

Faith in a Box – Chapter One Excerpt

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Chapter One The Accident

My name is Rick Greenberg, and the story I am about to tell is one many will not believe. I can only say it is true to the best of my knowledge, and to the best of the memories of all those who witnessed it.

I'm told I was unresponsive from the moment I arrived at Howard Community Hospital. My heart and breathing had stopped three times, from when people first found me barely alive, to the time I reached the emergency room. At one point while en-route to the ER, it took several minutes to revive me.

Except for pulmonary resuscitation, dedicated emergency medical technicians, a great emergency room department, and as many will say, a miracle from God, I would not be alive to tell my story. However, this is not the whole story, just the beginning.

John Polton, a Howard County fairground maintenance employee for the last 10 years was part of the cleanup crew for Kokomo Indiana department of parks and recreation. John was in his mid-forty's with long hair, a scrubby beard, and a protruding belly. He was wearing the same bib overalls he always wore while working. These traits made it easy for those who knew him to recognize. It was a Sunday, September 20 1992 when it all began.

A Vietnam Veterans' reunion had just finished a long weekend event. At the other end of the grounds sat a lone recreational vehicle. John wondered why it was still there. It was almost 11:00 am and all the other RV's and most of the veterans had left. He walked over to investigate and heard an engine running. He immediately realized it was the unit's generator. Then it came to him, this is the Reed's RV, I haven't seen them since last night.

Knocking at the door and getting no response, he began to worry thinking, with that generator running, anything could have happened to them; while looking for a way to peer inside the RV, John Spotted a wash bucket sitting under the camper. He grabbed the bucket, turned it upside down, stood on it, and gazed inside.

He gasped as he saw three people lying motionless. One woman was lying face down on the floor; two more people were lying directly below the window he was peering through. John suddenly flashed back to memories of Vietnam, and losing his balance he landed hard on the ground. He sat for a moment until he regained his senses, then spotted another crewmember walking several yards away he called to him.

"Hey Frank, call 911, there are people over here, they need help!"

"Who needs help? What's wrong?"

John climbed to his feet, rushed back to the RV attempting to break open the door while yelling back to his coworker,

"Just call 911 and hurry!"

Other workers who heard John yelling began to arrive at the campsite, "What are you doing

John, what the hell is going on?" They all said.

"The Reed's need help, people are dying in there!"

"What, what are you saying?"

"Look through the window and help me!"

Looking inside the RV, those who had gathered around were shocked at what appeared to be lifeless bodies. Other men joined in trying to help John break into the camper. Someone arrived carrying a tire iron. After prying it into the door jam, both he and John finally forced it open. Entering, they found the stench of death and human waste filled the vehicle.

Going first to the woman on the floor nearest the entryway, John tried to find a pulse but she was cold and stiff, rigor mortis had set in. Another woman and a man were on the dinette table bed. The woman was in a fetal position, the man on his back with his arm around her, both their faces seemed bruised, as if they were beaten. Finding the switch to the generator, John turned it off. Realizing what had happened, he began breaking out all the windows in an attempt to allow fresh air inside.

The sirens of emergency personnel arriving interrupted the sounds of windows breaking. Other civilians had entered the RV in an attempt to aid John when fifteen-year emergency technician Bob Hoard hurried in. Bob was a tall well-built man, sporting a military style haircut. Bob had seen some bad accidents over those years, but nothing like this. Behind him carrying the EMS supplies was partner Steve Ipolski. He had been on the job for six months, but had never dealt with a fatal accident. Steve began gagging at the smell of human waste when Bob told him, "Hold it together Steve," and then yelled for everyone to clear the vehicle.

Before leaving the scene, John informed the EMT's that the generator had been running. By what the EMT's had seen and observed, the suspicion of CO2 was high on the diagnosis. Squatting down next to the woman on the floor, Bob placed two fingers on her neck and found no pulse. Turning to Steve, he said, "This one's gone, check the guy in the rear!" Steve set the EMS kit down and moved past Bob and the dead woman to another man lying on the floor next to the bathroom, he too was covered in vomit and feces.

"This guy is alive, heart rate is strong, and pulse is good!"

Another EMT team arrived and Bob instructed them, to help Steve get his guy out the back door."

Moving to the second woman lying in the arms of the other male, he checked for a pulse, even though he knew her cold body meant she too was dead. Finding none, he moved to the man lying with her. He placed his fingers searching for life, finding it he yelled out at the top of his lungs.

"I've got a live one!"

