

Along the Road

# Along the Road

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Story about a Veitnam vet who has come home from war. We are told who he is and where he came from. While traveling, he experiences a flashback of an battle experience. A fiction but could be a true story for anybody recovering from the horrors and insanity of war.



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## Along the Road

Rain falls gently on the sidewalk, illuminated by the soft glow of the street lights. Patches of light show on the sidewalk and is distorted by the rain and rifts when I step through them.

Other than the yellow glow of the street lights and the lights from a couple buildings; the street is dim.

I walk down the street on a giant concrete slab, most commonly referred to as a sidewalk. A car drives down the street and passes me, sending a beacon of light over me and causing me to see the individual drops of water as it sprinkles down.

I glance up at the sky, sending beads of water into my eyes. It is 9:30. I lift up my collar as another car passes me, splattering the sidewalk before me with water as it hits a puddle. It is a warm night, yet I shove my left hand in the pockets of the damp army coat Iâ€™m wearing.

My hand feels around in the moist interior of my coat: a fifty, two twenties, and three five dollar bills, and two quarters and a dime.

In my other pocket is a seven-inch-long KABAR knife.

I donâ€™t have a lot. And what else I have is in a canvas knapsack slung over my right shoulder. My bag carries some clothes, and other possessions: on top of which is a green beret.

In a smaller pocket of my knapsack, secure and kept, is a Purple Heart and a Silver Star.

My Jaw is unshaven and my brown hair is growing long; giving me an age that exceeds my twenty-seven years.

Iâ€™m in a city in the state of Minnesota. It probably has a name, but I donâ€™t care. All I feel is the rain on my head, the weight on my back, and my left leg where shrapnel had entered the bone.

This may sound like another Vietnam story, A John Rambo novel, written by some dejected veteran who had lost their childhood innocence in a war no one cared about, thousands of miles away.

I have memories.

Flash-backs of my first year in Vietnam; when I was a nineteen year-old kid. Carefree and reckless; then watching metal from an enemy mine enter into my thigh; then receiving a Purple Heart, and returning (on my own free will) to the South Vietnamese city of Saigon in January for a second year of service. There I got shot in the arm. But this time, without a Purple Heart.

When I came back to the U.S in the October of 1968, my mother was dead. The doctors told me that she just fell asleep and didnâ€™t wake up.

I then began training With the Green Beret Special Forces on April 14, 1969.

After two years of training, I was Re-deployed back into South Vietnam. I was again fighting the Viet Cong in guerilla warfare and helping American Prisoners- of- War escape.

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After three years with the Green Berets, I came home with a Silver Star for bravery and valor. I also came home to a broken down household. I found out that my brother had been drafted into the army while I was in a hospital with my leg injury. He died in the city of Hue while the U.S Marines were in the act of retaking it. It happened on the same month that I was in Saigon, fighting for my life. He was eighteen.

Two weeks later, my dad died.

There is no one in the streets now and traffic had died down considerably.

The rain has now turned into a light drizzle.

I look up at the night sky. It is 10:00

I am wet and I now look for a place to stay awhile. I see a neon light a block away and I head towards it.

I cross the rain soaked street and see that the sign is that of a Café.

I slowly open the door and step inside.

My hazel

brown eyes sweep the area.

The café was dimly lit. It had a four foot bar against the wall on my left. On my right were eight tables each with four chairs around them. The floor was neatly swept and made of wood. Oak, I think.

In the corner of the far wall by the bar was a jukebox playing *I Lost My Heart in San Francisco*.

When you spend five years in Vietnam, you learn to be observant really fast.

I walk up to the bar, where a slender pretty girl of about twenty with straight, long auburn hair that fell to her shoulders and pale green eyes, was wiping the counter with a rag. She looks up at me and my wet army coat and poor hygiene with a perplexed expression.

I am tempted to tell her that I fought in a war to excuse my appearance, not to impress her. She was pretty, but I didn't think there was a girl out there for me, especially when I spent five years in a merciless jungle on the edge of the world. I was a loner, a person with nobody to come back to and now wanted to be left alone.

I buy a cup of coffee and make my way to a table by a window to watch the water strike against the glass pane and drip down in thin streams.

I slump down in a chair and grasp the paper with both hands; feeling the warmth of it. When it had cooled a little, I taste the coffee. It was a good cup.

My thoughts returned to the girl. She wouldn't be impressed anyway, I reflect. Most people saw us Vietnam veterans as "baby killers": people to be despised and frowned upon, not knowing the horrors that we faced there.

Well, no one really knew. Not president Ford, not the countless peace-nicks that rallied in Washington demanding the end of the war; yet taunted us vets and smoked Pot.

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Only we two million veterans knew; which most were now dying of suicide, cancer and wounds.

Of course none of that touched me. My dad taught me to be tough and be strong even though there was an easier way out. My mom also taught me patience, which kept me alive in Vietnam, and also to treat others with respect; which kept me from having trouble with the law most of the time.

