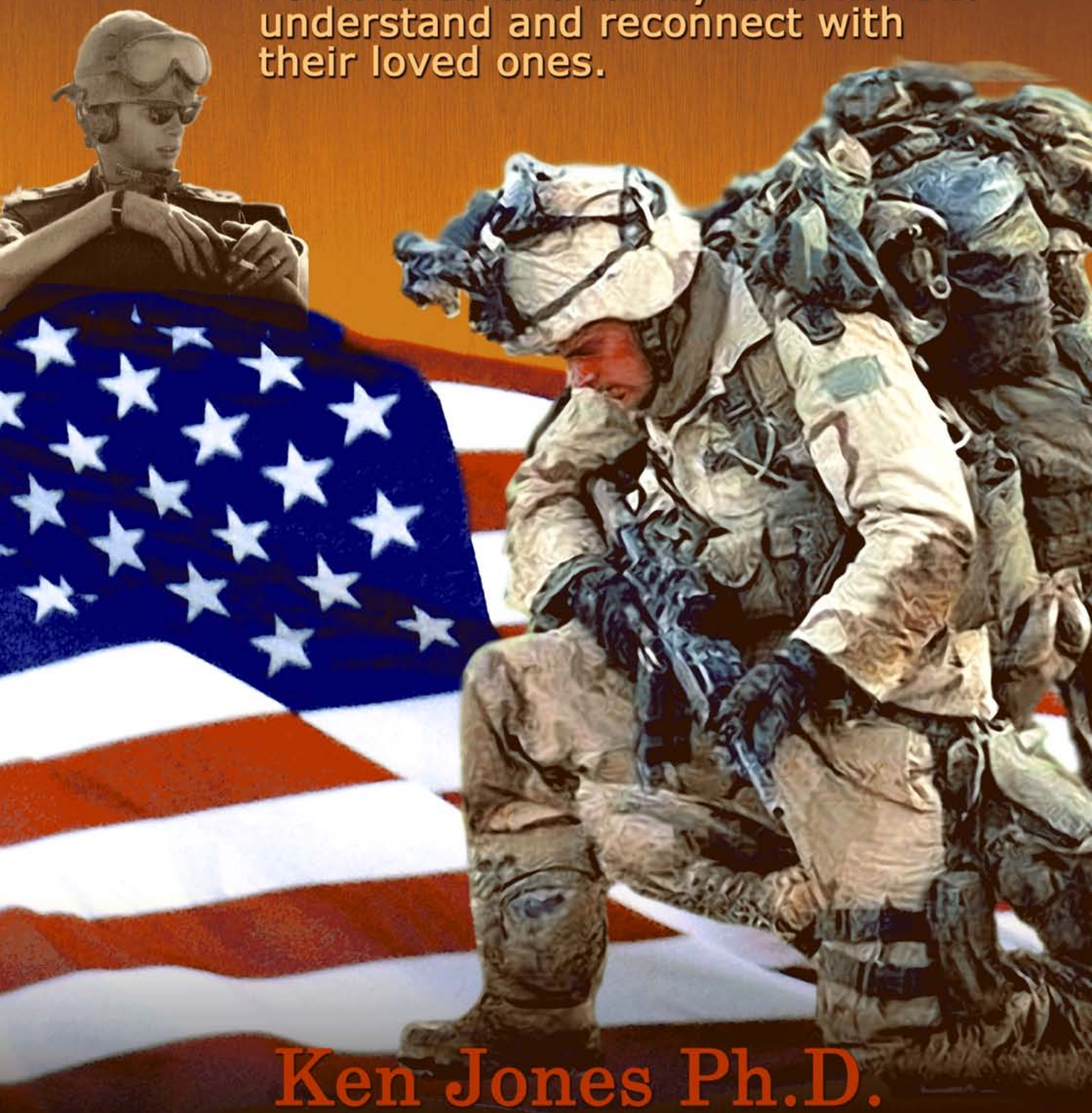


When Our Troops Come Home

For friends and family who want to
understand and reconnect with
their loved ones.



Ken Jones Ph.D.

When Our Troops Come Home

Ken Jones, PhD

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For my brothers

**Ned Neathery
Jim Bondsteel
And
Gabe Rollison**

Forward

You are not alone. You, the families and friends who await their return – you, who have experienced combat and know that your world is forever changed. You are not alone.

Across the decades and generations we, who did our trigger time in Vietnam, look to you with pride and admiration for who you are – America's warriors - the one percent who serve.