His pulse was weak and breathing was shallow at best, he was near death. Bob realized the only chance was to get him oxygen immediately. Grabbing the bottle from the EMS bag, he placed the mask over his mouth, turned on the oxygen and then screamed to anyone outside the camper.

"Anyone out there, I need help!" John who had been standing outside by the door rushed back in.

"This guy is alive; we need to get him outside into fresh air. Grab his feet and help me carry him."

Together they carried the man outside, laying him on the ground. Getting on his radio connected directly to Howard Community Hospital Emergency Room, Bob said, "Howard Emergency this is EMT unit 27."

“This is Howard Emergency, go ahead 27.”

As Bob prepared to relay the information on this man, he heard another paramedic yell from inside the RV.

“I’ve got two more here, both weak but alive!”

Bob glanced back to the camper; his concentration broken for a moment. Then he began to relay the important information to the emergency room.

“I have a white male approximately 40 years of age. There is possible exposure to carbon monoxide, patient has shallow breathing and is suffering from tachycardia. He has a heart rate of 300; blood pressure is 90 over 42 and pulse is 45. Over.”

“This is Doctor Lang 27; the patient’s heart rate is dangerously high. You need to shock patient back to normalcy with defibrillator. Be prepared to restart heart with compression if necessary.”

“Roger emergency one.” John ran the twenty paces back to his vehicle, grabbed the defibrillator, returned to the injured patient, and quickly hooked him to it.

“Howard I am attempting defibrillation! Howard his heart has stopped, I am applying compression!”

Moments seemed like minutes and then Doctor Lang said, “What is patient’s condition EMT 27?” More desperate seconds went by when finally Bob responded.

“Patient’s heart rate is back, I’ve got him back Howard.”

“What is heart rate 27?”

Bob checked the rate and said, “Heart rate is 130, and pressure is 100 over 50.

In the emergency room, several nurses smiled but Dr. Lang was not going to celebrate just yet. “We have a gravely injured person arriving soon, let’s get ready!”

The doctor radioed to the ambulance, “EMT 27, I want you to intubate patient, bag and transport, over.”

“Roger Howard, intubate patient and bag.”

“Correct 27, you need to get as much pure oxygen down the patient’s lungs as possible!”

Grabbing an intubate tube he slid it down the man’s throat, then connected the bag, forcing oxygen down the tube directly into the patient’s lungs. As other ambulances began to arrive, Bob directed them inside to the injured in the vehicle and called for Steve to get the stretcher. Bob asked if anyone knew these people. John, the man first on the scene said, “The people that own this RV are named Reed, but he’s not one of them. I don’t know him.”

As the police arrived, Bob asked them to get as much information as they could and relay it to Howard Community. The two paramedics loaded the patient into the back of the ambulance and prepared to transport him to the hospital.

As Bob closed the door, Steve gunned the engine and turned on the siren and lights. Bob was hooking the man up to the monitor to check his vitals and relay them back to the hospital emergency room when suddenly, his heart stopped beating.

“Howard, patient is in cardiac arrest. Steve what’s our ETA!”

“Twelve minutes!”

“Howard, I am attempting defibrillation.”

“Roger 27, start patient on 50cc adrenalin and continue to resuscitate.”

After several attempts, “I have a heart beat Howard, ETA is 5 minutes.”

Arriving at the ER, Ruth Lang was the Emergency Room doctor on duty. She was a young woman, with short brown hair, thin and attractive. Finishing her internship only two weeks earlier, she had started working at Howard Community on her first day with a case that would make the evening news.

"I want a complete oxygen saturation workup." Dr. Lang said. For this small town hospital, having an acute case of carbon monoxide poisoning was something they were not ready for. Dr. Lang immediately went to her handbook of clinical diagnosis. In it she read, hyperbaric oxygen therapy was a recommended use for acute CO poisoning. No such chamber existed anywhere in the state of Indiana that she knew of. She also read there was extreme pain associated with this condition.

"Start the patient on liquid valium drip! If it is monoxide poisoning, there is going to be a lot of chest pain."

Turning to the paramedics she asked, "How long was he in the contaminated area?"

"Not sure doc, but he was lying with two DOA's, could have been all night."

"I need an EKG machine in here and start saline fluids!"

An ER nurse shouted, "Doctor, the patient has stopped breathing."

Dr. Lang moved to his side, "Patient has esophagus blockage, his lungs have quit." Raising her voice, "I need a scalpel, surgical kit, and tracheotomy tube now!"

A nurse standing close to the doctor pushed a silver tray on wheels next to her; it has everything on it you need. One of the nurses had swabbed the patients neck at the point where Dr. Lang was about to make her incision. Grabbing the scalpel, she made a cut in his neck just above the chest cavity and inserted the trach tube.

