



Coming Home

David Connolly

AS YOU READ: Refer to the following vocabulary and war slang:

NVA: North Vietnamese Army

HUEY: a type of helicopter

C RATS: short for C Rations, a ready-to-eat, packaged meal

AMMO: short for ammunition

HOVER: to hang in the air suspended

SKID: the long “foot” of the helicopter

GRUNT: slang for soldier

GOOKS: slang for Vietnamese

THINK (AND BE WARNED!) ABOUT the writer’s use of “colorful” language. If you’re reading out loud, would the class be more comfortable using an alternative to the “F” word? Take this opportunity to think about the power of strong language.

I had come off of an ambush patrol at first light. We had killed seven NVA the night before. They had been carrying 122mm rocket launchers down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to set up and shoot at us.

A Huey sort of landed to resupply us (they never really landed if they didn’t have to); they kicked off C Rats and ammo at a hover, and I got onto the skid and was pulled up and onto the deck to go back to 11th Cavalry Regimental Headquarters at An Loc.

There they cut me orders for a leave and made me get a haircut, but wouldn’t let me take a shower (what the f***?), and I got back on the same chopper after it refueled to go to Bien Hoa Air Force Base for a flight to The World.

At Bien Hoa, I got on a Brannif 707 that took me to McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey. After

a short bus ride, I got on the Logan hop at Newark Airport and within 24 hours of killing someone in Vietnam, I was standing at my father’s front door in South Boston.

The only person I had any real contact with before standing on that front stoop was the cab driver who picked

me up at Logan. He asked me; “You home for good?” When I told him I was on leave and headed back for a second tour, he took me to a bar in Maverick Square and told me,

“Step up to the bar, young grunt.” Nobody asked me my age; the uniform was all they needed for an ID. I couldn’t pay for a drink; everyone shook my hand, slapped me on the back, and told me of their brothers, their friends, their kids, their Dads, who were “there” and welcomed me home. The cabbie was a retired Jarhead, a Marine rifleman from Korea, who actually tried to drop his drawers to show me, and everyone else at the bar, where Chinese mortar shrapnel had caught him, “f***ing good and well” while he was standing in a chow line for Thanksgiving dinner.

He deposited me back on the front stoop at 153 I Street in Southie, the two of us shit-faced, and when I asked him what I owed him for the ride and the drinks he told me, “F*** you, young grunt; you are owed more than you’ll ever see and if you go lookin’ for what you’re owed you’ll only get mad.”

Standing there on that stoop where I had been raised, where I had listened to stories from my Grand Da of fighting for Ireland with the IRA, and from my Dad of World War II, I had to think.

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I was a Sergeant of Infantry in the United States Army with three rows of battle ribbons, including the Combat Infantry Badge and a Purple Heart, but I was still only nineteen years old and I had no f***ing idea what I was supposed to think, or say, or do, and there was nobody there to give me any kind of heads up. I didn't have my squad to lean on and I missed them and their support more than any of you civilians could ever f***ing imagine, and to this day I sometimes still do.

Everyone in my family was glad to see me, kissing and hugging me, taking me back into the fold, and trying to feed me more food than I had seen in a year.

But, the next morning, my family was afraid to wake me. See, people like me, my Brothers, had already come to be demonized in the press as "drug-crazed baby killers" and "walking time bombs." It didn't matter that I had never shot at anyone who wasn't holding a weapon, had never abused a civilian or a prisoner, had never committed rape. But I had seen those things happen and those things were being reported with glee in the media.

I was supposed to be home on leave for 28 days. After seven days of my family treating me like I was "different,"

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of my friends asking me how many "gooks" I killed, if I brought them back any of that good weed, of my girlfriend telling me to stop swearing and to stop touching her, I went down to the Boston Army Base on Summer Street without telling anyone else in my life, and asked, could I go back to Vietnam and the 11th Cavalry?

See, I didn't belong back here then. I still don't feel like I belong here with all of you who really don't know shit about what your comfortable lives cost others like me and my Brothers and Sisters.

Over the years, I have tried to write myself sane, as sane as I can hope to be after all of the poor boys and girls I killed or helped to kill, after

all of those on both sides I have seen killed or maimed, after holding my own guts until a medic could get to me, after being splashed full in the face with my best friend's brains, after all of the other shit I've done and seen and am still living through.

But, I truly, earnestly believe that there is hope for my younger Brothers and Sisters to find the same place I have found, even after returning from their war, some of them over and over again.

We who have fought and killed and bled for this country we love, we must come to understand, and this is very important, that those of us who stood up for our country, who went to do the dirty work, we are agents of the violence of war, that is true, but we are also its victims. We have to strive to move beyond the pain, the guilt, the hurt, all of that useless baggage, and become whole again.

We can do that only by facing what has happened to us, by slicing open the bags of puss within us that hurt us, that stifle our advance through our lives, and let clean blood flow again so we can heal.

How to do that is by writing, letting all that we went through flow onto the page and out of our souls. The truth, so often so hard to face, will set you free. You have the courage, the same courage you had to go fight your war, to fight for yourself now. Find it. Pick up that pen.

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