

Homecoming

(Fundamentals of Inertial Navigation)

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“An inertial navigation system knows where it is, because it knows where it isn’t.”¹

I have been thinking about all of the stories that my family has collected about me. I can see a sort of metamorphosis, an evolution as it were, of tall tales and recollections retold until all resemblance of the actual events have been lost in the telling. There are so many they fill my family’s collection of mental snapshots. They can sit for hours and relate tales of my misdeeds. I had a good time in high school, and I had a best friend, Andy.

Our parents, Andy’s and mine, considered our graduation from high school a highly unlikely event. Andy and I were like “two peas in a pod.” Whatever trouble I got into Andy was surely to be blamed, and vice versa. Our parents had long before this day given up all hope of establishing some semblance of control over our nighttime activities. We had reduced our parents to the simple plea, “please do not bring home any babies.” It was about this time, also, that they began to focus on our chances of graduation. Most parents worried about what their kids would do after they got out of high school. Our parents doubted if we would. Sometimes, being loving sons that we were, Andy and I would leave for the evening promising our parents that we would be back by graduation. They prayed for divine intervention.

Andy and I loved motorcycles, but we had very little money for them. Andy and I had a hard time holding down jobs. My money was his and his money was mine. That is the way we worked things out. We were best friends in the true sense of the word. Life was good.

We could only afford one motorcycle between the two of us. So we rode two up. The louder the faster. Our first bike was a Bultaco, then we stepped up to a Husqvarna. Our very first Harley was a FLH Shovelhead. It was a high-maintenance scooter. Andy and I loved it.

My favorite trips were the ones we took on early Saturday mornings. Andy and I would hop on our old Hog and head south on Sepulveda Boulevard. “Oxnard for breakfast!” would be our rallying cry. When we hit Ventura Boulevard we would take it east, through the Cahuenga Pass, dropping down past the Hollywood Bowl into Hollywood via Highland Avenue. Up and down the streets of Hollywood we would ride checking out the human flotsam from the night before. After we had pissed off enough people with our noise, we would head west on Sunset. We could always smell the Pacific before we came upon her. If I had one high school experience to relive it would be the times Andy and I spent on that old Hog as we cruised north on PCH (Pacific Coast Highway) towards Oxnard. They are my most poignant memories. I cannot smell the ocean and feel the caress of her breezes without thinking about those days.

My first car was an AMC Hornet. Actually, it wasn’t my first car in the true

sense of the word. Andy and I owned the car together. His younger brother, Sean, took a screwdriver to the trunk lid and carved for us a most realistic phallic like symbol. This artsy trait was to be of great help to Sean in future years as he became one of the premier jail house tattoo artists in Folsom Prison. Several coats of primer and paint did not diminish its luster. We did not have money for masking tape, so the windows near the body took on a kind of tinted-glass look. Sean's artwork was not to be covered up. One look at our paint job and at Sean's handiwork, and Andy's dad dubbed our car the "horny Hornet." Andy's dad was a camera man for ABC. We didn't see him for days at a time, which I think made him feel better about us.

It was not a pretty car. It didn't go fast. It was an ecological disaster area, but who cared back then? It consumed oil at an alarming rate. The horny Hornet changed our lives. It allowed us to take the female of the species out to the movies without asking them if we could borrow their parents' car. Our parents, of course, knew better than to loan us any vehicle that they valued. The horny Hornet allowed us the freedom to go to the drive-in movies without worrying if someone was going to go through the vehicle the next day and discover some sort of undergarment that did not belong to a young male.

Our parents were taking bets on just how close to graduation we would get before our motorcycle, or an angry father, or whomever we messed with in Hollywood, killed us. We surprised a lot of people.

Andy and I grew up never questioning whether or not we would go into the military. If it was good enough for our dads then it was good enough for us. It is hard to believe we were that ignorant.

Andy and I graduated from high school, barely. Uncle Sam was waiting for us.

