employees took to the changes. There was often upheaval which manifested itself in arguments between the project team and employees. True to my father's word, Ed supported the project team at every turn, especially me, since I was often the focus of employee anger. Every time I encountered a verbal assault or physical threat, Ed was standing right behind me making sure all went well.

Since the project had a finite timeline and the project team were all transplants, we worked 6 days of the week, 14 to 16 hours a day. Days became repetitive: wake before the sun rise, spend all day at the distribution center, and then venture back to the hotel well after sunset. The only respite for the project team was dinner, which typically happened at the Big Old Building. The B.O.B., as it was also known, was across the street from the hotel and with a brewery, pizzeria, and venues for live music and stand-up comedy, it had something for everyone. But mostly, it was far enough away from the project that discussions would include anything but automated guided vehicles, inventory control systems, pallet jacks, employee training schedules or the latest dust-up. After a couple of

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weeks, Ed began telling stories about Vietnam, which I welcomed because I certainly did not know any. Of the many stories Ed shared, the “napalm story” as Ed called it, was especially noteworthy because it included my father.

Ed and my father both joined Bravo Company in the 9th Infantry Division on the same day in 1968. Ed was an infantryman and sniper, and my father was an Artillery Forward Observer. The 9th Infantry Division was based south of Saigon and charged with the defense of the Mekong River Delta. One morning on patrol, the company encountered a small enemy force on the banks of the river. After a short fire fight, the enemy retreated. My father called in an air strike in the direction the force fled. However, the strike was off the mark and too close to the company’s location. Immediately after the napalm canisters hit the ground, fire and smoke filled the air. As the temperature began to rise, Ed noticed men rolling on the ground trying to extinguish themselves. Before the jets could make another pass, with his uniform on fire and helmet smoldering, my father stepped out of the ridgeline and began repeating to the FAC “checkfire ... checkfire checkfire.” The message was received, the jets disengaged and flew overhead without dropping another bomb. The flames coming from my father were eventually put out by one of his fellow company men. Soon thereafter, medical helicopters arrived to evacuate 10 men (including my father), all with severe burns. Ed said to me, “that’s the day your father saved our asses”, and it was also the reason he was awarded his first of two purple hearts.

A few weeks later, I had a chance to talk to my father about Ed’s story. He didn’t want to discuss or expand on the story. What was most interesting is that his response to my questions were not the typical “there is nothing to talk about”, instead, he told me “I just did my job.” That moment had a profound impact on me and how I saw my father until the day he died. True, it was only one story, about one day, told to me by one person. However, it was a glimpse into a previously hidden world.

III

I never did get to learn of the hidden world of my father beyond this one story. I am certainly fortunate to have met Ed though. Yet not everyone gets to meet an Ed. There are thousands of untold stories and thousands of children of Vietnam Veterans that must begin to unearth the hidden world. With several sources, such as DAV and Red Warriors, estimating that 390 Vietnam Veterans die each day the time is now. So, this is a call to action: we need to have a concerted effort to get more stories written, heard, and viewed; it is time to give families and friends the opportunity I had during that summer in Grand Rapids.