We understand the fear and rage and guilt you experience, the nights without sleep and the need for the next adrenalin fix. We understand the bond, the love that exists among warriors. We understand how, at first, there are no words to express the losses you have endured, or the guilt of having survived.

Understanding these things we who served in Vietnam have an obligation. It is simply this: That never again shall a generation of America's warriors have to endure what we endured on the long journey home.

This then is a beginning, just one of thousands across our country. *When Our Troops Come Home* is a description of an interior journey for warriors returning from combat. It is offered to families and friends who desperately want to understand. And it is offered to our warriors as one more voice reminding you that you are not alone.

Ken Jones
Anchorage, Alaska
May 26, 2008
Memorial Day

Preface to the Original Edition

Even now I recall them; space enfolding itself in majesty, the infinite blue of the clear winter sky extending beyond forever; the immaculate miles of white on white; the ridgelines and mountaintops articulating the solitude of being - the Brooks Range. March 1968.

I had stood hours before, staring blankly into the humidity and heat, beside the runway of the Tan Son Nhut Airbase in the Republic of Viet Nam. I still recall the helplessness and terror of sitting in the window seat, three rows behind the trailing edge of the 707's right wing, as it taxied onto the active runway and surged toward its takeoff speed. For most of the month prior to my departure we had been in the Iron Triangle with the 101st Airborne, trying to stop the 122mm rockets that were raining in on the airbase during the 1968 Tet Offensive.

I knew that there was no such thing as being short so long as I was within range of anything in Viet Nam. It was the knowing that turned my knuckles white as I gripped the armrests and watched the world accelerate along the tarmac outside the aircraft window.

The last time I was blown up was eight days before I was supposed to leave the country. There was no such thing as short. So, I watched and ate the fear and willed the aircraft into the sky.

As the jet climbed and turned outward bound, the old staff sergeant sitting next to me leaned over and offered his reassurance. "Relax son, you're going home." My aching hands let go of the armrests. I nodded and tried to smile. But even then I knew, there was no longer any such place as home.

As I watched the unfolding beauty of the Alaska winter I felt like a hundred-year-old child seeing snow for the first time. The aircraft made a sweeping right turn and headed south. I slept. Finally, we were out of range.

The PA system awakened me. Not the words, but the click of the microphone button just before the flight attendant's announcement. We were beginning our descent into Anchorage, Alaska. This was a refueling stop. We could deplane for an hour or so if we liked. Moments after the stewardess' announcement, a male voice came over the system in an authentic impersonation of the impersonal monotone flight attendants use for landing announcements. It was one of the grunts who had been seated up forward.

"Gentlemen, in preparation for our arrival in Anchorage, please bring your tray tables, seat backs and stewardesses to their full upright position for landing."
The resulting cheers and laughter started exhausted men moving again.

When the aircraft stopped, a stairway was pushed up to the front door. The doors were opened and it took only seconds for the cold to sweep through the cabin. All of us wore short sleeve, khaki summer uniforms. Deplaning was swift and stumbling. Brilliant sunshine. How could there be this much sunlight and such intense cold? Inside the terminal I stood shivering. Even here it was only seventy degrees. How could people live in these temperatures?

I saw her walking toward me. She was old. Forty, maybe forty-five. She smiled at me. She walked up and offered me a blue, half-sized, airline-issued blanket. I gratefully accepted. I remember her. The blanket stopped my shivering and her smile made me warm. She turned and disappeared into the milling crowd. I didn't get a chance to thank her. It was one of the kindest things anyone has ever done for me.

When Our Troops Come Home is the continuation of the journey begun in the frigid sunshine of Anchorage in March of 1968. The journey took sixteen years. This book is about trauma, specifically, the trauma induced by combat. It is a story recounted in metaphor and symbol and direct experience. This is the nature of interior journeys. Such material is intended to be read twice, once with the mind and once with the heart.

During the past three and a half years I have had the opportunity to spend moments and hours and days and months with human beings who have experienced trauma. It has been my honor and privilege to share in these peoples' anguish and healing. Much of it as a result of my time spent as a volunteer counselor at the Anchorage Viet Nam Veterans Outreach Center. Many of the men and women I have spent time with were survivors of combat in Viet Nam. There were also a number of wives of Viet Nam survivors who were desperately seeking answers to questions they did not understand; questions about the pain and silence of their husbands concerning anything to do with Viet Nam.

Trauma, whatever its form, is devastating. It tears the mind, shatters the soul and breaks the heart. Trauma leaves a human being cut off and isolated. If the pain is not shared and dissipated, it becomes impacted.

