

# Looking Back: My Life as a Disabled Combat Vietnam Veteran

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**Abstract:** This is my personal account and perspective as a disabled Vietnam combat veteran. My intent is to provide insights into how I handled the unique challenges of (1) coming home to an intolerant welcome of antiwar protests and marches, (2) fighting in a war with no ideological basis and no final resolution of conflict, and (3) left with little to no support in coping with the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder including isolation, rage, survival guilt, sleep disturbances, nightmares, and “flashbacks.”

**Keywords:** Vietnam; PTSD; survival guilt; self-medication; camaraderie; spousal support; resilience; memorial

## Introduction

It was a dying request by Captain John Miller, played by Tom Hanks in the movie, *Saving Private Ryan*. “James...earn this. Earn it,” he said to Private James Ryan (played by Matt Damon), a soldier in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. In the movie, Captain Miller and his squad of men had fought halfway across France to find Private Ryan, the last surviving brother of four servicemen. In the movie, they accomplished their mission.

*“James...earn this. Earn it.”*

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I served in Vietnam as the 3rd platoon leader, 1st Lieutenant, “C” Company, 2nd Battalion of the 506th Regiment (Currahees), 101st Airborne Division. In the summer and fall of 1970 my regiment continuously locked horns with the 324<sup>th</sup> B Division of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). Elements of the 101<sup>st</sup> Division, including my regiment, had engaged the NVA 324<sup>th</sup> B Division that summer in the Battle of Fire Support Base Ripcord. Fire Base Ripcord was located about 30 kilometers northwest from the coastal city of Hue (Nolan, 2000). It was a disparate battle in the midst of a devastating war – with both sides taking heavy casualties. It was now late October, and the NVA had mended their wounds, and they were looking for payback.

Payback came in that last week of October when the monsoons arrived early and because of the bad weather we found ourselves in a compromised position. Like wolves after their prey, elements of the 324<sup>th</sup> NVA Division began to circle us – and

NVA sapper units were busy planting land mines throughout our area. On October 31, we were attempting to secure an area, hoping the weather would break so we could be extracted by helicopters, and that is when I stepped on the landmine.

Unlike World War II (WWII) and the Korean War, the men I fought with were very young, 18-20 years. In fact, the Vietnam War has been labeled America's first teenage war (Williams, 1979). But like WWII and the Korean War, they all came from different backgrounds, cultures and points on the map. On that day, most of us were sick, running fevers because of the weather – and all of us were physically, mentally, and psychologically exhausted. As I lay retching and withering with pain from the traumatic amputation of my lower leg, the men of the 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon, led by Sergeant Chuck Reilly, stood firm and secured the area. Their heroic action allowed me to be medically evacuated (MEDEVAC) by helicopter – removed from Harm's Way – leaving my men. No, abandoning them. Thus began my “survival guilt” that I have carried with me until recently (Lifton, 1973).

My Dust Off (helicopter) took me to the 18<sup>th</sup> Surgical Hospital in Quang Tri, where they removed remnants of my right lower leg – which now ended 6 inches below my knee. But I was alive and in the postoperative haze of anesthesia, I thought about the last few days – the men I fought with, the men who stood with me, the men who gave me another chance in life. I owed them, I thought. I owe them.

*“...earn this. Earn it.”*

## Alcohol, Sleep, Pain, and Rage

I know the sleepless nights and I know the nightmares – it comes with war, any war (Schnurr, Lunney, Sengupta, & Waelde, 2003; Weiss et al., 1992). With sleep, my problem was falling asleep. Some of us turned to alcohol to “relax” and dull the senses in order to enter that wonderful state of unconsciousness in which all sensory activity is suspended – sleep (Kormos, 1978). My “overuse” of alcohol in the evenings coincided not only with its ability to dull the senses for sleep, but also to blunt the pain due to the immediate post-surgical healing of my stump (amputated leg) and initial prosthetic fitting. However, in time, I was to realize that stump pain and discomfort would be a daily, lifetime reality due to ill-fitting prosthetics and constant skin complications which included scar tissue abscesses and skin breakdowns.

