

Martin Naparsteck

Having Been to War

I became a Vietnam veteran three months early. I was told during the summer of 1967 by a soldier on his second enlistment, and therefore far more knowledgeable about the ways of the military than me, that I could get an early out. If I could show that I had a need, such as a waiting job or an acceptance at college, the army would discharge me up to 90 days early. So I wrote to Wilkes College in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, the college at which my academic failures two years previously had precipitated my entry into the army and my assignment to Vietnam, and asked if I could be readmitted, and in a few weeks I received a letter of re-acceptance, showed it to an officer, filled out some forms, and a few weeks after that was told I would depart the Republic of South Vietnam in late August, in time for me to begin the Fall semester at Wilkes in September. I would be a college student again. I would get out of the army three months early, out of Vietnam one month early. I would be a Vietnam veteran.

But I didn't think of myself as a Viet vet then. I thought of myself as a soldier who had gone to war, who had missed most of that war, who regretted not being a hero, who wondered if he would still be as much of a nerd upon returning to the World—as we often referred to the United States—as before he left. I didn't think so much that the war had made a man of me, but I hoped to God it had made me into something other than a nerd. But I still wore thick glasses, was acutely aware I didn't know how to dress or style my hair or lean against a doorway with a cigarette dangling from my mouth, that I could only look at other guys and wonder what they did that made women find them appealing. My main concern as I took my trip home was that women would be as uninterested in me when I got back as they were before I left.

I could find no one to say goodbye to. The few soldiers I had most closely befriended had departed the 'Nam weeks earlier. Steve, my closest friend in Vietnam, went back to Selma, Alabama, a month earlier. But even Steve was always a temporary friend, someone I knew I would never write to, who would never write to me. I didn't realize it at the time, but I think for most of us making close and lasting friendships seemed an expensive luxury. The army system of assigning soldiers to the 'Nam for 12 month tours, rather than for the duration, as had happened in World War Two and

Korea, meant we focused on the short term. Many soldiers, although not I, kept calendars in the form of naked woman with their legs spread, chopped into tiny squares, numbered one to 365, and each day spent in country resulted in a square being blackened in with the point of a pencil or blued in with the point of a pen, until number 1 was reached, number 1 sitting right at the entry to the vagina, the site of great rewards. I had no such calendar, and if I had had one, the last 30 numbers would not have been shaded in; the entire pelvic would have been un-entered by the point of anything. Still, like all the soldiers, I counted down the days. I was from the day I arrived, at least in attitude, a short-timer, and making lifelong friendships would have interfered with that saving emotion. I was not burdened with the attitude of a lifer, a career soldier, and there was no one we draftees looked down on more than a lifer. Bad enough were those who enlisted for a single three-year stint, but far worse were those who re-enlisted, again and again and again. Wanting my military career to be that of a short-timer assured that all my Vietnam friendships would end with my departure.

I sat in the back of a deuce and a half for the ride from Phu Lam, south of Saigon, to Bien Hoa, north of the city. The trip took an hour, maybe an hour and a half, and three or four other soldiers, none of whom I knew, sat in the back with me. We didn't introduce ourselves, and I'm not certain if they were, like me, headed home, or just to a new assignment. I had my duffel bag with me, resting on the floor of the truck, my name stenciled on its side. The road was smooth enough, but the driver had little concern for the comfort of those of us in the back, and he speeded up and slowed down at whim, forcing us to shift back and forth, to right and left. The first leg of my trip home was bouncing and sudden swaying. The canvas to cover the curved frames of the truck, like ineffective roll bars, was peeled back, allowing us to see the countryside, the paddies of rice, the girls in *ao dais* on their bicycles, the distant hills, the Jeeps and occasional tank, the jet fighters zooming overhead, the children glancing at the truck I rode in with disinterest, and then the base. At Bien Hoa the truck pulled up in front of a military building, made of metal, and I was instructed by a sergeant to take my duffel bag inside, where I was told which plane to get on, and I walked, my bag on my shoulder, a few hundred yards, gave the bag to a soldier who put it on top of dozens of others on a motorized cart, and I got on a plane, a Pan Am gumbo jet. Everything was matter of fact, without ceremony, without emotion on anyone's face, without a goodbye, without a handshake, without a thank you from the U.S. Army or the South Vietnamese government. I was like the duffel bag, just being piled into the plane to be shipped home, one more piece of baggage. And no one says good-bye to a piece of baggage.

