

Silent Heroes

A Story Forty Years in the Making

Chapter 1

Making it Through another Day

Charlie Ridge, Vietnam, 1970

What the hell happened!

I'm on all fours, my head down, stunned and confused. I try to regain my senses but to no avail. My eyes ache from an orange glow that flickers in the darkness surrounding me. I pick up my hand in an attempt to shield my face from both the light and the heat being emitted. I smell the odor of burning fuel and something else. It's bad. What is it? The sound of men screaming forces my eyes upward until I see the horror. A CH 46 helicopter is on the ground, engulfed in flames.

As I study the chopper, I see something else. "Is that a man?" I say aloud. "Is that one of the crew?" I watch as a guy tries to escape the burning chopper through a porthole. I yell at myself, "Get up, Greeny! Help the guy!" I repeat this over and over, but my body won't respond. Halfway out, he stops, and I shout, "No!" as his body slumps out the window and burns. The screams from the crew still inside have my eyes glued to the burning wreck. Now, I know what that something else odor is. It's the smell of the 46 crew, burning alive.

My mind returns to when the chopper was landing, and I remember. An RPG took the bird down. The sound of explosions and rifle fire bring me back to the present. I look nearby and see my team is in a world of shit. I try to get into the fight, to join them, but my dazed head still won't allow it. All I can think about is, "Where's Black? Where the hell is my team leader?"

I use my rifle as a cane, struggling until I'm on my feet. Through still hazy eyes, I see one of my Marines curled in a ball, his M-16 lying next to him, too afraid to move. I watch as Hippie

crawls over to him, picks up the man's weapon, puts it back in his hands, and gets him back in the fight. Another Marine yells at me, but I can't understand him through the ringing in my ears.

He runs up to me and puts his face in mine. It's Bunyan.

He frantically yells, "Greeny, what should we do? What should we do?"

I'm the APL, and the team is looking to me for answers. My head clears, and I yell out orders. "Form a one eighty in front of the bird. Keep the chopper to your backs." I see Surfer talking on the radio. "Surfer, tell the cobras to lay down fire east of the bird, twenty yards out!" Surfer acknowledges. Mini gun and rocket fire drive the enemy back. I need the seventy-nine grenade launcher laying down a pattern. "Olive, put rounds down range fifty to seventy-five yards, left to right, and keep them going!"

Olive Oil confirms my orders. Alpha Ace is fighting back.

I hear an A.O. (Arial Observer) overhead and know that's who Surfer's talking to. "Surfer, I need illumination one hundred yards east of the bird. Show me who's out there."

In just minutes, the A.O. has illumination popping over the enemies' head. "Oh, shit!" I see over a hundred V.C. approaching from the east. "Surfer, you know what to do. Get snake and nape on that area! Toast 'em."

The A.O. directs his own weapons on the approaching force, strafing the enemy in the open. "Arty coming in danger close. Keep your heads down," Surfer yells out. The enemy's advance slows, and my attention turns to finding my team leader.

Camp Pendleton California, 1972

It's been two years since Charlie Ridge. One question still weighs on my mind-- why am I still alive?

My name is Sergeant Green, and I'm a United States Marine. I live and work on the Marine

Corps Base Camp Pendleton. My wife, Peg, and our two-year-old daughter, Kimberly, are here with me. We live in enlisted housing, Unit 2022. The apartments are dirty, and bugs are all over. The smell of insecticide fills the air, and the requests for window air conditioners fall on deaf ears. In July, the California heat grows as the dog days of summer continue. I've tried to move my family into town, but the problem is, so has everyone else. Every day more Marines return from Vietnam. The base is swelling so much that some units are living in tents. There's just no place to go.

I returned from Vietnam in September, and after thirty days leave, I'm assigned to Ninth Communication Battalion. After serving with First Recon in Vietnam, I find the unit boring. I want to be back with the best of the best, back with recon marines, but the Marine Corps won't change my MOS unless I reenlist. Maybe if I'm back with recon, the dreams will go away. Maybe I can finally have peace.

I promised Peg when my time was up in December; I'd get out, move back to Chicago, take that technician's job, and start our lives. I don't think I ever meant to keep that promise.