Over and over again I heard the words that "had never been spoken". The assumption, expressed by the person with whom I talked, was that they were alone in their anguish. They felt relief when someone spoke their language. It was the same with me when I began my journey.

It is my hope that, as we spend time together, you will come to understand that, although this story is recounted around the trauma of combat, it is the possibility of healing from trauma that is paramount. The nature of trauma is to force people to face meaninglessness directly. The symbols of a person's life are obliterated. People are left alone with only themselves. In the desolation and aloneness, through the love of those willing to share their pain, the mystery of life is renewed and affirmed.

Lest anyone be misled, let me say that I am not a psychiatrist or psychologist or a social worker. I am a grunt. I was trained in recon. I just say what I see.

Truly, there is a place called home. To the lady who met me at the Anchorage Airport so many years ago - thank you.

Ken Jones
June 1987
Eagle River, Alaska

PART I

THE CAULDRON

Chapter 1

"First up in the morning, as usual - old men have guilty dreams - I start the fire and build the coffee. Our culture runs on coffee and gasoline, the first often tasting like the second."

Edward Abbey
Down The River

August, 1967. Southwest of Chu Lai. Our cav platoon is linked up with a company of South Koreans. ROK Marines. The area we're going into is seven miles wide, twenty-three miles long. It has been declared a free fire zone. It is a VC staging area. The locals are VC supporters. Our mission is to burn or destroy every structure and kill anything that moves. People. Animals. Livestock. Anything. Everything. Search and destroy.

The company of ROK's has four U.S. Marine advisors, a captain, a sergeant and two enlisted men. I'm driving the lead track, three zero. It's my job. I've already been blown up once. I know what this is about.

Hot. It's only mid-morning and the sun beating down on our tracks makes the metal so hot that our gunners have to sit on their flack jackets. Nobody wants to stand inside the track when it's moving. We all know the mines are out there.

Nothing. Moving. Waiting. Moving. Nothing. An embankment ahead. A stream. Banks too high and steep to negotiate. Dense brush beyond.

"Three zero, three six. Find us a place to ford."

"Three zero, roger."

"Hang a left, Ken."

"Roger."

We move out. The rest of the tracks herring-bone. Tracks in column, alternating their front slopes left and right to establish clear fields of fire. Our track moves on, paralleling the stream. The feeling settles in. Intercom.

"Jerry?"

"Yeah."

"This sucks."

"Yeah."

We move on. The stream turns south. A slight rise to our right front. A steep drop, maybe fifteen feet down. Sand at the bottom. Fifty meters across. A negotiable slope on the opposite side. No other place to pass. Stream bank where we came from. Drainage ditch ahead of us.

"Jerry."

"Yeah."

"This really sucks."

"Yeah."

"Three six. Three zero."

"Roger. Go."

"We got a place to ford."

"Roger. We're moving up."

"Three seven, three six. Move up and cover three zero."

"Three elements, three six. Move east and come on line. Cover."

The tracks move out behind us. We wait. I climb out of my coffin and watch the tracks move toward us. The ROK's are moving in a crouch. Bayonets fixed. They don't like it either. The Marine captain is riding three six. The sergeant and one of the enlisted men are on three seven.

Jim Fleshhood is driving three seven. Jim is my best friend. He's been blown up, too. We both know.

Jerry is a twenty-seven-year old staff sergeant, my track commander. His eyes haven't stopped searching the ravine and brush beyond. Our gunners are behind their gun shields. Ready. Jesus, it's hot.

The tracks and infantry are almost to us. Three seven moves to our left rear. Clear field of fire. Three two moves to our right rear. Same thing.

I look at Fleshhood, the top of his head and his eyes visible above the driver's hatch. We just look at each other.

"Jerry?"

"Yeah."

"There's a mine in there."

"I know. You see anything?"

"No, but I know it's there."

"Yeah."

The rest of the tracks are set.

"Three zero, three six."

"Three zero."

"The ROK's are sending squads through to secure the other side. Cover."

"Three zero. Roger."

The ROK's move out. Low. Quick. Nothing. Across the sand. Up the opposite bank. Nothing. We wait. Nothing.

The crack of the radio startles me.

"Three zero. Three six."

"Three zero."

"Let's go."

"Three six, three zero. There's got to be a mine in there. Do you want to sweep it or walk it first?"

"This is three six. Do you see anything?"

"Three zero. Negative. But it's there."

"Three six, roger. Move out. Slowly."

Jerry and I look at each other. We were blown up together last month. We know.

"Well, Ken, you heard the man."

