

Chapter 1

There is nothing that war has ever achieved that we could not better achieve without it.

—William Hooke

In 1995, I stood daydreaming in front of my office window, staring at the threatening skies, mesmerized by the trees whipping violently in the gusting wind. It would be raining much harder soon. I wore the look of a haggard man. My hair was graying, the starched collar of my perfectly creased white shirt squeezed my neck tightly and my red silk tie hung loosely down to my belt buckle. Everything in my office was perfectly arranged, a byproduct of being a marine. I saw my reflection in the glass, revealing the deepening lines in my once youthful face. I was almost forty-five and twenty-five years had passed since leaving Vietnam. I walked back to my desk and sank into my soft brown leather chair.

On the wall behind my desk hung a picture of my oldest son in his dress blue marine uniform, and next to it sat a shadow box of medals I had earned in Vietnam, with a picture of myself as a youthful marine sitting under my poncho in the jungle in 1969. Only nineteen when the picture was taken, I appeared to be more child than man. I could hardly believe that it was me. Sitting under my poncho, poised with my rifle, shirtless except for my flak jacket, and lying on my pack which held everything that I owned in life, I was ready for battle. I remember it was taken in the Arizona Territory, a notorious area in Vietnam. The picture was a vivid reminder that no matter how tough life got or how bleak my situation appeared to be in my

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current life, I needed only glance at the photo to remind me of where I had been, what I had endured, and how brutal life could really get, and suddenly my everyday problems became meaningless.

My son had quickly grown into a man and joined the Marine Corps; I'm sure that I influenced his decision. On a recent trip to attend his Marine Corps graduation ceremony in San Diego, I realized that all the emotions of being a marine were once again stirring inside of me. Watching those fine young stallions being molded into men, hearing the familiar screaming by the drill instructors, and seeing the red and gold colors proudly displayed everywhere filled my heart with an old, buried pride of being a marine. Only another marine understands the power of the corps, of being a marine. *Semper Fi* says it all. For the next few days, I was determined to understand and deal with those familiar feelings. Why did I feel such pride and honor but at the same time such pain, hurt, resentment, and anger? The emotions didn't seem to fit with one another. There had to be a reason why I felt as I did, and I was determined to figure it out.

Lying on my desk, in an old shoebox, was a stack of old letters that I had sent home to my mother while in Vietnam. She had recently returned them to me. I didn't know why I held onto them. I hadn't even read them since returning home. A photo album lay next to the box that was full of pictures that I had sent home. I remember Mom commenting that the pictures were always of me and my marine buddies sitting around in the jungle cooking our coffee over makeshift stoves made from C-ration cans burning heat tabs, or a guy shaving, or some other meaningless domestic activity. I later explained to her that as soon as she sent me the disposable camera in the mail, I

immediately took the pictures before the camera was ruined by the rain and that I didn't want the extra weight of the camera in my pack. Besides when you were caught in an ambush the last thing on your mind was grabbing the camera to take pictures of a Viet Cong shooting at you. A marine always lightened the load he had to hump, even if it was a tiny camera. Also in the box was a yellow stained airline ticket, still neatly folded in its tattered cover. When I thought about the airline ticket, tears welled up in my eyes.

Staring at my son's picture I felt the all too familiar rage and anger swelling in my heart once again. I'd felt it for so many years, the burning desire to tell off America, to blast its politicians and citizens for what they had done to me and my fellow marines, and all the others who had served the country honorably, proudly, in battle. But I always kept my feelings about war to myself. I had tried so often to let the emotions go, but I never knew how. That's the tough part. Young minds are subjected to surreal situations and the only way to deal with them is to suppress them, which is the worst thing to do. For too many years I blamed myself for my bitterness and hostility but never understood why I felt that way.

Then, in my quiet office, watching it rain, I finally realized that the war was still a living part of me and had been for more than twenty-five years after coming home. My emotional war wounds were buried deep inside me, and even though dealing with them would be gut wrenching, if I ever hoped to find peace and release all of the heartache, fear and despair, loneliness, guilt, anger, bitterness, and every other emotion from my soul—let them drift away into the past and know that my war was over—I'd have to confront and deal with the pain and relive my entire experience of war. I would write it all down and then reread

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it a hundred times until I understood every word that flowed from deep within me. Maybe then I could sort out the truth about how I felt, and maybe others who I loved and cared about would be able to understand why I acted as I did when I returned home from Vietnam and would better understand what war was really like for a nineteen-year-old kid.

I rose from my chair and once again strolled over to the window. The rain was coming down hard, cascading from the roof and splashing on a banana tree in the flowerbed. Seeing the rain run off the leaves reminded me of the monsoon.

The monsoon crept in shrouded in dark, damp, dreary clouds. It was like living in a black and white photograph. The young faces of the marines grew sullen and their eyes blackened from not sleeping and they had a haggard, drawn look of despair, making their youthful faces seem much older. The thousand-yard stare of depression became etched on everyone's face. The stench of rotting skin on the marine's feet and the smell of soiled damp clothing mixed with gritty dirt clogging pores was still etched in my mind.

When the rain fell and the dark clouds hung low and the thunder rolled, I was reminded of the many lonesome days spent praying to God that the rain would stop. I'd get a fresh pair of dry socks, and he would let me survive just one more day.

I felt alone, stumbling through the darkness in Vietnam, searching for an answer that no one could give, like a story that had no end or a poem that made no sense. In such weather, I curled up in my poncho, wrapped tightly, lay on my side so only half of me got wet, and slept.

Winter soon drifted into spring then to summer, almost undetected. Only the calendar scratched on the side of every marine's helmet revealed which month it was and how many days he had left in country. Our skin, pale and white from months of being in the rain, soon turned red under the hot sun then a dark tan from months of exposure to the heat. At least being tan hid the dirt that accumulated on our skin from weeks of not bathing.

As I glanced down at the pictures in the album that lay opened on my desk, I realized that I was about to cry again. Sometimes when I was alone and thought about the war I would cry and never had a clue why. No one saw me do it. Marines don't cry; men don't cry. Why after so many years did the war affect me so? Why did I have such unexplained shame, guilt, and uncontrollable anger, violence that often came rushing out without warning? What were these emotions that I couldn't explain or understand? I felt like a walking time bomb ready to explode.

As I stood motionless, watching it rain, my breath fogged the window. The cold air of winter penetrated the glass and the tears came flowing from my eyes and rolled down my face like the rain sliding down on the windowpane. I began to sob and soon it turned to a loud, moaning cry, swelling from deep within. It was gut wrenching, as if I was about to vomit. I dropped to my knees and wrapped my arms around my chest and heaved back and forth. Never had I felt so distraught. For the first time since returning from my war, after twenty-five years, I finally, for some unknown reason, was letting my mournful soul scream and cry out, releasing my feelings, exploding them into the empty and darkening room without fear that

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someone could hear me. The outburst lasted only a few minutes, but for me it was as if decades of pain, sorrow, and heartache were being ripped from my guts.

I settled into my chair and closed my eyes, remembering.