"He's breathing,

" she said with a bit of relief, then quickly returning to the seriousness of the task. "I need that blood carboxyhemoglobin report now. We need to confirm this is carbon monoxide, and find out who this man is!

Two days earlier, it was a warm September evening, Cindy and I were on our way to Kokomo Indiana, to attend our first Vietnam Reunion. They had been holding this event for several years, and when Max and Kathleen invited us, it sounded too great an occasion to miss. Max and Kathleen Reed are a couple we met at the American Legion post after my return from the war to liberate Kuwait. Max, a short man with a stocky built, full head of hair and dark complexion, was the Legion Commander. His wife, Kathleen, a short woman with a slender build, long red hair, and freckles on her face was attractive. They explained they were going to attend the reunion using their recreational vehicle, along with friends Jim and Jenny Banks. They also were members of The American Legion. Cindy liked them, enjoyed the camaraderie she felt, but because of their tendency to drink and argue, she never really wanted to spend a weekend with them.

I knew all four of them were heavy drinkers, and with the consumption came the arguments, but the trip was something I felt I needed to do. It had been over 20 years since I'd left Vietnam, but the memories and flash backs from that time in my life were happening again, just as they did the first few years after my return from the war. I thought if I went to this event, met and talked with some other men, possibly going through the same thing as I, then maybe it would help.

At first Cindy didn't want to go. She would point out their constant arguing, fighting and swearing drove her mad. Cindy, however, loved the fact I was a Marine. She proudly told anyone who would listen; her husband was a staff sergeant in the top military organization ever, the United States Marine Corps. Those are not my words, but hers. She also honored me with the fact, I was a Vietnam Veteran, and would not allow anyone to put me down. Remembering our trip to Washington D.C. a few years before the Gulf war, a woman sitting behind us on a tour bus happened to make, what sounded to Cindy like a derogatory remark,

just as we were passing the Marine Corps Memorial, "Marines are real killers, they fight and give no mercy." She said. Turning in her seat to face the woman Cindy told her, "Yes they are, and because they are you can sit in this bus and speak critically of them! My husband is a Marine and you're damn lucky he is."

"Oh no," she cried back, "Please, I have the greatest respect for them and all our troops." We never heard another word from that woman the rest of the tour. I had never felt more pride in Cindy, for what she did that day.

Like the person she was, thinking only of me, she said, we would attend. The event ran from Thursday evening until Sunday morning. We arranged to meet them there late Friday night as I had to complete a night's training with my Marine Corps Reserve unit. During the three-hour drive to Kokomo, we talked about our extended family, our parents, and about the weekend ahead. You see, we were both from broken marriages. "Hers ending in abuse and mine in infidelity. Cindy was a beautiful woman. We met at one of the stores where I delivered my products and soon became fond of each other, dated and eventually married. Blond hair, blue eyed, with a shapely figure, and the most intriguing smile I had ever seen.

Our trip to Kokomo was unexciting. We stopped along the way to eat burgers and fries. Nothing that occurred during that long drive would indicate what we were about to experience. We arrived late, around midnight and found both couples asleep in the RV. Knocking on the door, they were glad we finally made it. We made small talk for a while, and then settled down for the night. Kathleen had our bed all ready for us, with Jim and Jen sleeping on the pull out sofa toward the front of the RV. Cindy and I were across from them and a little back on the dinette table turned bed; Max and Kathleen were in the rear bedroom. We all fell fast asleep, tomorrow would be a big day.

I awoke early that September morning, quietly eased my way out of bed so not to wake Cindy. I smelled coffee percolating outside. Stepping out of the RV, squinting at a sun filled sky, I noticed Kathleen was standing by a grill laying bacon on a flat skillet. Though it was still cool, it would warm to a summer-like day before it was over. Kathleen looking up to greet me said, "Good morning Rick."

"Good morning." I yawned and stretched.

"Want some coffee?"

"You bet I do!" As I grabbed a cup and poured, I asked. "Where's Max?"

A voice from behind me said, "I'm right here."

I turned to see him walking around from the back of the RV. "What's going on?" I said.

"Aw, those people in the tent next to us were complaining that the fumes from the generator's motor were blowing in their tent last night."

"Why don't they move their damn tent," said Kathleen, "We were here first!"

As Max gave her a look of irritation, I asked him, "What are you going to do?"

"I just took the sewer hose and taped it to the exhaust pipe and ran it out the front of the camper, past the engine compartment. That should direct the fumes away from them."