"Yeah, shit." Into the coffin.

"Three two, three six."

"Three two."

"Three two, follow three zero. Stay right in his tracks."

"Three seven, three six."

"Three seven."

"Three seven, hold what you got until three zero makes the far bank then follow three two across."

"Three seven, roger."

I hold the steering levers and depress the accelerator with my right foot. The track moves toward the rise. Up the incline. Up. Up. Nursing the levers. Waiting for the track to counter balance and drop down the opposite side. I hold my breath. Waiting for the explosion. The track falls forward. Forever. Crunch. We're on the down side of the slope. Nothing.

I hit the accelerator. Sand flies. Up the other side. We made it. I explode out of the driver's compartment. We made it. Jerry and I smile at each other. Three two is hauling ass across the sand. Right in our tracks. Jesus, we're alive!

Three seven is approaching the berm. ROK infantry coming down on both sides. Three seven is coming in at a slight angle. Jim's a good driver. Let one side of the track land before the other and it helps absorb the shock. Front slope in the air. Starting down. They're going to come down slightly to the right of my tracks. Slightly to the right. Maybe a quarter of a track width. Ten inches maybe.

The blast knocks me backwards. My legs catch the rim of the driver's hatch. I pull myself back. Three seven is invisible in the black smoke. ROK's are down and screaming on both sides of the track. Some just disappeared.

"Six, three six. Dust off! Dust off!"

I rip my headset off. I don't remember running across the sand. The nightmare begins.

Three seven is on its back. Top hatches against the embankment. The rear door is lodged in the sand at the bottom of the ravine. No way to get inside. Black smoke billows up from underneath. I can hear the fire without seeing any flames. ROKs are

moving their wounded away. The fuel tanks are going to go. I can hear Fleshhood. He's inside.

"Get me out. Please! Get me out!"

"Jim!"

"Please get me out. I'm burning!"

There's no way. There's only six inches between the embankment and the driver's hatch. The barbed wire that was coiled on the front of the track is tangled around everything.

Panic! Dig at the sand. Someone else is with me. Maybe two others. Digging...Digging...Crunch. The metal coffin moves. Three five has pulled to the top of the berm and is trying to bulldoze three seven up. Thirteen tons of metal stuck on its back. Crunch. Some clearance.

Jim is screaming. The smoke is choking us. The snap of machine gun rounds beginning to cook off from the heat inside three seven.

"Try the other side!"

Can't see. I fall down the slope. Choking. Tears streaming. Crunch. Three seven shudders. Around the back. Clearer on this side. A slight breeze. Snap...snap...snap...snap. I hear the rounds ricocheting inside the track.

He's just laying there. The Marine sergeant. Forehead resting on his arm. No one else around. Just me and the Marine. He looks up. The eyes. Quiet. Very calm.

"I'm stuck."

"What?"

Crunch.

"Oh, Jesus, I'll be good. Please get me out!" Fleshhood pleading. Others shouting. Three five's engine roaring. Crunch. I can see daylight under the front of the track. Hear the scuffling and yelling from the other side.

"Jim! Grab my hand!" someone yells. They're getting to him. Jim screams as they pull him out through the tangled barbed wire.

The Marine. "I'm stuck."

"What's stuck?"

"My leg."

I bend down to look. See the flames inside. Snap...Snap...Snap. Two bodies already burned black. The gun shield is across his left leg at mid-calf. Right leg clear but jungle boot and fatigues already smoking.

"Gimme a fucking fire extinguisher! I need a knife!"

The fire extinguisher appears in my hand. Crunch. Others around. The Marine and I are alone. Nozzle pointed at his free leg. Swoosh. A white cloud. The extinguisher freezing in my hand.

"Hit it again!" Crunch.

The gun shield doesn't move. The Marine groans. Head on his forearm. More fire, reaching us now. Crunch. His fatigues ignite. Crunch. Pull.

"Pull, goddamn it!"

"I can't move."

The smell of flesh burning. The extinguisher is empty. "Where's that fuckin' knife!" Snap. Snap. Crunch.

"Wait." His hand reaches for my left arm.

"I'll get you out. Just a second."

"No. Wait."

The knife appears. I start to crawl in. The Marine and I are on our bellies. Face to face. He's on the inside. I'm on the outside. Shit, it's hot. I start to move. He grabs my flack jacket.

"Wait."

"Bullshit. I gotta get you out."

Quiet eyes look at me.

Snap. Snapsnapsnap.

"Shoot me."

"What?"

"Shoot me."