I didn't know a single person on the plane. Soldiers came back from World War One and World War Two and Korea, and probably from the Civil War and the Spanish-American War as parts of units. That's how they would come back from the Gulf War. They shared something. I was one of 200, maybe 220, 240 men on that plane. And anything I shared with them was kept silent. I had served not with a single one of them. It was a civilian plane, chartered to the military, and the stewardesses were professionally attentive. They reminded us to buckle our seat belts. Later they would serve us meals that seemed very much like the Swanson TV dinners my mother had sometimes served me. They smiled and answered questions about estimated time of arrival and location of pillows and how to make a seat recline. We might have been, to these young woman, vacationers, or worse, businessmen returning from a boring meeting. They knew nothing of us, and if they admired us or feared us or wondered about us, they knew how not to let those emotions be revealed in their faces. And I realized, as I tried and failed to make eye contact with one of them, that any smile on a face or any friendliness in a voice or any moment of attention directed at me was less an act of kindness than a professional requirement. The second section of my trip home was a reminder that some things, at least, had not changed; having gone to war did not make me more interesting to women.

I was aware of the traditions of returning soldiers, but I can't remember how much I thought of them on the opening minutes of that flight. Would a band greet us as we deplaned? Would some of the young men be greeted by smiling, crying young women running at them with outstretched arms? Would one young soldier see his infant son for the first time? Would someone one day soon in a bar buy me a beer to thank me? Would I one day be teary-eyed with disturbing memories? Would a banner be stretched across the front porch of my mother's home welcoming me back? Would old friends stop by? Would children look at me with wonder and admiration? Probably I thought of none of those things. Not in the first minutes, not as the plane taxied and sped down the runway and lifted off. Not as some of the others, like me, looked out the windows, not to get a last glimpse of the 'Nam, but because lifting planes always, in daytime, offer spectacular vistas. I saw endless rows of small houses, and beyond that endless stretches of trees broken only by large patches of paddies, and, as we lifted higher and higher, endless stretches of blue sky and pretty white clouds. It was not a tradition of a returning warrior, but a tradition of any flyer: the most beautiful part of any flight is the takeoff and its wonderful views. And then, in a moment I could not have predicted, something that seemed very much like it should be a tradition happened, and a reaction I could not have predicted followed. The pilot announced, "We have just left the airspace of the Republic of South Vietnam," and his tone, the slight rise

in his pitch at the end, suggested that he expected something, perhaps applause, perhaps cheering. But no one said anything. No one cheered. No one clapped. No one, as far as I could tell, cried. It's as if the pilot had said, You're on your way home, and we had said, Big Deal. Maybe there were subdued emotions. We were, most of us, after all, young men (I was 21), and whatever Vietnam had taught us, we were all too acutely aware, from years in high schools and colleges, that we were terribly inadequate at expressing our emotions. Too often young women had laughed at our displays of emotions, too often teachers had scolded us for our exuberant hearts, too often we had ridiculed each other for revealing too much beyond stoicism in our voices or faces or body language. Girls could do that. Not boys. Not young men. Even having been to war hadn't earned us that right. I think the pilot, locked in his little cabin up front, must have looked at his co-pilot or navigator with a look just like one high school teacher gives to another, a look that said, Don't these jerks know how to react properly? And the answer, of course, was no, we didn't know how to react, how to say what our emotions were. God, we weren't even within a 1,000 clicks of knowing what our emotions were.

Some of the soldiers read paperback books. Some read the magazines that had been tucked into the pockets on the back of the seats in front of them. I heard one ask for a pack of peanuts and I heard the stewardess tell him he would have to wait until it was time to serve the snacks. I remember I had a paperback—then, as now, I always have a book with me—but I can't remember the title or author. I can't remember even if it was fiction or non-fiction. I do remember I didn't spend a lot of time reading it. I was thinking about things. I was thinking about returning home and not having a girl waiting for me. I had never had a real girlfriend. I had not received a single letter in my eleven months in Vietnam from a girl. Not one. My heart felt little stabs, like a pen knife being stuck in it, every time one of my buddies got a letter from his girl. Steve got married just days before he left for the 'Nam and got letters every day. A package at least once a week. He showed me a picture of his wife; she was pretty, the pleasant smile of an Alabama belle. She looked like she'd be nice to talk to. To listen to. She must have had a sweet Southern accent. You could see it in the photograph. No girl had ever given me her photograph. That was one of the traditions of war. You had a girl waiting for you at home. And you looked a dozen times a day at her photo. I didn't have a girl. The tradition was closed to me.

