



The Scars of War

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ABSTRACT

This narrative describes the unrelenting grief of a Viet Nam veteran over the death of one of the soldiers in his platoon.

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"I could have told him that Rainwater had post-traumatic stress symptoms, but it wouldn't have mattered."

Several years ago I was writing a book (Williams, 2017) about transformative thoughts that some people have after the death of a loved one. Grieving individuals, especially those who experience ongoing, deep distress, will sometimes have "aha" moments—thoughts that reframe the loss and provide a measure of healing. Hoping for such a story, I called my brother-in-law, Al, as I remembered that he had experienced a traumatic loss during his time in Viet Nam. At the end of the interview, I realized that the course of grief may never change when scars are jagged and cut too deep.

Al grew up in poverty—poverty that is often not seen or acknowledged in our affluent culture. There was never enough to eat, snow could be seen coming through the boards in the house heated by one coal stove, and Christmas consisted of one bike for all five children. The family survived due to an incredibly strong work ethic and a devotion among family members. Al's father, a fundamentalist preacher for small churches with little financial resources, did whatever was physically necessary to make a living and then preach. Al followed his father's example by driving a tractor at the ripe old age of 10 years, picking cotton, and painting the tops of chicken houses. His work ethic never waned as Al labored 40 hours a week, in addition to his academic load, to put himself through college. He also maintained his strong family ties throughout his life. As a child, his parents had demanded obedience, but there was an unbreakable bond of love between the parents and all the children. Al treasured his siblings and would do anything to prove his worth including braiding his sister's hair and dressing his younger brother. The children worked and played together; all were musically talented and frequently sang as a quartet for religious events. Although the family's religion was often perceived as different from the mainstream, Al and his siblings learned the importance of "doing what is right, being honest, and taking care of your family."

In college Al majored in accounting. The never-ending Viet Nam war raged on, but there were unsubstantiated beliefs that it would end soon. College initially kept him from the draft, and then he married my sister. But President Johnson ended the deferment for marriage shortly thereafter, and Al received his draft notice in the fall of 1965. He chose to go to Officer's Candidate School (OCS) with the hope of going into the finance corps. Upon completion of training, he requested a transfer from the infantry to the Army Finance Corps; unfortunately, 13 other people in his class made the same request, including two with doctorates in finance, three with masters in business,

and three certified public accountants. An infantry platoon leader, not a finance officer, ended up as his MOS (Military Occupation Specialty). The Army became a "fit" for him with its discipline, hard work, and sense of camaraderie. In OCS, his leadership skills were apparent, as he was named student company commander for "Blue Week." After completing OCS, Al was selected as an instructor in the weapons department of the Infantry School at Fort Benning. This assignment bought him another year from Viet Nam and raised the hopes of family members for a settlement of the war.

His notice of an "overseas destination," meaning time in Viet Nam, came during his stint as an instructor. He volunteered for several schools, including jump school and jungle warfare school in Panama, as he wanted to have the best training possible. Prior to leaving the country, Al was able to spend some time with his family and newborn son. His father, the family patriarch, took Al to a bedroom and sobbed. His only words were, "Son, I think you will make it."

As a First Lieutenant, Al arrived in Viet Nam at Cam Ranh Bay in November of 1967, assigned to the 101st Airborne Division as a platoon leader with the First Brigade. He was taken by jeep into the jungle to meet his platoon. Many of the men were war-worn since enlisted men spent 12 months in active fighting while officers were relieved after six months. Most of the men had already been in the jungle for more than six months. The platoon was skeptical of a new, young lieutenant. They had experienced leadership mistakes in the past, exposing them to unnecessary risks. Al formed the platoon in a circle and addressed them; he had one goal in mind: "we will all go home." His intention was not to win medals or claim glory but to lead his unit in a way that everyone, including him, returned home safely. He reminded them that this effort required two commitments: he would do his job and each of them had to do their jobs. Working together would insure that everyone made it.

In his platoon was a young man, Jewel Rainwater, who was close to the age of Al's youngest brother. Rainwater hailed from the same state as Al, and many of their life circumstances were similar. Al took a special interest in him, and they bonded quickly. The young soldier had a keen sense of humor as he had drawn a big "13" on his helmet, describing it as his lucky number. He was saving his money to buy a Chevrolet convertible for pure pleasure when he returned home. At 19 years of age, he was the unit's point man. As point man, Rainwater always walked first in line and was critical to the unit's safety. He had earned a reputation for being best at "point" as he was extremely attentive to detail and always alert. He could spot spider holes and trip wires; he was incredibly sensitive to changes in the environment. Rainwater had saved the platoon again, and again, and again.

For the platoon, there were no safe places and no escape from the 24/7 brutality of the war. No demarcated lines for battle existed, and jungle warfare created constant fear of ambush and death. At one point, the platoon was in the jungle for 40 days straight with no bath or mail, only rations dropped from a helicopter.

