

“Like Ripples in a Pond”

by
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Flying at five thousand feet gave view to a vast panorama of untold beauty. The rice paddies were diked-off in large squares and partially filled with water. The sun reflecting off the water gave the illusion of large mirrors laid flat. The rich green landscape belied the grisly scene about to unfold.

A radio call had come to the pilot of the helicopter to evacuate wounded American fighting men from an infantry company of the First Cavalry Division. The pilot oriented himself to his map and made the necessary turn to put the aircraft on an intercept course to the assigned destination.

Not unlike a falling rock, a rapid descent to the landing area was required to minimize the chance of getting hit by enemy ground-fire.

The medical evacuation helicopter, known as a *Medevac*, had already taken the more seriously wounded troopers out. The combat medic had several others he had triaged, treated, and assigned to be flown to the nearest field hospital.

Leaning out from my gun-seat and looking ahead maybe a mile, I could see tracers being fired from what I was sure were the American lines - lots of tracers. Lots.

The Cav's company area came into view, and I could see some of the operation in progress. It involved somewhat of a defensive perimeter with some troopers advancing on what seemed to be an objective.

This mid-summer of 1967 suddenly became very real and very frightening. These were mostly young Americans in unquestioningly perilous positions. They were firing their weapons and advancing, firing and advancing. I was struck by the stark reality of the events before me. Suddenly I was worried about their welfare. Just as suddenly I realized how parents feel about their offspring when telling them to, "be careful."

In what would have been the rear of the defense-line, there were rows of something but I couldn't quite make out what. It stood out only because of the symmetry where otherwise no symmetry existed.

The rotor was turning hard as the Huey helicopter flared just prior to touching down. There was the usual bump as the aircraft touched and then firmly planted itself on the Southeast Asian soil. The infantry company was engaged in combat against the VietCong. The pilot had been directed to a precise landing spot after correctly identifying the brightly colored smoke marking the infantry company area.

An infantry sergeant approached the aircraft and shouted at me, "Will you give me a hand loading a guy?" After receiving permission to leave the aircraft, I nodded, unhooked my radio headset and harness from the gun-seat and followed him into the clearing.

I was reluctant to go more than arm's length from the aircraft. Uppermost in my mind was the thought that it might leave without me, leaving me in this hot, humid cauldron of fear.

The sergeant was a young man, but looked gaunt. He had that emaciated look that's acquired by grunts after weeks in the field. We are talking weeks of conditions that most could not imagine. Living on the ground with snakes and biting insects, not enough sleep and eating from cans constitutes misery on an unparalleled scale—psychological, physiological and physical stress that consumes every ounce of body fat. Worse yet, or worse than anything else, living on death's doorstep twenty-four hours a day, sucks the life from everyone at that threshold.

Soldiers in the field, particularly those in the forward rifle companies, all have a certain facial masque. It becomes an aged look, "Old before their time" would perhaps be a more appropriate description. The comparison became ever so clear when airlifting a new trooper into the forward line companies. The FNG (new guy) would have, among other things, fresh, new fatigues, most often a new rifle and field gear. He also would possess a fresh or healthy look clearly not shared by those around him.

Walking into the clearing, I saw an infantryman lying on a poncho and partially covered by it. He was a large man. The sergeant rolled up the sides of the poncho forming a sort of grip with which to lift and carry the wounded GI. I did the same.

There was constant rifle-fire accompanied by the bark of machine guns and the *crump* of hand grenades. There were many sounds I had never heard before. One sound was like air leaking from a tire. I realized this sound was made by bullets fired by the enemy at the American line of defense—the closer the bullet, the louder the hiss. I was really nervous and kept looking around as twenty year-old new guys always do.

Once I realized there were so many rounds whizzing so near, I experienced an emotion I'd never felt before. It was clarity of vision in my mind's eye—vision that told me with great impact that I could be hit any time now. Hit anywhere and killed, or worse yet, sustain a grievous wound and not die. There are worse things than dying, and I would soon witness what they were.

As we placed the GI in the helicopter, the sergeant leaned toward me and asked if I would go back and get the GI's leg. It was that split-second that everything again came into focus and I felt as though someone had touched me with high voltage.

I stammered, "What did you say?" He repeated the line he had said before. In spite of the noise from the helicopter jet engine and rotor-whine, I had heard him clearly. It was that I just couldn't believe what he had actually said.

I went back, and there was the man's leg, almost his entire leg. I felt sick and my stomach contracted and came up into the back of my throat. I choked it off, took a few deep breaths, reached down and picked up the man's leg. It took everything I had to do that, but I did it. Just before reaching down, I looked toward the sergeant to see if he was watching me. He wasn't. He was talking to the wounded GI. I was glad he wasn't watching because I was ashamed that I had hesitated.

I turned my back to the helicopter to get my breath and swallowed hard to regain control of my emotions. It was then that I saw what the symmetrical rows were. They were American KIA's. American fighting men killed in action in this very engagement. There are no words to describe how I was struck by what lay before me. It was a scene I would never forget.