The plane landed in Guam, probably to refuel, and we got out, walked around. Some of us smoked. A few chattered haphazardly with others. I asked one soldier where he was from and he mumbled something I didn't hear clearly and turned away. Maybe he had bad memories; maybe I inter-

rupted him during a moment of introspection; maybe this; maybe that. Maybe he was just rude. That's what I thought then. That's what I think now. I have now, as I had then, quick and forgiving sympathy for those who have suffered. None for a moment of rudeness. Yet, I know, like in the Thomas Hardy poem, if I met that soldier again, I'd buy him a beer, let him buy me a beer. Odd. The Thomas Hardy poem is about an enemy soldier killed in combat. But I share, understand, the same emotion for a fellow American soldier. Yet I knew at the moment of his rudeness, the mere fact that we had served in the same army in the same war was not enough to entice forgiveness out of me. It did entice something else from within me, a realization that my experience was my experience, an individual set of emotions. Some men may learn camaraderie from war, or courage, or self-discipline, a hundred positive personality traits, and I think probably I did learn some of that in Vietnam. I also learned how to use chopsticks. If I say this final skill was more useful to me, I do not denigrate what soldiers experience, but rather question what society values.

The flight from Guam to California left no impression on my memory beyond the repeat of the reaction of the pilot's announcement. "We have just entered the air space of the United States of America," he said, and one soldier applauded, one, two, three claps, and then silence, the silence of embarrassment, an embarrassment brought on, I believe, by the realization he was alone. Some soldiers slept as the announcement was made, others may have been absorbed in their books, and a few, me included, refused to expose our emotions. If I had been willing to expose an emotion, however, I could not have articulated it. I had no idea what emotion I felt about returning from Vietnam, about returning from war. I know there were emotions there and that they were deep and complex and confusing, but beyond that, I understood nothing about them.

We landed at an Air Force base in Northern California, and as we deplaned a stewardess just inside the exit door said goodbye to each soldier as he walked by her. When I was a step from her, she turned to talk to another stewardess, squeezed in a goodbye to me between a laugh and a comment to her friend, and I felt a pang of loneliness. Her politeness, her caring, her warmth were all professional. I was put on a bus with 30 or 40 other soldiers and we were driven south, to Oakland Army Terminal. There, I was reunited with my duffel bag, told to unpack and hand in my field jacket, the one piece of military clothing I wanted to keep, and told to take the other stuff home with me. I put my duffel bag on a pile with dozens of others and went to a mess hall where I was given a steak dinner. That was a tradition I had heard about. Each American soldier returning from Vietnam was given a steak dinner, a welcome home gift. I ate in silence, sitting at a long table with soldiers I never saw before and would never see

again, and when my plate was empty, a private who was wiping off tables said, "If you're done, move it along, other people are waiting for table space." He was speaking to everyone within 10 feet, not to me specifically, but it sounded like I was his target. I next had to wait in line while I was processed out. A clerk asked me some questions, I answered them, I took a seat, I waited. There were no magazines or newspapers to read. A few of the three or four dozens soldiers sitting in the room, waiting like me for their discharge papers, chatted. Most did not. I didn't. A name would be called, the soldier would get up, walk to a desk, take some papers, listen as he was told to look them over to see if they were correct, and then turn and leave. One said, "I'm out of here." Another said, "Civilian, civilian at last, thank God almighty, I'm a civilian at last." When my name was called, I walked up to the desk, took the manila envelope that was handed to me, opened it to make a cursory glance as I was told to look it over, and despite an impulse to say nothing, I said my MOS was wrong. My MOS was just a number, and God knows why I even remembered the right number. MOS is Military Occupational Specialty. I had been an electronics technician. I repaired and maintained long lines equipment, a device that took a bunch of small signals and allowed them to be piggybacked on top of a stronger transmission signal, so they wouldn't each need their own transmitter. I didn't recognize the number on the piece of paper I was holding, and I felt an impulse to be quiet. I didn't care. I didn't intend to ever work in electronics again. I didn't want to ever work in electronics again. The fact that the number was wrong was insignificant. But something just came out. I told the clerk the wrong MOS was listed. He said, grumbled, "What should it be?," and I told him, and he called to another clerk behind him, who came up, and they spoke, and the second clerk looked at me with open annoyance. "Wait," he snapped. I had created more work for him. He would have to retype the form. And, I soon learned, he would punish me for that. I went back to my chair and waited. And waited. And waited. An hour. An hour and a half. Two hours. Two and a half hours. Finally he came back, snapped the piece of paper at me without letting go of it, and snapped his words. "Is this right?" I looked at the paper. The number that had been there had been whited out and a new number typed on top of it. It couldn't have taken more than two minutes. Three minutes if he waited for the White Out to dry, but the way the new number was buried in it made it clear he hadn't. Two and a half hours for two minutes work. The new number was wrong. I said, "This is fine." He said, "You're welcome," and walked away. I went to a final desk and was given an envelope with some money. My final monthly pay plus enough for the cheapest ticket to fly from San Francisco to Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. I went outside to a bus stop. Some men stood there in uniforms, a few were in civilian clothes, their duffel