Andy and I joined the Marines. We did not wait for the draft. We did not go in on the buddy plan. Andy was bilingual, and they offered him an opportunity to go into Naval Intelligence. It was a job that virtually guaranteed that he would not go to Vietnam. I was in the grunts. Infantry. My military occupational specialty was 0311. Basic ground pounder, one each. I was a "Hollywood Marine," that is, I went to boot camp in San Diego. After boot camp I was sent to Camp Pendleton for further training. After all of that training, I received a special request from my government to participate in the Southeast Asian war games, expenses paid by Uncle Sam.

**We are the unwilling
Led by the unqualified
Doing the unnecessary
For the ungrateful²**

I was given the standard thirty days leave before having to report for deployment to the Republic of South Vietnam. I kind of got engaged to a young lady whom I lusted over for most of my senior year. I gave her my Marine Corps ring and she gave me sex. It was a relationship that I did not take seriously enough. The memories of those days would come to haunt me. Her name was Sandy.

"One, two, three, four.

What are we fighting for?
 Don't tell me cause I don't give a damn,
 Next stop is Vietnam.
 It's five, six, seven, eight.
 . . . Open up those pearly gates."³

On the fateful departure date my family, girlfriend and I headed off for Norton Air Force Base. The departure was brutal for my family, and up until very recently, I thought one of the toughest things that I have ever had to do. I can tell you now, sending a son off to a combat zone is much tougher than having to do it yourself. It is only now that I can really appreciate why my dad cried when I walked out to that 707.

After many stops we arrived at Tan Son Nhut airport, Saigon, Republic of South Vietnam. As soon as they opened up the door on that big bird, every pore in my body broke out in a sweat. We were gathered up in large trucks...

"A cherry marine is not to be trusted. He is new in-country and he can get you killed . . ."

I was standing outside having a smoke when this very salty-looking marine walked up to me and looked me over. I was an interior lineman on my high school football team. He asked me if I was a machine gunner. I said that I wasn't. "Well, you are one now," he said, as he led me towards a small tent.

Dear Mom, Dad, Barry and Jenny,

I am doing okay. The flight was long and boring. I have been assigned to an infantry company . . . Please do not worry about me. All we do around here is guard bridges and the base. Give my love to all.

Ben

I had been issued my M-60 machine gun and 782 gear in Dong Ha. Then they sent me to war. Con Thien was situated just south of the seventeenth parallel, the artificial dividing line between North and South Vietnam. This line was called the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), the "Z" or, as we often referred to it, the Dead Marine Zone. It was designated as a "free fire" zone. A free fire zone is a place where there are no rules of engagement; if something moves, you shoot it, if you think it moved, you shoot it and if you want to be sure that it doesn't move (just for shits and grins), you shell the hell out of it.

Hi Larry,

Feelin' the draft yet? Ha, ha, ba. Hope you get that deferral that you are trying for. Stay out of the 'Nam. Life is barbaric here . . .

Do not share this letter. . .stay the heck away from here.

Ben

I arrived with the evening mail. Inside the helicopter with me were three other

marines. They looked at my brand new boots, utilities and sea bag. They looked at my gun. "Hey, cherry," One yelled, "You know how to use that thing?" nodding his head at my M-60. "You the new gunner?" he shouted without waiting for my reply to his first question. "Gunnery don't last too long around here," he pointed out to me, and then he began to laugh. I could barely hear him over the noise of the helicopter, however his meaning was clear and the other two guys joined him at my discomfort.

Hi Andy,

I am glad that you are not here. Stay away from here if at all possible. This place really sucks. I live in a bunker with a roof covered with rotting sandbags. Everything is rotting over here. Including me. They have made me a machine gunner. Don't laugh, I know, it is my worst nightmare come true . . .

We live like animals here. I cannot stress how bad it is in the 'Nam. They have a saying here, it is, "as bad as a day in the 'Nam." If you are having one of those days then you are truly fucked up.

Say hi to your mom and dad for me. Have you heard from Larry lately? I wrote him but haven't heard back from him.