I had to carry the soldier's leg back and I was thinking, "What am I going to do with this when I get there?" The GI was talking to the sergeant and didn't look at me. I was thankful for that. I placed his leg on the poncho, where it would have been were it still attached.

I would find out the severed limb was the result of a machine gun burst striking the trooper as he advanced against the enemy. I was watching the sergeant talk to the trooper and the trooper was ghastly pale. I looked at him and I thought, "What were the more seriously wounded like that went out on the Medevac?"

The eye contact between the sergeant and the wounded trooper was extraordinary. It was easy to see they shared a special bond as brothers of the war. The exchange wasn't anything I could hear, but it was easy to see they were close friends. Tears ran down the sergeant's face as he waved goodbye to his friend. He had to get back to the war.

Yes, back to the war. No options, no choices, no way out. Back to the war, and back to a repeat of the carnage of troopers under his command—a squad of fine young American men traveling directly into harm's way.

The cadence of the exchange of fire accelerated and the aircraft needed to lift off. I saw the medic—"Doc" as everyone called him—rounding up the other wounded he had selected to fly out on this trip.

The brief, but traumatic encounter, I had with the American KIA's, (killed in action) and the casualty I placed into the helicopter, was substantial. It was comparable to falling some distance and landing on concrete or being struck by a vehicle traveling at high speed. It was a queasy, sick feeling. It was absolutely gut-wrenching.

I climbed back into my gun-seat and reconnected. From there I watched Doc look over the wounded and decide who needed to go on this flight. Of four selected, two appeared to be shrapnel wounds, while two others were bullet wounds. All seemed serious to me.

They all bore the blood-smears and extensive bandages associated with combat wounds. They also bore the expressions of pain and tension that would obviously accompany such trauma. I could see it and feel it, even though it wasn't me. I felt so bad for these men and I was sick to think about the dead who will be the very last to be lifted out. They shouldn't have to lie here. It just wasn't right. I understood the logic of the triage or priority system, but it still seemed so wrong.

Other wounded GI's got aboard and we were getting ready to take off for the field hospital. Taking off was wonderful. I just wanted to get away from there. Far away, and quickly. I shuddered to think what it would be like to spend a night out there in the boonies. Doc looked at me briefly and shook his head in that "bad, isn't it" connotation.

The pilot got the okay for lift-off and the rotor turned harder until the Huey broke loose from the grip of Vietnam. Forward movement followed a brief hover and we gained speed and altitude. One of the wounded moved from his seat to the floor of the aircraft and sat beside the GI who lost his leg. They held onto each other for the twenty-minute flight to the field hospital.

The GI missing the leg looked more and more pale, and I was sure he wouldn't last the flight. Clearly, these were the last few minutes of his life. I tried not to look because the scene was so sad. The pale GI said something and his partner moved his ear closer to hear the words.

Death took him as unheard words passed his lips. What were the words? Was it the name of his mother, his wife, or perhaps his child? What? No one really knew. His partner removed his steel helmet and laid his head ever so softly on his friend.

A Mother somewhere may have felt a harsh emotional lightning bolt of recognition that part of her had been lost. It's been said it sometimes happens that way.

It dawned on me that America had lost something valuable in this man. He stepped forward and traveled thousands of miles to meet the sound of guns and stand in defense of a foreign people.

Sadness prevails. This is a silent tragedy that will be repeated many times over, day after day, year after year. This is just one life, fallen into the ranks of fifty-eight thousand American casualties to be tallied by war's end.

The loved ones of this casualty will be the recipients of the dreaded personal visit by United States Army officials who will advise them of their loss.

This single loss will flow through the people in this man's life, as ripples flow through the calm surface of a pond broken by a thrown rock. The ripples will reach the farthest shore of Mother, Father, Brother, Sister, Son, Daughter, Aunt, Uncle, Grandparents, Friends and all others who knew him. All will feel the loss. Some will never recover, others will never be the same. But all will be affected in some way the rest of their lives.

What did this man's future hold? What did it hold for him and what did it hold for our nation? What did we lose in losing him? We cannot know. We cannot measure what passed from his future, and from ours.

I saw this scene repeated scores of times and each time I dreaded the next flight even more. It just seemed to never end. Mother, Father, Sister, Brother—the ripples went on forever.



Drafted into the U.S. Army; December 7, 1965, honorably discharged November 28, 1967

- Basic training, Fort Hood Texas
- Military Police School, Fort Gordon, Georgia
- First Military Police Duty Station, 30th MP Battalion, Presidio, San Francisco, California
- Assigned to and arrived at Nha-Trang, Vietnam, January 1, 1967
- Assigned to Combat MP Company, 272 MP Battalion, Bong Son, Vietnam
- Performed (machine)-Gun-jeep escort for supply truck convoys
- Joint-duty; (machine-gunner) 229th Aviation Battalion, First Cavalry Division, Huey Helicopter
- Awarded Air Medal, December 29, 1967

