

To Brother Tom

We "Namvets" call each other "brothers" for the time that we all spent
In a far away foreign land to which by our government we were sent.
We did not stop to question the what, the when or why.
We knew no other path but to heed our nation's cry.
It has taken several decades to realize the facts
that our sacrifices though noble were just a bunch of fruitless acts

When we arrived at the "Nam" airport, the tarmac was burning hot
the humidity was stifling and the air smelled of jungle rot.
We soon learned that the ubiquitous smell was not decaying vegetation
But rather the burning of the feces of the previous days visitation
To the common latrine facility near the perimeter of every base
Where the fire was fueled by diesel fuel to burn the fetid waste.

We were assigned to diverse units, which had the greatest need
To fly, to hump, to shoot, to fight, and ultimately to bleed.
We became the "FNGs", the new guys at the gate,
But the veterans eyes, the stares, the taunts spoke volumes of our fate
We would learn the hard way through a year of endless toil and fear
What soldiers have always learned, the end is always near.

Imagine spending a whole year living
on what you carry on your back
Your food, ammo, grenades, bandages, and spare socks
All in your green canvas rucksack
You spend weeks in the field until your smell becomes obscene
But there is no way to wash yourself unless you count wading through a stream

Every day you hump your load up mountains steep and thick
With saw grass, thorny vines, bamboo spines and creatures that can stick
their fangs, and stingers and pitchers injecting toxins in your skin
But these are not the only threats ...how do I begin?
Your skin with all its scrapes, punctures and cuts
becomes infected, swells up and fills with yellow pus

Your thirst becomes unquenchable, dehydration and heat exhaustion sets in
But the water sources all are tainted with malaria, typhus, and other pathogens
The malaria pills or other sources give you diarrhea without end
You have no choice but to mess yourself and add that smell to the blend
You sweat until your clothes are soaked and throw away your underwear
Because the tight wet drawers chaff and cause a rash almost everywhere

And yet you hump on for ten to twenty kilometers a day
Although exhausted, you cease to feel your body and continue on your way.
One foot in front of the other you lose all track of time and space
The trip become surreal, but to fall out would be a disgrace
You begin to realize the reality of your plight
You don't exist to win the "war" it's for your "brothers" that you fight.

We are among the lucky ones who came home almost intact
A return to a loving family the reward for all our acts.
We continued to what many thought was a normal life
A job, our kids and a supporting, loving wife.
But you and I we know the truth kept hidden way down deep.
We live with some old demons, the secrets that we keep.

John Henningson
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