The alcohol “habit” started five days following my surgery in the 18<sup>th</sup> Surgical Hospital in Vietnam when I was flown into Fitzsimmons Army Hospital in Denver. Whether it was the Vietnam “stigma” of veterans having drug habits (which the majority of us did not) I do not know, but pain medications for us were extremely restricted. I was told “no more morphine and any such stuff” by the head nurse as I was wheeled on a gurney to my bed, situated in a ward with about 40 other beds, each filled with wounded soldiers. “And another thing, Lieutenant, there is no rank in my ward. You are all just patients, MY Patients.”

Liquor of any kind, of course, was prohibited in the hospital. But my ward had already established the means and methods of circumventing this obstacle with an intricate scheme involving the family and friends who visited. It suffices to say that when the lights went out in the ward at 2200 hours (10 pm), the bottles came out.

“In vino veritas,” which is Latin for “in wine there is truth.” The alcohol uncorked the rage in us, and we shared this rage in our whispered and hushed conversations in the darkened hospital ward. We fought in a hostile war, where the Vietnamese people hated us and wanted us to leave. We came home to a hostile country, where Americans were either suspicious of us or scorned us for killing to survive. For the latter, for killing to survive, we

were called “psychopathic killers” (DeFazio, 1978).

The map I carried in Vietnam was a collage of blues, greens, and browns that colored the topography we patrolled. It was a vague map with no real landmarks, just brown contour lines signifying hills, valleys, and ridgelines. Wide and narrow blue lines represented rivers and streams. And green, lots of green for thick, double to triple canopy jungle with vines that reached and grabbed and tore at our equipment, clothing, and skin. The map accentuated the vagueness of the war. There was no real objective, no hill to take and hold, no road to secure. There was nothing “secure” in Vietnam. One day we would be flown (air-mobile combat assault) into a hill marked #650 on the map, then work our way down into a valley and then scale a ridgeline that led to another hill, marked with another number. On that hill we might set up a night defensive position, and if there were trails nearby, trails that showed signs of enemy use, we would move into an ambush position. The next day we would patrol another ridgeline then cautiously descend into another valley only to climb another hill marked #541 or #496. The military word for this was “search and destroy.” The mission, the purpose of this war? Body count. This was the first and only American war where the mission was not defeating a country, but killing as many “Vietnamese combatants” as possible (DeFazio, 1978).

Towards midnight, in the darkened ward at Fitzsimmons Hospital, the alcohol-induced stupor would allow me to sleep and escape the pain and rage. And so it went for years. During the day, sober, I was able to focus on my work, engaging its challenges and “gutting out” the pain until evening – when sunset issued in the first drink. But the booze was taking its toll, on my marriage, on my family, on my professional endeavors. I looked into the mirror one day and didn't like what I saw. I was not living up to my promise. So I just stopped drinking, cold turkey – never to touch it again. I owed the men of the 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon, my wife, and my family. I owed them.

“...earn this. Earn it.”

## Bringing the War Home

The enemy soldier was charging me, his bayonet thrusting toward my chest. I had just expended all

the rounds in the magazine of my M16 rifle and had no time to reload. A swift upward thrust with the butt of my rifle deflected the bayonet and I used the enemy soldier's forward momentum to spin him to the back of my foxhole. I had to crush his throat now with my hands because I knew behind him more enemy soldiers were advancing. I wrapped my fingers around his throat and pressed my thumbs hard against his trachea to crush it.

Screams from a familiar voice and the sensation of someone pounding on my chest woke me from the nightmare. "Babe, stop it, stop it, you are choking me," my wife, Carol Sue, yelled as she fought to break the grip that I had around her neck.

Our families, especially our wives, bore the brunt of our psychological scars. Carol Sue and I had married a few months before my leaving for Vietnam. In coming home to her I experienced what most of my Vietnam veterans did not – gratitude and relief of me returning, patience with my odd behaviors and most importantly, love and all the wonderful attributes that go with that word.

Because of me, Carol Sue is also a Vietnam veteran. She knows our broken, restless sleep – she has shaken me many times out of nightmares as I yelled out in agitation. She has held me as I wept when on a few occasions, very few, I opened up and told her of the unbelievable acts of bravery I repeatedly witnessed members of my platoon display – yet they were for naught, for nothing. She knows of our bouts of cold and seemingly uncaring attitudes when empathy towards friends and family was needed but not given because we learned in Vietnam not to care – we couldn't care and survive. She and our son experience my sudden, frightening outbursts of anger when a seemingly innocent, innocuous event triggered flashbacks to a moment in time where the ugliness of warfare ruled the day.