Peace.

To Susan on the West Coast waiting,
From Andy in Vietnam fighting.
To Susan on the West Coast waiting,
From Andy in Vietnam fighting.
Oh Susan I know you love me so,
But I'd love to hear it in my ear.
I would have been there, working at
my craft,
Had it not been for the draft.
So dry up your tears,
And feel no fears,
You're here with me,
Like I'm there with you. . . ⁴

My platoon has been relieved at Con Thien. We rotated back to Dong Ha combat base. I can't decide what is worse. Dong Ha does not have the constant shelling that Con Thien did, however, we are out in the bush for weeks at a time. Resupply is by helicopter. Sometimes they don't even touch the ground. Mail, ammunition, and C-rats come tumbling out the door. The LZs are usually cold. The only time the choppers will come into a hot LZ is when we have wounded personnel. No sacrifice is too great to get our wounded buddies out of there. Life is simple. Survival. In a world filled with exciting technology we are reduced to plastic weapons surrounded by jungle. If we carried spears, what would be the difference between us and the cavemen a million years ago? Nothing.

"Sympathetic detonation" is when a bullet hits a grenade, mortar round or other

various devices of destruction we are obliged to carry. It sets off a chain reaction that is not conducive to good health or longevity. There is nothing sympathetic about it.

Dear Sandy,

I received your letter dated the fourteenth. Please do not worry about me. Please send me another picture I just about got this one wore out from all my looking at it. Two hundred and ninety nine days and a wake up!

Peace and Love.

The calendar is everything. I have two hundred and ninety six days left in this hole. I dream about cold cokes and cheeseburgers. Cold cokes with ice. I am reduced to my basic needs. We hump all day and dig in at night. The only connection we have to the world is our radio, a PRC-25. We call it the "prick-25." I am glad that I am not the radioman. Charley knows that the radioman is always near the platoon commander, the lieutenant. The whip antenna marks him. The prick-25 is heavy and you have to carry it in addition to all of your other shit.

I would not want to be a radioman.

"I am glad that I am not the gunner. When the shit hits the fan, you always hear the point man yelling, 'guns up, guns up.'

The gunner is always in the middle of the shit. I am glad that I am not the gunner."

"Guns up, guns up!" The whispered command is relayed down the long line of marines laying down along an old jungle trail. Slowly moving up the path I keep the sixty pointed forward, off my shoulder. I can hear my A-gunner panting behind me. "Wait-a-minute" thorn bushes tear at me. Tall sawgrass and unidentifiable jungle brush whip my face. Sweat stings my eyes. I pass the command section, the lieutenant, gunny, the corpsman and radioman. The lieutenant is murmuring into the handset. Gunny gives me a thumbs up. I am crouching as I move. I come around a bend. The Mexican is laying on his back. He holds out a clenched fist. I stop. He makes his hand flat and lowers it. I get on my belly. The Mexican motions me forward and I do a very slow crawl towards him. The jungle floor feels cool here. I could sleep here. I could sleep for a hundred days. He puts his lips to my ear. "Beaucoup VC coming down the trail bro," he says very slowly. I can smell the rancid salsa he used on his ham and motherfuckers. I give him a look. "Cochise ten meters up ahead, be chilly my friend," he says. Then he slowly rolls over on his belly looking forward.

I turn back to my A-gunner. I give him a thumbs out sign. He takes off his pack as I do. We are bringing just our gun and ammo to the party. I hold my index finger to my lips and start to crawl forward. Cochise is waiting for me. I crawl up beside him. He looks at me and smiles. He loves this shit. He always walks the point. I would hate to be the point man. Cochise moves some small ferns with the barrel of his M-16. In front of us is a trail that our small one intersects. The other trail is a well-used one. I can hear the sing song chatter of the unsuspecting enemy. They are NVA (North Vietnamese Regulars). Ever since Tet, when we kicked the local VC's ass, the NVA has

been coming down in greater and greater numbers. Their pith helmets and haircuts give them away.