It was after I returned, the nightmares began. I haven't slept through the night for a long time. My flashbacks are getting worse as well. They are so easily set off. A helicopter flying by or a car backfiring, and suddenly I'm back in the war. I've talked to the base doctors about it, and they've suggested I make an appointment with the psychiatric wing. However, I know if I want to stay in the Corps that would not be a good idea. I've been told when a Marine sees a psychiatrist, they are immediately put on notice as either someone trying to get out or someone who is sick in the head and can no longer serve. I'm neither of those, so there's no support for me here. It would help if I could remember these dreams, but I don't. All I know is, they have to do with Nam.

It all comes to a head at zero two hundred hours when I scream, "Blood! Look at all the

blood!”

“Wake up, Rick! Wake up. You’re having another dream,” Peg says.

I sit up, covered in sweat, my eyes wide open. Trembling like a small child, I look and stare at Peg. I throw the covers off and sit at the edge of the mattress. I just sit, head down, eyes shut. With her hand on my shoulder, she says, “That’s the third time this week. I think they’re getting worse.”

“They are. Not remembering doesn’t stop them from scaring the hell out of me.”

“Who’s Chief?” Peg asks.

“Chief?” I ask. “He was a friend in Nam. Why?”

“You kept yelling his name.”

I hadn’t thought about Chief in a long time. I turn my head to look at her but say nothing. “Talk to me Rick, or go talk to someone. I can’t live like this. You can’t live like this.”

“Who, Peg? Who can I talk to?”

“Won’t the V.A. help you?”

I shake my head as if the question is ridiculous and say, “No, Peg, the V.A. won’t help me. Base doctors won’t help either. I’m on my own.”

“No, you’re not. You’ve got me,” she says softly while taking my hand.

I jerk away, her remark is out of sympathy, and I reply, “I don’t need your pity.” I stand and take a step toward the head, then stop, turn back, and coldly tell her, “I reenlisted yesterday. I’ll have orders for Force Recon by the end of the month.” I knew this would hurt her.

Then, the look on her face makes me realize, it was her love, not pity she was offering.

“You promised you were through,” she says with a whimper. “You said the Marine Corps was in your past. Why did you do it?”

I sit back down on the bed and look into her tearful eyes. “What else can I do, Peg? You think that metallurgical job is still there for me? All that awaits me back in Chicago are dead-end jobs for a guy who doesn’t even have a high school diploma. I’m good here. I know how to be a Marine. If I leave the Corps, then it’s over for me.”

I get back up and move to the head. I close the door behind me and turn on the water, splashing some on my face. I grab a towel and dry off. With my hands on both sides of the sink, I stare at the man in the mirror. The sound of helicopters flying overhead causes my eyes to move upward. In an instant, I flash back to the war. Darkness surrounds me, and my face is covered in paint. I walk slowly while a battle rages on. Explosions and small arms fire fill my head. I put my hands over my ears, but I cannot stop the sounds and the cries for help. Overwhelmed, I want to run away. Then, a warm hand touches my arm. In an instant, I’m back in the present with my wife behind me.

“You all right?” Peg asks.

I look at her with fear in my eyes, and say, “Hold me. Just hold me.” In her embrace, I feel safe again.

“If you don’t have anyone to talk to, honey, talk to me,” she whispers.

Talk to her, how can she possibly understand?

“I promise I won’t judge, and I won’t ask any question you don’t want to answer. I’ll just be there for you, sweetheart. I’ll just listen. Talk to me, Rick, please.”

The idea is laughable, but maybe she’s the perfect one. I don’t think she can help, but who else is there?

“You want to hear about my time in Nam?”

“I want you to have someone you can trust, listen to your story.”

I stare a few moments longer and sigh, “Make some coffee. This will take a while.”

Peg leaves the room. I head back to the bedroom and slip on a pair of jeans and a shirt. Slowly I walk into the kitchen of our tiny one bedroom flat and find the coffee already percolating.

Peg steps out of the oversized pantry we use as our baby's nursery, and I ask, "What about Kimberly? Is she alright?"

"She's fine. Ready for that cup of coffee?"

"Yeah, I am."

As she pours two cups, I sit at the table and ask her again, "Are you sure you want to hear this? You might learn something about me you won't like. Some of what I did you might find sickening. Some of the things I did, I'm not proud of."

Peg sits down, places the coffee in front of me, and softly touches my hand. "I know you did what you had to, to stay alive. I want to hear it all. Don't leave anything out." She sits back in her chair, and says, "I'm ready."

"Hell, where do I begin?"

"It's always best to start at the beginning."