If I could, I would turn back time and have waiting for each one of my veterans a spouse like Carol Sue. A companion that would have helped them vanquish the ghosts that haunted their minds – and they would have fared better in their life's journey (Figley & Leventman, 1990).

*"...earn this. Earn it."*

## Closure

It was May of 2013. I was scanning my groceries in the self-service check out area at McConnell Air Force Base commissary and a man about my age approached me.

"I heard you were with the One Hundred and First Division in Nam," he said with a smile. The man motioned with his head toward John, one of the clerks, and said, "John just told me." John was a Vietnam Veteran with whom I had spoken to on occasion. John smiled and yelled over to me, "I told you I knew someone you should meet."

"I'm Tom Muskus, I served with the Hundred and First." He continued to smile, and stuck out his hand.

I took his hand and firmly shook it. "Ken Pitetti.....So who were you with?" There were a lot of Vietnam Veterans I have met that "talked the talk" but when pressed, served as an "attached" support element (i.e., not infantry) and never saw a bullet fired in anger.

"First platoon, Bravo Company, Second of the Five-O-Sixth. And who were you with?" Tom released my hand, and waited for my response.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 506<sup>th</sup> Regiment, the Currahee "Stand Alone" Regiment, has a storied and proud history beginning from its creation during World War II prior to the European invasion in 1944. It earned its honorable reputation in the bloody battles of D-Day, Operation Market Garden, and The Battle of the Bulge. In Vietnam it was recognized for its combat distinction in the Tet Offensive, Battle of Hamburger Hill, and Battle of Fire Base Ripcord. And it continued to serve, as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 506<sup>th</sup> Regiment, with the same Esprit De Corps in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

"I was the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon leader, Charlie Company, Second of the Five-O-Sixth," I answered.

"Well, LT, when were you there?"

"LT" was short for lieutenant, a common way enlisted men and non-commissioned officers addressed us. "Summer and Fall of 1970," I

answered. I was still hesitant about getting too friendly.

“Pitetti, that was your last name, right?”

I nodded.

“Yeah, I think I remember some talk about losing another LT from Charlie Company when I was on Fire Base Rakkasan. I don't remember the name exactly, but I remember it was Italian. That could have been you.”

In Vietnam there were three platoons with each company, with about 25-30 per platoon. The platoons, however, performed constant combat patrols independent of the other platoons. Platoons came together for two reasons, one good, one bad: when providing perimeter defense for a fire base or organizing for an assault on a fortified enemy position. On a fire base there was one hot meal a day, a “rigged up” 50 gallon barrel for a shower, quiet time to write letters back home, and relatively secure nights in a bunker. If it was for an assault, and if the NVA were waiting, an assault meant casualties – on both sides. Because of the usual platoon size patrols, it was not uncommon for members of the same company, but serving in different platoons, not to know one another. The fact that he knew about Fire Base Rakkasan, one of the many temporary military encampments used throughout the Vietnam War to provide artillery fire support for infantry platoons and companies in the field, was a positive sign to continue the conversation.

I had just finished working out at the Base gymnasium so I was wearing shorts and my prosthetic leg was obvious. Tom looked at it, “is that where you got that?”

“Yes, landmine.”

Tom nodded his head in an understanding manner. “They were nasty buggers, we lost a lot of guys to those.”

I stood silent, not knowing what next to say. Here we were, two combat veterans who shared the same war, patrolled and fought on the same ground, for the same unit, standing silent. If we were from

another era, from another war, we would have gleefully hugged one another, bonded as kin by the same baptismal waters of being part of a war that was fought for a clear purpose, and won. But the Vietnam War was different, and I had left behind members of that company on the battlefield that day in October. Except for a few letters I had exchanged with my medic, Specialist Joe O'Donnell, I had not made any contact with any of the men in my platoon or company since returning. This was a common reality with Vietnam veterans, for we were “often too frightened to attempt to find out what happened to those left behind” (Howard, 1976).

Tom pulled out his wallet and handed me his card. “I am a representative of our Regiment, Ken. We have a web address on the internet specifically for those of us who served in the Charlie Company during that time. If you are interested you can join us. My e-mail is on the card.”

I took it, and without looking at it, slipped it in my pocket. He noticed the quick, almost dismissing manner I handled his card. His eyes locked into mine.