I didn't volunteer for this war. When I was nineteen, I didn't even know where Vietnam was. I was drafted into the war, same as my brother. He and I were friends; we fished brook trout and kokanee salmon together, hunted mule deer together and swam in rivers while playing hooky from school in our home in Colorado.

Why am I here? I have no one to go to. Both my parents are dead and my brother was killed. After Dad died, I took my family's broken down '59 Lincoln and fled from my childhood in the mountains of Colorado I once called home and came here.

The song ended slowly and another song started to play. I recognized the song immediately; the tune was *Johnny B. Goode* by Chuck Berry. That song and me went way back. Back to 1958 when I was ten and my brother was eight. We would huddle around the radio (especially on rainy days) and listen to this very song.

Despite myself, I started to sing the lyrics softly just like I used to do.

I was amazed that I could still remember the lyrics, let alone remember the tune.

I looked down at my half empty cup. How long has it been since I heard it?

I make a quick calculation by drumming my fingers on the table; eleven years, eleven long years since I heard it.

Halfway through the song (I don't really know why) I look up.

Maybe it was paranoia, I don't know. I guess after all those years of watching my back; being wary and alert, expecting something bad to happen any second and trying not to step on anything that might blow my foot off; I became more aware of everyone and everything around me. My hearing seemed to get clearer, my nose more sensitive, and my eyes sharper.

To some people, they call it survival instincts; they say you're born with it. That may be true, but for me, I didn't acquire my so called instincts or whatever you want to call it until I was in Vietnam and getting shot at and fearing for my life. Especially when I was watching metal pierce my bone.

That was the lesson I learned when I was in a hospital with shards of metal in me. It's the number one rule of a soldier in Vietnam and I learned it the hard way. What I learned is this: you learn how to survive and learn how to adjust to different environments and be observant or you get injured or killed.

Period.

So when I feel a presence at the table. I'm back in Vietnam, going through the tall elephant grass and half expecting enemy slugs to spray across my chest or a booby trap going off right under my feet.

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Though when I look up, I see the girl with green eyes that I saw behind the bar standing there.

I must have startled her because for a moment she looked frightened. She regained her composure and for a moment we just stare at each other.

“ Hello.” She whispers.

I reply with a nod of acknowledgement. When she stays where she is, I say: “ a nice night we’re having.”

“ Yes, it is.”

Her voice was low and lovely, and for a second I felt that I had heard her voice somewhere before— a long ago.

There was a short pause; then the girl motioned at my dark green army coat. My *wet* dark green army coat.

“ You served in Vietnam?” She asked. That sentence sounded to me more like a statement than a question. “ Yes.” I said, looking into her eyes. “ Yes I did.” I then hold up my left fingers “ five years.”

There was another pause. Then she said, “ If you don’t mind me being curious— may I ask for your name.” I smiled a little. “ If you could tell me yours first.”

She laughed softly. “ Audrey Taylor.”

I looked up at her with a half-smile; showing my teeth. “ Lieutenant Bryan Hale.” I then reached up and shook her hand. She laughed and then shook my hand and smiled. “ Well, very pleased to make your acquaintance lieutenant.” The rain or the music must’ve stopped because suddenly it was very quiet. She then looked right into my eyes.

“ So, you’re the one.”

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The rain lasted all night and into the morning, lashing out furiously at the jungle canopy; first turning the ground into mud and then into a thick sludge unable to travel through. A thick mist covered the ground, coating everything with moisture. A loud buzzing was echoing throughout the jungle.

I’m sitting under a tree, wet. The giant leaves above me offer protection from most of the rain, but water fills the leaves and drips down onto my helmet and shoulders.

I adjust my flak jacket and push up my sleeve and wipe away the grime on my watch. I peer at it, trying to read it. It is about 7:30 A.M.

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I look around me and I see no sign of Colonel Harris. I gaze around to see what the rest of Decker team was doing. Campbell was on my left calmly smoking a cigarette; he was looking at the ground, thinking.

Coffman and Worley were talking in low tones; Gorman had his hand beside his rifle. He and Benson appeared to be asleep. Cramer was swearing softly and cleaning his M-16. The rest of us had AK-47s except for Gorman who had a modified, bolt-action Winchester 30-06 and Campbell with his big M-60.

Besides me, we also all had semi-automatic Colt 45s and fragmentation grenades. I had a Soviet Makarov, a weapon that I took a year ago from a dead NVA officer.

I look up again; Cramer was still cursing and wiping his rifle barrel. I then mentally go through Decker team. Somber-faced Donald Cramer was interesting. He was born in Lowesville, North Carolina and won two Bronze Stars before joining up with the Green Berets. He denied the use of an AK-47, saying that his M-16 was the only American thing he had left.

Arthur Campbell was the only black man on the team and was 6-4 and 236 pounds. He was a football player in an all-black team from Alabama before joining the Green Berets in '69.

Andrew Coffman and David Worley were friends and grew up together in the small town of Groton, South Dakota. Both had signed up for a year before joining the Special Forces in 1968.