"You think it will work?"

"It better, it's going to be nice today, but tonight it's gonna be cold, down in the lower 40's."

Cindy came walking out of the RV, I handed her the coffee I had poured for myself and gave her a good morning kiss. Breakfast of eggs and bacon always seemed to taste better when you're cooking and eating them outdoors. Cindy was a smoker. I had quit almost ten years earlier, so when she sat next to the Reed's to have her morning cigarette I sat across from them and up wind. Jenny and Jim came out and joined us. Jim, like Max and I was a Vietnam Veteran. He and his wife Jenny had attended this event for the last three years. Jim was an overweight man, balding, in his mid-forties, and a little older than me. He was a jolly guy until

he started drinking, then his boisterous attitude would get the best of him. Jenny was a small woman with a slender build, much like Kathleen, however she showed her age more readily. We all shared breakfast, sat, talked and enjoyed the sun warming the day.

Those two couples got along very well with each other until someone disagreed with another. That morning, even though there was no drinking, an argument started. Cindy signaled me with her hand, and the two of us were on our way. As we walked, I turned back and said, "We'll see you guys tonight, we're going to stroll around and take in all the sights. We'll be back in time for dinner and to go with you to listen to the band."

"Make sure you do," said Max, "The music tonight is Stones impersonators, supposed to be real good."

"No problem, see you later." With that, we were off.

"Those guys are always arguing." I said.

"That's why I didn't want to come," said Cindy, "But I'm glad we did, this is really nice."

Walking through the grounds, we found vendors selling all things pertaining to Vietnam. There were stands with military patches, arm bands, hats of all types and even a Vietnam era uniform. The most interesting item we found that day was a veteran's book where you could sign your name, unit, and the date and time you had spent in Nam. Other Vets at that event could then read the book and check those dates against their own time in country, trying to see if they matched. We searched the book for anyone I might know, despondently we found no one.

The day continued to warm, and the sunshine never quit. We walked all over holding hands, spending time together. At lunch, we had sandwiches from a vendor and ate while sitting under a tree in full fall blossom. I could not have picked a better day to spend with the one I loved.

As evening approached, we passed a table that was advertising for non-denominational Sunday services. Asking Cindy if she wanted to attend got a response of, "We'll see," which usually meant, no. Cindy always said she believed in God, she just could not see attending church every Sunday. Our faith was something that was at the short end of our lives.

Returning to the RV site, we found Max and Kathleen preparing dinner. Kathleen loved to cook outdoors and the meal she was preparing was fit for an RV commercial. Steak smothered in onions with potatoes frying in a pan with butter and garlic. Neither Cindy nor I had any alcohol that day, but once back at the RV, we indulged in a few beers.

After dinner, we gathered our folding chairs and headed down to the bandstand for the evening's entertainment. The veterans were gathering early and we searched for a good location to sit and listen to the music. It was evident that the size of the crowd was in the thousands, much larger than any other Vietnam reunion held here before tonight. We pulled a cooler behind us which had cold beer and a bottle of Red Rum for shots and looked forward to an evening of music and merriment. The Rolling Stones impersonators were very good. Listening to such hits as, "Satisfaction" and "Time is on my Side," had the crowd cheering and dancing on the grass. It was a great evening but the cold weather was rolling in.

When the entertainment started the temperature was still in the upper 60's, but within an hour of the music starting, it had dropped to the 50's. The winds increased the chill in the air which gave the Reed's, along with Jim and Jenny more reason to do their shots. Cindy and I had a few, but we were not intending to get drunk that night. We wanted to get an early start in the morning, so our evening was ending. Back at the RV we settled down with some coffee and left over dinner. As the others began arriving, the two of us crawled into our bed for a night's

sleep.

All the drinking by the group had them turning in for the night as well. It was around 9 p.m., surprisingly neither couple did any arguing. Jenny was drunk and Jim was half way to the stars. Max and Kathleen were definitely high, but I would not say they were intoxicated. Turning on the generator to allow the furnace heat to run, Max never went to check on the make-shift exhaust he devised, to see if it was still in the same place he had left it.

Cindy and I fell asleep in each others arms. No one knew for sure what happened, but during the night, the exhaust fumes began to enter the cabin. Jim would later account, he woke, dizzy, confused and needing to use the bathroom. He found his wife Jenny had wet herself so he laid her on the floor next to the bed. When he reached the bathroom, just in front of Max and Kathleen's bedroom, he passed out falling to the floor. In the early hours of the morning, we all lost control of our bodily fluids.

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