“At our reunions, some of the platoons are without their Lieutenants because a lot of them were killed over there. I know you are well aware of the casualty rates of platoon leaders,” Tom said pointedly. “Your platoon might be without a platoon leader and it would be important for those men to have one again.”

That struck an emotional chord. I broke off from his stare and looked at the floor.

“Let me know if you are interested, Ken,” he said as he began walking toward the exit door. “It was good meeting you,” and continued walking toward the exit doors of the commissary, but stopped and turned back to me. “Currahee, brother,” he called out, then disappeared through the doors.

Currahee, Cherokee for “stand alone,” was a nickname given to the 506<sup>th</sup> Regiment in its early beginnings in WWII at Camp Toccoa, Georgia. It was our regimental motto, and we officers called out “Currahee” when we returned a salute from our men – a tradition that continues today. I had not had that word spoken to me for 43 years.



That night, as I was finishing up final preparations for a lecture I was giving the next day, I took out Tom's card and stared at it. Carol Sue happened to walk into my office and looking over my shoulder, pointed at Tom's card, which had the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Screaming Eagle insignia on it, and asked, "What is that about?"

I told her. She thought for a moment, then quietly, but sternly said, "You have no choice – it is time....it is time."

I e-mailed Tom, found out the contact numbers, and "re-joined" Charlie Company/2<sup>nd</sup> Bn/506<sup>th</sup> Inf/101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division that night. It was an amazing web site that they had developed, and most important, they had a listing by platoon of many of the members of Charlie Company with their contact number. It had been over 43 years, but I looked through the list of the 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon hoping a name might be familiar. I stopped at Dave Simonds, and there was his e-mail. Carol Sue was right, I had no choice, I had to find out...it was time.

My first contact with Dave was introductory – who I was, and did he serve at the same time I did.

His response came that night. Yes, he was in the 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon at that time.

It was time. I clicked "Reply."

"Dave:

*I was there from August to Nov 1 (stepped on a landmine) – were you with the 3rd platoon on that day? Background. I get up every day thinking about that day – thinking that I somehow led the 3rd platoon into a mess, then got wounded, extracted, and left you guys there to deal with it. I have returned and been successful in my life – but I still think of that day – every day."*

He is probably at work, busy, I thought. Probably won't get back to me until, well, maybe tomorrow. But the reply came back within minutes.

"Lt:

*A lot happened that day, but it was the day I remember you made us men. After that day I knew I*

*was going to make it, I went on to get my SGT. stripes and led by example which I learned that day from you. I have also talked (which I do very seldom) with my friends and family about that day and how it made me survive. But don't think you let us down or left us in a mess. You have carried that around for 40 years and I hope this will help you."*

### **Epilogue: Lt. Pitetti Returned to Charlie Company**

There was a reunion of my company at Ft. Campbell, Kentucky, in March of 2014. I have stayed away from all types of "Vietnam Veterans Reunions" for reasons discussed above. But in our e-mail that day, Dave Simonds gave me no choice. He said that Charlie Company needed to get LT Pitetti back with them again.

For three days I was with them. We hugged one another and yes, shed tears, and kept saying, "Welcome home, brother." I told them that I returned home and complemented my Bachelor's Degree in Biology with a Masters in Biology and followed that with a Doctorate in Human Physiology. I told them that I am now a professor at Wichita State University in the College of Health Sciences and that I teach and contribute to the professional development of physical therapists, physician assistants, nurses, medical laboratory technicians, and speech therapists. I told them how my research has contributed to improving the physical work capacities of persons with physical and mental disabilities. I introduced them and their wives to Carol Sue and told them of our son who went to the United States Air Force Academy. I told them all this because I wanted them to know that I didn't waste it. And everything I have accomplished since Vietnam was because on that day in October, 1970, they stood and they fought – and allowed me to live.

### **Last Mission**

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., The Wall, is hallowed, haunted ground – an emotional walk. When discussing the location and theme of our next C Co reunion, The Wall was brought up. There was a moment of hesitating silence, then one member stood and told his story. He had driven 6 ½ hours from his home, alone. Walked to the entrance, stopped, turned around and drove 6 ½ hours back home. Others in the room

said they had similar experiences. Alone, they could not get to those panels that held the names of our fallen brothers. In April of 2015, the men of Charlie Company will go to The Wall – together.

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