Andy,

How are you? Haven't heard from you in awhile. Mail call is my only lifeline. They call us line animals . . . Please do not even think about coming over here!

Peace.

Dear Ben,

We have been worried about you. Please try to write a little more often if only to calm your mother down. She is living in front of the T.V. in the hope of catching sight of you. However, it seems to me that every time they mention the marines, it is always something terrible .

Two weeks later I am walking into the PX at Da Nang. I run into Andy. I cannot believe my eyes. He looks at me and gives a shout. We hug and slap each other around like two big stupid bear cubs. People walk around us and don't interrupt us. There is precious little joy in the 'Nam.

Dear Mom and Dad,

I am sorry that I haven't written to you in awhile, however, it has been a little hectic around here. Please, next time, do not call the Red Cross to find out if I am still alive. I am catching some serious flak from the gunny. . .

Peace.

We were sweeping through a 'ville. Our guys in 1st platoon swept through here a week ago and walked into a large anti-personnel mine just half a klick outside the 'ville. It was part of a dismantled five hundred pound bomb that had been a dud. The gooks had removed the detonator, spooned out the explosive and filled a very large crudely-shaped bomb with the explosive, pieces of metal, glass and rocks. Then they suspended it from a tree above the trail. In triple-canopy jungle it was impossible to see. I was tight with 1st platoon. We had humped a few hills together. Shared a few doobies. Nobody was happy.

Second platoon was sent in to relocate the inhabitants for their "protection." A cherry dude was having a hard time getting a mamasan and papasan to join the other villagers. Their large sow was pissed off and not moving. The mid-morning sun was a mother fucker. We were tired. Our uniforms were already heavily sweat-stained. I walked up to them and asked, "What's happening, cherry?"

All three of them were trying to push/pull the pig towards the area where the villagers were gathering with all of their stuff. The cherry dude straightened up to reply. As he did so I swung the sixty off of my shoulder and put a short burst into the pig. Blood and pig shit splattered mamasan, papasan and the cherry marine. The cherry jumped back and fell into the mire of pig shit and mud. The dude yelled at me in a mixture of fear and disbelief, "What the fuck are you doing?"

I looked at him and said, "The pig was VC, beaucoup VC in this 'ville, cherry."
 "VC?" He yelled, "VC? How in the hell can a pig be VC?"

White Boy was watching me from inside the hootch next to the pig pen, "Yo, Guns," he yelled, "Guns. What's up with the pig, man?"

"Pig was VC," I said to him.

"VC?" White Boy asked, "Fuck'n pig VC?"

"Sure as shit," I said, as I turned to walk away, "VC all over the mutherfuck'n place."

White Boy came out of the hootch as the Corporal came sprinting around the corner, "What the hell is going on?" he asked White Boy. White Boy looked at him and said, "Found a VC pig, Guns did."

"VC pig?" the Corporal asked, "VC pig, here? No shit?"

"VC all over the fuck'n place," White Boy said, sadly nodding his head as he walked up to me. We did a little dap. White Boy looked me over, he pulled his smokes out of a little plastic bag that the humidity required us to keep them in, "We aren't getting a little flaky, are we?" he asked me as he handed me a butt.

"Thanks," I said as I took the cigarette from him. "Up tight, outa sight, man," I said with my most sincere smile. I pulled out my new Zippo lighter. Andy had bought it for me when we met at the PX in Da Nang. It had the Marine Corps emblem engraved on one side. I held it out for White Boy to light his cigarette.

"Never seen no VC pig before. How'd you recognize him?" White Boy asked me through the smoke of his cigarette.

I turned and started walking towards the hootches that the squad was beginning to torch, "Had to be VC," I said, "Pig didn't want to get with the program."

White Boy shook his head and wiped his face with the green towel that we grunts kept hung around our necks, "Fucking VC pigs," he muttered as we walked towards the burning hootches. We ignored the wailing noise coming from the group of villagers.