bags at their feet. They must have changed in a men's room. I had some civilian clothes with me, stuff I had worn while off duty and roaming the streets of Saigon, Rue Tu Du, Trang Hao Dong, the bars of Cholon. I kept my dress greens on because that meant I could fly half fare back to Pennsylvania, pocket the rest of the money. I think that amounted to less than \$100. A bench allowed four men to sit. The rest of us had to stand. Most of the men stood. Few talked. No one seemed animated. It might have been a bus stop in Chicago or New York or Atlanta. Strangers mingling out of a necessity imposed on them by having the same destination. The sign said, "Airport Bus Stops Here."

At the airport I waited in line while another soldier in front of me, like me in his dress greens, walked up to the counter to buy a ticket. I couldn't hear all of the conversation, and I wasn't interested in it, but I did hear the woman on the other side say, with no attempt to hide her contempt, "The money you're pocketing by flying half fare is taxpayer money." I felt relief that the next opening at the counter was with a different clerk, another woman, who seemed utterly disinterested in the fact that I was wearing a uniform. The ticket I bought would take me from San Francisco to Pittsburgh, where I would switch planes and fly to Wilkes-Barre. I decided not to call home ahead of time. I don't know why. Maybe I wanted to surprise my mother. I cannot remember today if I even informed her that I was getting out of the army three months early, out of the 'Nam a month early. I don't know why I wouldn't have written to her about that. I certainly wasn't trying to avoid a welcome home party. There wouldn't be one. My father had died six years earlier, and none of my siblings, my four older brothers, were living at home. And I didn't have a girlfriend. That, I think, is why I didn't call home from the airport, and if I hadn't written home about getting an early out, that would have been the reason for that also.

I walked across the tarmac, climbed the stairs, and was among the first passengers on the plane. I can't remember what airline it was. I found my seat, sat, and watched other passengers look for their seats. I was among the first passengers on the plane not because of any hurry to get home, but because I had flown so seldom and had not yet learned that getting on early meant sitting uncomfortably as other passengers leaned over you to put carry on luggage in the overhead bins. For a long time no one sat next to me. All the seats had been assigned. When the plane seemed nearly full, when there were only three or four people in the aisle, an attractive woman, maybe about my age, came on the plane, glanced up at the little metal tags on the luggage racks above our heads, glanced down at a ticket in her hand, and I hoped she would sit next to me. I made a promise to myself. I think subconsciously I had made the promise months earlier, while in Vietnam. Being in war had earned me something. It had earned

me the right to overcome my sometimes crippling shyness around girls. If I had been to war, I was a man, and if I was a man, I could talk to women; my logic was subconscious, and perhaps it wasn't that simplistic, but maybe it was. This woman, this attractive woman with long, straightish hair, with makeup carefully applied to look like she wore no makeup, with beads around her neck stretching to her bosom, with long earrings, this woman who seemed so like the stereotyped pretty girl of the late 60's, one who would end up years later, decades later, in bad movies and worse television shows, as one of the personifications of the sixties, this woman was coming closer and closer to my seat, and there were few open seats left. There must have been more than 200 passengers on the plane, and fewer than a dozen open seats, and I had convinced myself, for the first time in my life, I believe, that I had earned the right to talk to her. I was, after all, a veteran. She stopped alongside me, looked at the tag above me, looked at her ticket, looked at me, stared for long moments. I smiled but realized we were not making eye contact. She was looking at my uniform, at the ribbons and medals on my chest, and she said, in a tone flat as the ones I made on the Sousaphone I had played in high school, "Were you in Vietnam?" I had earned the right to speak to her, but not the skill, so I nodded. I didn't open my mouth for fear of stuttering, or mumbling, in some way revealing that despite having been to war I remained a nerd, inarticulate and unsure and crippled by shyness. I may have nodded too long. She said, "I'm not sitting next to you." She stepped to a stewardess and said something and the stewardess nodded and led her to another seat. That was the moment I realized I was not just a veteran, but a Vietnam veteran. That was the moment I realized I had not earned the right to speak to women by having been to war but had instead earned the scorn of at least some of them. I felt as if I had been walking down a street, doing no harm to anyone, when a woman, a pretty woman, stuck out her foot and tripped me, and I fell so my face slammed into the concrete walk. That was my trip home. My reward for having been to war.

Martin Naparsteck is the author of two novels about the Vietnam War, *War Song* and *A Hero's Welcome*, and the short story collection, *Saying Things*. His writing has appeared in *North American Review*, *Mississippi Review*, and elsewhere. He is the book reviewer for *The Salt Lake Tribune*.