Sharp nosed and lantern jawed Andrew Coffman could make anybody laugh, (except for Gorman) and could even make a smile come out of Colonel Harris. He wasn't obnoxious; he just knew how to make people smile.

David Worley, with his high cheekbones and boyish face, was the writer. He could write poems, short stories; anything that included a pencil and paper he was good at. Worley also had a girl back home by the name of Angie Walker. Several times I would see him, huddled under a tree, writing one of his well composed letters to her.

Jack Gorman was mysterious. I don't know where he learned to shoot, but he was the best shot (in front of me) and so earned the sniper. I frowned, I didn't know much about him; I don't think anybody does.

Skinny Stanley Benson grew up in Topeka Kansas, went to Washburn University, and dropped out his sophomore year and joined the army. In his three years of service he has two purple hearts and still active as a Green Beret. He is only twenty-three.

A small smile creases my lips. This was Decker team, so named after Alan Decker, a former member of this team.

Alan Decker had been well liked by the rest of the group, for he had been an easy going, friendly and likable man; a good man to be around in a tough situation.

Actually he was probably the one that I knew most of, I reflected. Most people kept to themselves; that was just Vietnam. No one wanted to know each other too well for fear of them dying. People in this war shared their background information but that was about it. Nobody knew when someone was going to get killed or where, so it was best to keep aloof and not bear the pain of watching a friend die.

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All I knew about the members of the team I had obtained by watching them or they had shared the information themselves. But that wasn't Alan, no; he was incredibly outgoing and on the first day he had went around and talked to us. He was always relaxed, always calm, always composed. In a dangerous situation he knew what to do. We had respected him for that and so named the team after him.

But that had changed when we were outside of Hanoi, where we had engaged in a firefight near the city and Decker was killed, shot almost literally to pieces.

An hour later, the rain stops and the one in charge, a tall man with pale-blue eyes: Colonel Harris, tells us to break camp and we start walking to a POW Camp near the Laotian border.

It was 6:45 when we got there. We were called off from the Guerilla fight in the south and our new mission is this: to liberate American soldiers from the North Vietnamese.

We had prepared a while for this mission and knew how it would go. If it went according to plan, it would go like clockwork. If it didn't go well, we would have to use our own judgment.

Unfortunately, that happened quite a bit in Vietnam.

It was starting to get dark and we only had a while until we couldn't see each other.

When we are close, Harris says, "Okay, this is it; you all know what to do. Gorman, you stay back with that Winchester of yours and cover us, the rest of us go ahead. He then warned: "I don't know if it's gonna be them or us, but someone's gonna die today so be careful."

Hours before, we had camouflaged ourselves and were almost as invisible as the V.C themselves so we didn't have to worry being seen and we were trained to walk quietly. We came in to the camp; we could see where there were some obvious POWs. Yet what happened next, I scarcely knew.

I was third in line, with Colonel Harris and Stanly ahead of me. Suddenly, Benson went down in a burst of gunfire and the quiet of the day ripped apart from fire on both sides.

Gorman was behind us; firing his Winchester and Cramer was throwing grenades and shooting bursts from his M-16.

Then Cramer went down; and then Campbell. He was yelling as he got sprayed twice, yet he was still firing. The potential All-American died slowly, cursing everything concerned.

He dropped the M-60

I don't know why I did it, but instinct took over, I let my rifle fall to the dirt and calmly picked up the dropped M-60 that was lying by Campbell's lifeless form and started firing.

The loud report of Gorman's rifle was gone, but I don't turn around. Behind me, Gorman was leaning against a Jambu tree; Winchester on the ground and his neck rolled to one side at an awkward angle: he had been shot in the head. I could hear Worley screaming.

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I didn't stop.

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Rain no longer pattered against the window pane. There were no more passing cars and the buildings on the street had grown dark.

The clock above the counter read 11:30.

â Your story was in the papers, and on the newsâ they said you killed them all and then rescued all twelve POWs; the only people that came out alive were you and Colonel Harris.â

I was in a daze. Memories flooding back, overwhelming me. I slowly stood up, trying to see straight, trying to come back from the chaos of whizzing bullets and dying men. I could hear it now. I was living it again.

She talked to me as I slung on my knapsack.

â They said that you would have won the Medal of Honor.â

I thanked the girl for the coffee and headed for the door, still feeling unsteady on my feet.

â That youâ re an American heroâ lâ

I opened the door slowly and shut it behind me.

The rain has a way of cleansing the air, giving it a clean renewed smell.

I take a deep breath of the warm night air and exhale slowly.

It had stopped raining and had left the night air crisp and fresh. I smiled, just the way I liked it.

I looked at the black street; remembering that September day in 1973. Remembering Coffman's jokes, Worley's letters and that small smile that appeared on his lips whenever he mentioned Angie, recalling that day so long ago; I smiled again and took another deep breath. It was nice to be appreciated, I thought; though appreciation would come along if you were patient enough.

I sighed and looked at the road ahead of me; long and endless, yet welcoming and an invitation for adventure.

I step onto the wet concrete. It was time to be going.

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