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Wounds of Words

Words have always been able to cut deep and leave wounds that are difficult, or refuse, to heal. Some of the deepest wounds, and maybe those most resistant to healing, may not be those inflicted by the words of others, but those we inflict upon ourselves.

We were about to be inserted by helicopter for a four day reconnaissance patrol on the edge of the DMZ. We were approaching our Landing Zone when the enemy rounds suddenly pierced, and exited, the taut aluminum skin of the helicopter; not with the sound of a bullet hitting something solid, that sound would come moments later, but with a strange plinking sound, a sound that anyone who ever experienced it will likely never forget. Jumping to our feet, we immediately joined the door gunner and returned fire through the already smashed out windows as the enemy tracer rounds rose toward us from the jungle. The CH-46 helicopter suddenly fell like a rock and I momentarily thought we were crashing, but the pilot quickly regained control and moved us away from the enemy fire, and we headed back to our base camp at Dong Ha in a helicopter that was spewing smoke and vibrating badly from the damage it received.. After an interminable flight back, wondering if we were going to make it, we landed at Dong Ha, where a waiting fire truck quickly foamed down the chopper. Both helicopter gunners and two members of the seven man reconnaissance team had been wounded in the encounter but, amazingly, and fortunately, none too seriously. A conversation with the pilot after we landed informed me that the sudden fall of the helicopter was an evasive maneuver to escape the enemy fire.

Later that day, safely back in our area, I felt quite a bit of apprehension when our team leader

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informed us that we were going to attempt to get back into the area in the morning. Maybe it wasn't apprehension as much as dread. That evening, as I was checking my gear for our morning insertion, our patrol leader came into our hootch and informed us that it was decided to send in another team as we'd have to go in with two replacements, individuals who weren't familiar with how our team operated in the bush. I felt a sense of relief knowing that we wouldn't have to attempt to get back into that area..

There were six platoons in the company, with two teams to platoon, so the men all knew one another and were very close as most had trained together in the states before the company went to Vietnam, and others had joined the company in-country as replacements from other reconnaissance units. I knew all seven of the men who would be taking our place in the morning and considered them friends. Someone in the Division wanted a reconnaissance of the area and it was circumstances and a bit of luck that another team was going in instead of ours. I didn't think much of it after that and went about whatever it was that I had to do. I don't remember what I was doing the next day when someone came up to me and informed me that the team that took our place had been shot down. The helicopter had inverted and crashed in a fireball, with the likelihood that there was no possibility of survivors. It was then that I would utter, to no one in particular, those cold, unfeeling words that would haunt me to this day..."better them than me." There weren't any tears, no hand wringing like one sees in the movies; just cold detachment. But how could I say those words? Maybe it was the sense of relief that I had dodged another proverbial bullet. More likely, it was the fact that I had shut down emotionally to everything that I was experiencing in Vietnam. Seven of my friends had just died,

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and all I could say was “better them than me.” Then I went about my day and prepared myself for the team’s next patrol. Little did I know at the time how much those four little words would haunt me for the rest of my life.

The area where the helicopter went down was so heavily defended by the enemy that the bodies couldn’t be recovered, despite attempts by a Marine infantry unit that resulted in four being killed. Sometime in 2007, the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC, now DPAA) investigated the crash site and identified the remains of two of the recon team, but I haven’t heard anything about the other 5 team members or the four-man helicopter crew. With the help of a wonderful Psychologist at the local VA Outreach Center I’ve come to a better understanding of the event. It’s terrible living with the guilt of words uttered, a guilt I silently carried for so many years, so many decades, without ever mentioning it to anyone, all the while never recognizing or understanding the toll the open wound I had inflicted on myself was having.