Hi Larry,

I heard a nasty rumor that you ran up north to avoid the draft. Can't really say that I blame you. I've seen too much shit to judge such a harmless act. I hate what I'm doing but not strong enough to stop. I killed a pig yesterday. Funny, huh? I almost did the slopes too. I find myself becoming more and more detached from my actions. It is truly the wild wild west out here. I just don't give a shit anymore . . .

Peace.

Arizona Territory, Charlie's home away from home. We were the uninvited guests. Every unit got its turn to sweep through that God-forsaken piece of real estate. Land mines are the worst. The place reminded me of Camp Pendleton in a way. We dug our foxholes where others had dug before us. We set up the same lanes of fire, called in the same coordinates to target the same bunkers, broken down pagodas, and likely avenues of approach. It was a game. And we bled.

I was sitting in a half-dug foxhole. It would be dark soon. I could look out across the flat expanse of this part of the Territory and see Liberty Bridge in the

distance. Kilo Company was guarding the bridge for the next couple of weeks. I was sure that they were glad that we were here and they were there. I had done the same.

I could hear the murmur of the prick-25 in the direction of the command post; two poncho liners for a roof and doc, our corpsman, making his special stew. The platoon commander, Lieutenant Briggs came up to my position. You don't salute officers in the bush. It gives the gooks an added incentive to snipe.

Squatting down beside me I didn't see him look at Blooper Man, who had been lying to me about his sexual conquests in New Orleans, and indicate with a nod of his head to leave us alone. "Guns," he said, "I got some bad news."

"What," I said, "They're going to send me to the 'Nam and fight for the same shit-hole day after day, week after week?" I asked while I rummaged through my rucksack for some c-rats.

"No, Guns," he said, "This is serious shit."

"When Sandy drowned we tried to get Ben back home for the funeral. But the Marine Corps said that they could not do that for just a girl friend. We talked to the Red Cross, we talked to our Congressman. They were sympathetic but they could not help us."

We were on a fire base. It was just a shitty little hill. The engineers had bulldozed the top of it flat. The marines had choppered in the guns: 105's, 155's and a few Ontos's for self defense. They damn near got over-run the other night. That is what the platoon was there for. Temporary guard duty to beef up the artillery dudes. It was a skate job. The commanding officer of the fire base wanted us to stand inspection with spit-shined boots and polished brass. We stood it once. That night, someone threw a grenade with its explosives removed into his hootch. It was a dud, just a warning. You don't fuck with line animals.

"Sandy broke her neck while body surfing. The coroner said that she had been pregnant . . ."

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Trent,

How are you . . . I hope that you are taking good care of the horny Hornet and not letting Sean drive the car. He's a maniac. Ran into Andy in the middle of nowhere. He was with his group of civilian dudes. I think he is with the psyops crowd. They hang loud speakers from the bottom of the slicks and fly around and play gooner funeral music. Hell, we've heard them a couple of times, and it depressed the hell out of us and we didn't even know the words. Blooper Man wanted me to shoot at the bird. It was tempting. Say hi to everyone. . . thanks for the nice words about Sandy...

Two months later. . .

It is the monsoon season. Everything is wet. I have written home and asked for more socks. You cannot have enough socks. We are patrolling an area just south of

Hue. We are looking for a NVA regiment that is supposed to be didi-bopping around here somewhere. Out-fucking standing, an undermanned platoon looking for a NVA regiment. It is like hunting for tigers with a stick - just to see if they are out there.

Mail call. The "world." It comes in on the chopper with our resupply shit. It is the highlight of our day. We are dug in on a rise of ground. The command post is on the other side of the hill. I am with the 2nd squad. From my position I can only see them. I feel cut off from the rest of the platoon. I do not like this place.

I get one letter. It is from Andy's dad. I smile. He can't spell, but he writes. I have been beaten down to the point where the most basic pleasures seem huge: a hot shower, hot chow, letters from home. I'd have never thought that I would get so much pleasure out of such basic necessities of life. I am a line animal.

