

Remembrance and Restoration

A Vietnam vet returns to find the man who saved him

BY JACK ESTES

WHEN I WAS 19 I CARRIED A MACHINE GUN IN VIETNAM and lived in a village outside Da Nang. I was part of a squad of 10 Marines and 15 local villagers called a Combined Action Platoon. One night in March of 1969 we were overrun by Viet Cong. Most of my platoon was killed or wounded. A villager named Hien saved my life. I remember he had a gold front tooth, and for almost 25 years I've thought about Hien and some day returning to my village, returning to the origin of my pain.

My family knows about pain. They have seen it in my face and heard it in my voice and lived it in a dozen different ways. My wife knows how Doc was shot, how Big Jimmy died, and she has seen, in her mind's eye, the dead and wounded lying on top of me. She has lived with my inability to cry and the distant look I get in my eyes. My little boy and girl also know about pain. They know of Dad's friends who had head wounds and sucking chest wounds; and of those who walk with leg braces, swinging useless arms. They've met C.J., who was bayoneted, and Louie with no teeth, whose fingers were blown off and his face disfigured. They know the Fourth of July isn't good for me, and that during Desert Storm I felt crazy. They understand that sometimes I don't sleep and can't play with them because I have been up all night wondering if the village still exists, or if Hien is alive. Mostly I wonder if it all really happened. A few months ago, I took my wife and children to Vietnam. I wanted to return to my village and, with the help of my friend Louie, who was visiting Da Nang, try to find Hien.

We landed outside Ho Chi Minh City. In a country thriving on the black market and corruption I worried as the police checked our bags. At the same time I felt detached seeing my uniformed former enemies. A beat-up van drove us past dilapidated buildings and stray cows wandering through broken streets. Soon we were in the city, surrounded by thousands of bicycles, motorbikes and three-wheeled cyclo-carts. Some motorbikes carried families, sacks of rice, baskets of chickens. One old man pedaled by with a huge hog filling his cyclo; another had a cart full of dead ducks, their heads hanging to the side.

Countless beggars roamed the streets. Multiple amputees dragged themselves up or hopped at my side begging, "You! You!" I was overwhelmed with grief walking past a blind boy with no arms begging next to an old man with no legs. A great sense of despair came over me when I saw the former U.S. Embassy, boarded up and run-down, the courtyard littered with broken glass and feces. Two nights were enough—we left for Da Nang.

As our plane descended, I began having flashbacks to when Doc was hit and imagined his blood on me. I thought of Hien standing over Big Jimmy as he lay dead among the shabby shanties of my village. At the beginning of our trip I was concerned that I would feel nothing. Now I worried about breaking apart—like a statue disintegrating. When we stood in the aisle to deplane, I began to weep. I wanted to let out deep sobs of grief I was never allowed to feel as a young soldier. I became dazed. It

was as if I'd come back one last time to try and save all those who'd died in my place.

Louie greeted us on arrival. He was extremely excited, nearly manic, as he pulled me to one side. "Bro, I did it!" he cried. "I found him, Bro! Hien is alive!" For days, Louie had sent out reconnaissance teams of former South Vietnamese soldiers to my village to find Hien. When they finally found him, he was frightened. He thought it was a communist trick; he couldn't believe that I'd returned after all these years. He was so fearful that when Louie's scouts left he took a knife and scraped off his gold cap. Only when Louie went into the village with an old photo of me did Hien agree to come to Da Nang.

On meeting, he looked older and smaller. I remembered the younger Hien, firing his rifle, throwing grenades and pressing his hand on Big Jimmy's red throat. I looked hard at his face, trying to see the young man he used to be. I recognized his high cheekbones and began to relax when he recalled the weapons I'd carried. Then he took his gold cap from his pocket, held it to his mouth and smiled. Suddenly I began to see through the years. I thought about him warning me that night "V.C. *beaucoup* V.C." and then directing machine-gun fire when Marines were dying all around us.

The next day Hien took us to our village. In the countryside time has frozen. There are miles of tin-roofed shacks lining the roads, followed by wide expanses of brilliant green rice paddies. Farmers in conical hats and rolled-up pants still tend their crops with plows pulled by water buffalo. Mountains bordering the fields shoot up in thick, unbroken canopies of startling jungle. Surprisingly, the years and the jungle's wildness have healed the scars of B-52 strikes and greened over the napalm memories.

My village is poor; there are no paved roads, sanitation facilities or schools. The fields and the thatched-roof homes are the same, but all of the villagers I once knew are dead or gone. Some may have made it to America or died trying. The shanties where Big Jimmy and the others died are gone, too, replaced by a grove of bamboo trees. But being there gave me a sense of peace; a feeling of completion.

Later as we stood at the edge of the village, saying goodbye to Hien, an old woman came by. She was bent over, hobbling down the dirty street, a leg blown off at the hip and an arm twisted and deformed. "You! You!" she cried. "Give me money." She stopped at my feet, balanced on her good arm and one leg, smiling through blackened teeth. For a moment I thought I knew her. Her conical hat had slipped to the side of her head as she pleaded, "You! You!" I felt a sense of guilt and remorse looking at her deformed arm tucked close to her chest, useless except for an open palm begging for money. She had probably been maimed by U.S. gunfire. Or maybe she was blown up trying to plant a mine back when I was 19. "You! You!" She insisted. Louder this time. "You! You!" I gave her 20 cents; she smiled and hopped away.



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