

Coming Home

Bien Hoa

In October 1969, the White House announced that as part of the Nixon Administration's "Vietnamization" program, the 82nd Airborne would be one of the first American combat units withdrawn from South Vietnam. That meant I would be going home early, together with just about everyone else I knew in the division. We were hugely excited by the news - - equal parts exultation about getting out and paranoia about staying safe until we climbed aboard the "freedom bird".

The 82nd relocated to Phu Loi to stand down and from there the people I knew left in twos and threes for the Bien Hoa airfield and the return home. Eventually, Thomas and I were the only members of the radar squad still in country and in mid-November our turn finally came and we jumped on the truck to Bien Hoa. Later that day, sitting at a slatted wooden table in a far corner of the almost empty repo-depot beer hut, Thomas was sipping his beer slowly, looking straight ahead into the late afternoon sun. He turned to me and said, "Do I smell?"

I looked at him quizzically: "What you say?"

"I mean, do I smell, smell bad?"

"Thomas, I don't know what you're talking about. You don't smell bad. Why are you asking?"

He paused, sipped his beer, again looked straight ahead, past me, and said, "Sometimes the way the guys acted, I thought maybe I smell."

"Well, you don't."

We finished our beers in silence, then shook hands, and wished each other well. We were leaving on different flights the next morning. Earlier in the day, I had borrowed five dollars from Thomas. I never saw him or heard from him again; I never paid him back.

Berzerkly

The flight home across the Pacific took the Southern route stopping briefly in Hawaii to refuel. In the row behind me was a PFC in handcuffs sitting between two MPs, being brought back for a crime I could only assume was pretty serious. His situation gave the lie to the standard GI refrain: "What can they do to me - - send me to Vietnam?"

Glimpsing at the manacled soldier, I realized that maybe Vietnam wasn't the worst thing that could happen to you.

We landed at San Francisco and were bussed to the Oakland Army Terminal where GIs, like me, who were leaving the service, underwent a perfunctory physical. We then proceeded through a sequence of stations where our paperwork was reviewed, added to, signed, and stamped. The final document in our file was the DD-214, which contained on a single sheet of paper our service history and the all-important statement that our discharge was an honorable one. After changing into civilian clothes, we were allowed to keep our duffel bags and any items of our military uniforms that we wished to hold onto. Although it was a bright, sunny California day, as I walked out of the terminal, the air seemed cold after Vietnam and I was happy to be wearing a heavy Army overcoat, one of the service items I had decided to keep.

I took a cab to Milvia Street in Berkeley, where my sister Bits lived with her boyfriend Jim Moorhead. It was around noon when I rang the doorbell and Bits, answering the door, screamed, and gave me a big hug and kiss. Jim, who had worked 'til late the night before at Bill Graham's Fillmore West in San Francisco, had just gotten out of bed and came over and hugged me too. The apartment, which was located not far from University Avenue and the Berkeley campus, the scene of student rioting throughout the 1960s, was filled with light and plants, flowers and cannabis. The apartment was also seemed to be filled with Irish setters - - Quinn, whom Bits had brought with her from New York and Quinn's new puppy Tara.

I spent the next few days wandering with Bits and Jim around the Bay area - - Golden Gate Park, Haight-Ashbury, North Beach, the Muir Woods - - drinking wine and smoking dope, some of which I had sent to them from Vietnam. We ate in a couple of local restaurants where the food was cheap but good. Although the weather was consistently clear and sunny, I couldn't seem to get warm. While I was in Berkeley, I heard the first sensational media reports concerning the My Lai massacre and initially didn't believe them, since I had never seen or heard of anything like that when I was over there. Finally, when it was time to go, Bits and Jim gave me a lift to the airport and I was off to New York.

Home

When I landed at LaGuardia, my sister Susie and Donald Percudani were there to greet me with champagne and kisses and hugs all around. Back home after embracing my Mom, Dad and my brother Tom and having a drink or two, I went to bed, at long last in the comfort and safety of my own bedroom. With the constant tension and adrenalin of Vietnam draining away, I slept for 25 hours.