I open the letter. It is a short one. I pull my poncho liner over my head to protect the letter from the rain. It is dated twelve days ago. . .

Dear Ben,

I don't know if you heard or not but we got some bad news yesterday. Andy was killed in action. He was . . . I told your parents that I would write and let you know. We were wondering . . .

I dropped the letter. I slid down to the bottom of my small fighting hole. My poncho liner must have slipped off me. It was raining. I took my helmet off. I stood up. I took off my belted ammunition and threw it down in the hole. I took off my flack jacket and threw it down on top of the belt rounds. I slipped the suspenders of my web belt, undid my belt and let the whole kit fall off of me, "Fuck it !" I said. "I don't need this shit no more. No more, shit."

I was crying. I plopped down on top of my gear and held my head in my hands. The rain was beating down on me.

Black Man walked up to me, "You trip'n man?" he asked me.

"No." I said, then I nodded to the letter which was sitting face down in the mud. Black Man picked it up. Most of the letter had dissolved in the rain. He could read enough. He put his arms around me, "Don't mean nothin' my man. It don't mean nothing," he said.

Andy died two days before his nineteenth birthday. I had three more weeks to go before mine.

After Andy had been killed I turned self destructive. The gunny was always on my ass to write home. I was hollow inside. The only hope a line animal had was surviving the shit and getting back to the world. There was no pain back in the land of the big PX, no suffering, no friends with their bodies ripped apart. Joy and happiness awaited us back there for those who made it out of here.

"I remember one time we were on this bridge guarding detail. It was a skate job. Anyway, his mama sent him a whole box of green tangerines, by the time they got to us they had ripened right nice. Well, Guns, be shared with

everyone, even the Corporal. Our bunker smelt like tangerines. I can't smell tangerines without thinking about that bridge and Guns."

You can't do nothing to a dead man.

"After Andy died, Ben's letters became more and more infrequent. We tried to be understanding, but it was just so hard. It felt like he was slipping through our fingers. . .

The whole neighborhood was affected by Andy's death. Terry, Andy's sister, became really involved in the peace movement, as did her mom. Andy's mom and dad separated before Ben rotated home. Terry ran away from home. We think she moved in with some guy up in 'Frisco. Our neighbors became very vocal about the war."

Dear War Criminal,

Andy is dead because of you. I hope you rot in hell for what you have done. How many kids have you killed, today?

Terry

Dear Terry,

Most kids aren't big enough for a good meal. We only kill what we can eat.

Ben

I was short. A two digit midget. Seventy six mother fuckers and a wake up. We were sitting on top of our bunker at Liberty Bridge. Black Man and Cochise were with me. Blooper Man and the Mexican were gone, KIA. Tubbs had gone home without most of his face. The lieutenant had been sitting on top of a tank when it rolled over a large mine. The heat from the explosion boiled up and around the sides of the tank. The rumor was that Cochise had shot the lieutenant to put him out of his misery. I believed it. I never asked him. White Boy had his own squad. The Corporal rotated home safe and sound and all in one piece. Nothing's fair.

We were sitting on top of our bunker looking out towards the Arizona Territory. Someone was in some serious shit out there. We could see the Bird Dog circling around the area. A thin line of tracers chased after it. It went into a shallow dive and marked the target with a Willie P (white phosphorous) rocket. A fast mover came thundering in. It dropped a couple of iron bombs. We could see the concussion. "Yeah. Get some motherfucker," Black Man said.

As he climbed out a single line of tracers raced after him. Some poor gook was probably chained to his ancient antiaircraft gun. A second fast mover rolled in after the first. Bright, shiny canisters tumbled down. Oily, greasy smoke billowed up from the rows of flames. Didn't see no more tracers.

Gunny walked up to our bunker. He came up to the edge, put his hands on his hips and said to me, "Guns, I got some good news and some bad news. Which do you want first?"

"Gunny," I said, "There ain't no such thing as good news in the 'Nam."