In January of 1968, the North Viet Nameese Army (NVA) launched the Tet offensive against more than 100 South Viet Nameese villages with massive killings and destruction. Al's platoon was flown on C-130s from the Cambodian border to Saigon. Saigon was in chaos, and the platoon spent weeks, paired with an armored unit, to help clear the city. They were then loaded on boats and traveled up the South China Sea to land on the beach at Da Nang. Their assignment was to head north on Highway 1 and clear the way to establish a base camp, later known as Camp Eagle, near Hue. The area along Highway 1 was surrounded by hills and steep mountains. The NVA and Viet Cong had dug in the hillsides, and Al's platoon was assigned to carry out search and destroy missions in dense jungle areas. A defoliant, later identified as Agent Orange, was sprayed to clear the jungle growth so that the enemy could be destroyed. There were no established camps along the route, and the platoon slept in foxholes or on the ground.

After arriving in the Hue area, the First Brigade faced fierce resistance as they established their base camp. At one point, another unit had been pinned down in the mountainous area from enemy fire, and Al's platoon was called in to assist. Every day for seven days, the platoon was in a firefight with the enemy. Everyone was nervous and emotional. Al described them as "shook up." At the end of the seventh day, Al found his point man, Rainwater, collapsed in a panic, hiding behind a tree. Rainwater was crying, sobbing. He protested to Al, "I am going to die if I go out there." Al encouraged him to "come on and get going." When Rainwater did not respond, Al tried to shock him out of his fear by slapping the side of his helmet. Nothing seemed to budge Rainwater.

Al was able to move the platoon across an open field to spend the night. Because Rainwater was no better in the morning, Al grew concerned about him. He knew that Rainwater was exhausted, scared, and wanted to go home. Having been in Viet Nam for 11 months, Rainwater was a "short stick"—meaning that he was due to go home soon. Al felt that maybe he had put too much pressure on the young soldier who was constantly on point. He made the decision to have Rainwater walk rear security that day instead of being point.

Rainwater would be the very last, the 29th person in the platoon. Al thought that less responsibility might help Rainwater relax and regain his rational behavior. Rainwater was thrilled not to be on point.

That day was spent chasing stragglers when the platoon walked into a base camp area of the NVA. The ground was well packed, and the smell of fire from the NVA soldiers' recent lunch was still present. Al knew they had walked into a hornet's nest. The platoon squatted down and alternated right and left, looking on both sides for soldiers. It was eerily quiet except for the sounds of the jungle, and then a single shot from an AK-47 opened up in the rear. The platoon fired backed with their M-16s until "cease fire" was called.

Al raced to the back of his men to find Rainwater sitting with his rifle across his lap and his legs crossed. He was leaning over, having been shot in the head by a sniper. A stick remained in his right hand as he had been drawing circles and doodling in the dirt. Al looked at Rainwater with both dismay and anger. Rainwater had let down his guard since he was in the rear. Carelessness and lack of attention had played a part in his death.

Because the platoon was so remote, there was no way to get Rainwater out of the jungle. As neither a stretcher nor a poncho was available, Al radioed for a helicopter. Rainwater's arms were tied to his body, and his legs were tied together as well. A rope was thrown from the helicopter and wound around his ankles. As his body was lifted and hung in flight, Al choked up.

Not long after Rainwater's death, Al completed his required six months as a platoon leader and was assigned to Camp Eagle for administrative work. By this time, he had become disillusioned with the war. He felt the government had unrealistic ideas of what could be accomplished in Viet Nam. Politicians had manipulated the truth, and the stories and imagery in the press had turned people against our own soldiers. His contacts with South Viet Nameese civilians, who often did not understand the difference between democracy and communism, convinced him that most of the South Viet Nameese just wanted to be left alone. The NVA and Viet Cong were not going to give up. His conclusion: we shouldn't be here. *Was all this dying for naught?*

When he returned home, there were no accolades. He found that people physically took steps back from him when they found out that he had served in Viet Nam. One person asked him if he were a "baby killer," and there seemed to be a common assumption that all the soldiers in "Nam" were on drugs. For a southern boy who had had gone to fight communism, he no longer disclosed that he had served. For 10 years he refused to talk about his experiences; he did not want to be chastised for having done what he thought his country wanted him to do.

The grief over Rainwater's death remained with Al forever. There was guilt over his decision to relieve Rainwater from point; that relief cost Rainwater his life. There was anger over the broken commitment; Al had done his best to save all the platoon, and Rainwater had not been careful on the

day of his death. There were feelings of failure; Rainwater was the only solider that Al lost in his mission to bring his platoon home safely. There was no communal support for his loss; his country questioned his commitment.

It was 48 years later when Al and I did this interview. He was full of emotion and cried on the phone. His grief was as palpable as when the tragedy occurred. He had tried to convince himself that he had done all he could do to protect Rainwater; that people are going to die in war, especially those in the infantry; and that he should accept it all as part of the horrors of war. But none of those thoughts had erased the graphic images in his mind. He could still see Rainwater's body as it was hoisted from the jungle. I could have tried to lessen his pain by saying something about the trauma of war or suggesting that Rainwater had post traumatic stress symptoms, but it was clear that it would not have touched his unrelenting grief.

For many of those who have experienced the trauma of war, some scars cut too wide and deep, complicating and

prolonging the process of grief. Reading about the struggle of a fellow veteran may lessen the feelings of isolation and offer some measure of relief.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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