"I can't."

"Please. Just shoot me."

"I can't."

"Please!" Teeth gritted. Eyes quiet.

Time stops. Just the Marine and me.

"Please?"

Snap. Snap.

"Shit."

The M-16 is in my hand. Charging handle back, a round ejects, the bolt springs forward. Another round chambers. Safety clicks off. On one knee beside the Marine. Holding his hand. Muzzle to his head. Quiet eyes. Finger on the trigger. Snap. Snap. Snap. My mind shrieking. Trigger moving back. Quiet, quiet eyes....

Wake up! Sweating. Bile in my mouth. I cannot remember if my weapon ever fired.

I walked away from three seven. I have not yet walked away from the dream.

Chapter 2

"I've had all that I wanted of a lot of things I've had.
And a lot more than I wanted of some things that
turned out bad."

Merle Haggard
Wanted Man

Death did not come peacefully in Viet Nam. It did not lay on satin covers, surrounded by flowers and grieving loved ones. Death was not attended to by skilled professionals competent in the art of giving Death a peaceful appearance. In Viet Nam Death raged, full blown and evil, from the bowels of the earth.

Death's mistress shrieked in ecstasy amidst the screams of the wounded. She glided effortlessly through the gunfire, pausing only briefly to reassure herself that the mutilated body that another young man held in his arms had no pulse.

Death's mistress viewed her handiwork with satisfaction as the scorched, tree-like husk of an incinerated human being was stuffed, amid retching and curses, into an olive drab plastic bag. Ever present, Death clung defiantly and in jubilation to the absurdity of Viet Nam.

Death exerted its dominance through all of the human senses, especially the most primal sense, the survivor's sense of smell. What did Viet Nam smell like? Diesel fuel, gun smoke and the rancid, stinging, spoiled, ammonia stench of the sun baked dead. Survivors did not come back to the world with maturity. They returned very, very old.

Viet Nam is like herpes. Once you get it, it never really goes away. I went to Viet Nam when I was 19. I have spent the past 15 years watching, listening, and trying to understand. I have been a detached observer - being most comfortable in my aloneness.

Our time here will be spent in a sharing of the personal side, the feeling side, of an experience that, for those of us who were there, is an ever-present reality. My body was transported back from Viet Nam to Oakland, California in 1968. It took me years to realize that I died in Viet Nam.

In Viet Nam men were not killed in battle. They died in firefights. Firefight - an interesting euphemism. Like a rumble after a high school football game. The theory seemed to be that if the language of war could be made less specific, the act could be made more palatable. Somehow things were never called by names that conveyed meaning to anyone who was not a participant.

Even name became nomenclature. The killed, maimed and missing became KIA, WIA, MIA. The language of high-tech war. Detached, dehumanizing, unmeaning words. In an emerging, high-tech America, Viet Nam refocused our attention on the personal component of war. The purpose in Viet Nam was never to win. The purpose was to kill. High-tech death is sudden. Without dignity. Body bags are the epitome of high-tech death. Mass produced, non-descript, sanitary. While reading Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' book, *On Death and Dying*, I was most struck by the length of time in which the patients had to die.

There were few details given on how men died. The high-tech funeral in Viet Nam was a memorial service. The difference between a memorial service and a funeral is that at a memorial service it's easier to forget why you are there. Total acceptance can be used as effectively as total denial to isolate the living from the dead.

Memorial services never had bodies. We arrived alone. We survived alone. We went home alone. We survive alone. The most poignant lesson being that survival does not guarantee anything. Especially continued survival.

I knew a platoon sergeant that came to Viet Nam with the expressly stated purpose of either getting the Congressional Medal of Honor or being killed. I watched him get blown to pieces when he stepped on an antitank mine. The rest of us were relieved that we wouldn't have to be there when he got the medal. And we cried for him.

So far we have seen Viet Nam as a painting. A flat surface where the artist uses perspective to evoke feeling and emotion. Viet Nam is not a painting. Viet Nam is a play. One in which we still participate. A friend of mine once said that God was a comedian playing to an audience who was afraid to laugh. Perhaps it is time for us to perform the closing act. To allow the emotion, the feeling, the hurt, the vanity, the humor, and the tragedy to come to fruition.

For me, the anthem of Viet Nam is Richard Harris singing *MacArthur Park*. To this day I do not understand the words. And it makes no difference. The music touches me. The music is America in motion. Going nowhere. On and On. The cauldron of Viet Nam. Viet Nam survivors cling to their reality. There is nothing in fast food America that offers a comparable level of intensity.