Gunny said, "The bad news is you got just three zero minutes to clean your weapon, turn it in, pack your trash and catch the mail bird outta here."

"Shit, gunny," I said, "I ain't hooking up with another outfit, am I?"

"No shithead," the gunny said smiling, "Battalion came down and said that any short grunt with less than ninety days left could go home. That is, of course, if you want to."

I wanted to.

Home

"The aircraft must always know where it was. If it is sure where it isn't and it knows where it was, then, it can now subtract where it should be from where it wasn't (or vice-versa). By differentiating this from the algebraic difference between where it shouldn't be and where it was, it is able to obtain the difference between its deviation and its variation, this difference being called error."¹

It was a Saturday morning. Larry Haddack's dad saw me arrive in the taxi. He came over to welcome me home. Yes, I said, I knew that Larry had gone to Canada. No, I didn't blame him. I am more pissed that he didn't write. Larry's dad drove me over to where my dad worked.

"I heard a commotion in the switch room. I remember walking up the stairs, out of the breakroom, around the main frame and there he was. I can't remember much else. I know that I was crying. I think he was, too."

My first couple days home were traumatic, for my parents as well as myself. They thought that I would come home and everything would be just the way it was before I left. I was different. Nobody recognized me. I didn't recognize me.

"I had gone to work early that day. . . Ben was standing beside his dad. Everything else is kind of bleary. I do remember that he didn't smile now I think about it . . ."

Coming home was not like I thought it would be. I felt old, old beyond time. I saw everyone in a different light. I felt like a rhinoceros. You can't ignore a rhino in your house. But you wouldn't know what to do with one, either.

"To cope with what they saw in Vietnam, they had to freeze their emotions and not feel anything. When a buddy got blown away, their attitude was, 'It don't mean nothing. Just keep on trucking.' Well, obviously it did mean something. But they simply tried not to dwell on it, and to bang on until their tours were up."⁵

I called Sandy's parents. They were kinder than I deserved. I visited with Sandy

at her graveside. She had been buried with our child. Pain overwhelmed me. I told my dad that I had proof that there was no God. He said I should ask for forgiveness. I prayed to forget.

I talked with Andy's dad. He said that I could have the horny Hornet, but I never went over there to pick it up. It was part of the past with Andy, and that was gone . . .

Forever.

Shortly after the end of Desert Storm I received a call from Terry. The last communication that we had was the letter she sent me twenty plus years prior. Terry apologized for that letter. I said I was sorry, too. She asked me if it would be possible for us to get together and talk about Andy and what he was like when I last saw him, and maybe, talk about the war, too. I said I would like that.

After talking with Terry I hung up the phone and sat back in my chair to think. I couldn't concentrate. A gnawing empty feeling was in my gut. I went into the kitchen, poured myself some lukewarm coffee and sat at the kitchen table. I got up and looked out the window. I went to the refrigerator, opened the door and closed it without getting anything out of it. I couldn't concentrate on my work. Walking back into my small living room, I saved the work I had on the computer and turned it off. I went back to the kitchen. My fucking legislated helmet was sitting on top of the 'fridge. I grabbed it and walked out of my apartment. I went downstairs into the garage area. The sight of my Fat Boy put a smile on my face. I walked around her touching her, stroking her at those intimate places only she and I shared. I thought about Andy.

How I wound up on PCH I cannot really recall. I remember the wind and sound of my scooter pounding through the city, the Cahuenga Pass. My mind was on other things.

I found myself sitting on the beach. The late afternoon sun had just dropped below the horizon. I felt the sinking feeling I used to get as it got dark in the 'Nam, and the fear. The smell of the Pacific and the breeze on my face brought back a flood of memories. I rode that wave of pain. I pulled a cigarette out of my jean jacket's pocket. I had to dig for my old battered Zippo lighter, the feel of the well worn Marine Corps emblem comforted me. My old lady wanted me to quit. Fuck it. I took a deep drag. It felt good.