Everything at home felt odd and out of kilter. The City itself was strange as I slowly started to reestablish my life, or at least try to. I let my hair and mustache, which had not been particularly short in Vietnam, grow longer and I bought Lennon-style wire eyeglass frames. I took the subway to a New York State office on Seventh Avenue in Chelsea and applied for unemployment benefits.

Lucky Penny

On a Friday night in late January, I rode the subway into Manhattan from my parents' home in Sunnyside Queens. I walked over from the station at 51st Street and Lexington Avenue to the Lucky Penny, a tiny bar on 53rd Street near First Avenue. All the neighborhood guys were crowded around the short wooden bar which ran along the back wall - - Peachy, his brother Donald, Vinny Gaizo, Danny Vescovi, Marty Giovi, Mike Hagan, Larry Strubing, Billy Smith, Georgie Kowalski, and others. I was still something of a novelty after being away two years in the Army, so there was a lot of hand shaking and back pounding. When I threw my \$10 on the bar for the kitty, Peachy pulled the bill out and gave it back to me. "Next time", he said. Hughie the bartender drew me a beer and I looked up at the TV perched high on the wall to the right of the bar. The news had just come on and the announcer was reciting the weekly butcher's bill: KIAs, WIAs, MIAs. I watch for a second or two and felt the rage building inside of me. I slam my beer glass onto the bar and said in a loud voice, "This is bullshit. They already decided we're not going to win the war. They're already pulling troops out. Nobody should be getting his ass shot off anymore. They should pull them all out." The guys didn't say anything; they were hearing me out.

When I turned away from the TV, a man who had been sitting at a table near the door was now right in my face. "You're the reason we're losing the war. It's hippy creeps like you with your antiwar bullshit that's hurting the country." My eyes got big. I couldn't believe it. Billy Smith quickly stepped between us and put his finger in the man's chest. "Listen Jack, were you in the service?" The man said something about it not making any difference. "So you weren't in Vietnam." "No" the man said. "So why don't you shut the fuck up" Billy yelled. "This guy just got back from Vietnam." In a lower voice the man said it wasn't the point. Hughie, noticing that Peachy and Vinny had started to move towards the guy, zipped out from behind the bar and grabbed the man by his shoulder saying, "No trouble here boys, no trouble." He pushed the stranger over towards the door. Everyone at the bar was glaring at the table where the guy was now talking in low tones with two women and another man. I turned to pick up my beer and when I looked again towards the door, the foursome were throwing what they owed on the table and getting out of there.

Here Comes the Sun

The late February morning was cold and dark as I reluctantly left Susie's warm bed. I was up and out at 6:00 to allow plenty of time before Susie's mother returned from her job as a night nurse at New York Hospital. Susie, a pretty blond, soft and pink, sleepily kissed me goodbye and then snuggled down in the blankets. Walking as quietly as I could through the living room, past the rank kitchen where Susie's Irish setter Gaudie had begun stirring, I was quickly out the apartment door. I discovered I was too low on cash to grab a cab, so I walked down 49th Street, past Christo's Steakhouse with its lingering smell of charred beef, to Lexington Avenue and on down to Grand Central and the Number 7 train to Sunnyside. The high vaulted station was quiet and virtually empty when the Queens-bound train finally rattled in. I boarded, sat down, and almost immediately started to nod off, thinking warm thoughts of Susie. I awakened with a jolt as the train emerged from the tunnel at Hunters Point and filled with light. The eastern sky was almost blinding - - pearly pink suffused with yellow orange. The kid down the car from me had turned his radio on and *Here Comes the Sun* blared out:

Little darling
It's been a long, cold lonely winter.
Little darling
It feels like years since it's been here.

I had just started to put some distance between me and Vietnam and now Susie was helping. "It's all right", I thought.