I thought about Andy, and second squad. I thought about Black Man, the Mexican, Tubbs, White Boy. I thought about the desperation Blooper Man must have felt, Sandy, and the pain. I thought about the cherry dude whose name I never knew and I thought about Andy. I found myself thinking that maybe Andy got the better deal.

I swear to God, eighteen years of age is too young to have your heart ripped out of your soul. Something was stolen from me, something deep inside. I don't know what it was. All I do know is that it is hell to feel so hollow with only anger to fill that void. I never thought I'd see nineteen. I've seen it twice, and then some.

I stood up. I looked down at that fucking helmet laying in the sand. I thought about Andy, about the 'Nam. "Fuck this shit," I said, "It don't mean nothing." I kicked

that helmet towards the waves. I had paid the price for my freedom. Andy, more so. I walked over to my scooter and got on. I started her up. The familiar rumbling massaged my soul. I opened her up just to listen to her sing. I rode home in the night, helmetless and thought about Andy.

Endnotes

1. excerpts from Fundamentals of Inertial Navigation, smart-ass explanation for the uninformed.
2. popular protest slogan in the 60's.
3. excerpt from "Looks Like I'm Fixin' to Die Rag" by Country Joe and the Fish.
4. excerpt from "To Susan on the West Coast Waiting" by Donovan.
5. Dr. Grotts, Once a Hero. Book Three: Oquest for the Truth.

Glossary

Beaucoup Pronounced Boo-Coo. It means many, a whole lot.

Bird Dog Built by North American Aviation, twin engined, twin tailed aircraft designated as the OV-10 Bronco. Flown by men with huge balls. Used to coordinate air support for the grunts.

Black Man Blackest marine that we had ever seen. He was ordered never to smile when we were out in the bush.

Blooper Man Our grenadier. Nickname derived from the weapon, M-79 grenade launcher that he was obliged to carry.

CH-46 Three bladed, twin rotor head helicopter capable of carrying fifteen fully loaded marines or a whole shit load of stuff. Looks like a banana boat.

Charlie See VC

Chopper Any type of flying machine with vertical lift capability. Slang for helicopter. Ten thousand pieces flying in loose formation.

Cochise Half Hunkpapa Indian, half Mexican, someone tried to call him half-breed; until they woke up dead. He claimed he could smell VC from a mile away.

Dustoff Generic call sign for a chopper used to medevac wounded marines.

Flak Jacket Heavy, no sleeve apparel filled with ceramic disks designed to protect the wearer from flying debris, like bullets. Had no noticeable effect other than to slow

down mosquitoes and flatten out bullets before they penetrated your body.

In-Country Serving in the Republic of South Vietnam.

KIA Killed in action.

LZ Landing zone. Usually a small clearing in the jungle just big enough for one helicopter.

Line Animal Marine with an mos of 0311, a grunt, unofficially a 1369 (unlucky cocksucker).

M-16 Light weight weapon firing a 5.56mm round, used by the majority of American forces in Vietnam. Nicknamed the “Matty Mattel Rifle” because of its plastic stock.

M-60 Two man, crew served, belt fed, air cooled, .308 caliber machine gun. The most potent weapon in a marine platoon’s arsenal.

M-79 The “blooper”. Short barreled shotgun looking weapon that fired a 40mm projectile. Its nickname came from the sound it made when fired.

Marine One unlucky son-of-a-bitch.

The Mexican His last name was Gomez or maybe Sanchez, anyway, he once claimed that he was not a Mexican. What else could we call him?

Ontos Small tracked vehicle with a total of six one-oh-six recoilless weapons, three on each side, attached to it. A truly awesome defensive weapon when loaded with flechette rounds.

Tubbs The only grunt, in the bush, who managed to gain weight.

‘ville Village. Small collection of hootches usually made from local material such as bamboo and palm leaves.

VC Short for Viet Cong, indigenous people of South Vietnam who fought on the communist side; generic term used for the bad guys.

White Boy White haired, blue eyed, pale bodied marine. Black Man claimed that White Boy could get sunburned fully clothed.