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A Veteran's Tale

By Ian Ray

Throughout our lives there are challenges. There are times of both great strife and great happiness. In our own minds and in those of others, we are often defined by how we cope with adversity. Did we crumble under the pressure of a situation that was just too big for us, or did we summon great strength and face down the moment trying to crush us? Though many may summon strength, in the long run, the burden must be shared.

It was a Thursday in the middle of July 2009. I was off to work early and had two options that day. Should I drive west to inspect a cell phone tower that was having communication problems, or should I drive east where more towers were in need of attention? Traveling west would bring me near my hometown where I could stop in and check on my stepfather who had fallen to the drink lately, but I chose to head east and didn't give it another thought.

The hour was nearing five in the evening. I had wrapped up my work for the day and was driving home when my mother called and requested that I accompany my brother and her to Hinton, my hometown, to check on my stepfather. This was to be a welfare check as well as a desperate attempt to offer him help out of the bottle he had fallen into. I, of course, agreed to go and met them in Yukon so we could make the journey together.

On the ride over, we talked about how much we cared for my stepfather and how mad we were at him for letting himself go like this. He had been a hero to my brother and me, and we accepted that now it was our turn to step up and be a hero to him. The closer we got to the house, the more impassioned we became about what we wanted him to do. We would take him with us and check him into some facility where he could get help and clean up. We had it all figured out and wouldn't take no for an answer.

My stepfather's name was Jack. He was in his early sixties and had lived quite a life. Some may say he lived the life of Reilly, and when referring to his childhood, they would be correct. However, when the Vietnam War broke out Jack approached his father about going to college. It was well known that a young man was less likely to be drafted if he were in college. The response he received was less than favorable. Knowing the draft was inevitable, he volunteered for the Army, and before he could soak in what he had done, he was in Vietnam.

He arrived just before the Tet Offensive, a monumental counterattack by the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong. It was hell. He saw things so horrific that a normal person can't begin to imagine. He was constantly on guard and woke from sleep regularly to run to a bunker to avoid the shelling. This stayed with him all of his life.

Back to the story, we had arrived at the house. The three of us got out of the truck walked up to the door. My mother and brother went inside while I remained outside to finish a cigarette that I desperately needed. A moment later, my brother came out and told me to get my mother and escort her out of the house and back to the truck. He looked pale, like he had turned to stone. I did what he said. My mother was confused and started to cry. I told her everything would be fine and I would go and find out what was going on.

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When I returned to the house, I walked in and found my brother removing a rifle from the hands of what appeared to be my sleeping stepfather. Then it hit me. He wasn't sleeping.

"Is he dead?" I whispered.

"I think so," said my brother.

Just then I approached my stepfather, and the situation became gut wrenchingly clear. He had shot himself, and there would be no chance of survival.

In this moment I felt nothing. Sadness did not cripple me, nor did fear. I made my way to the kitchen, where the phone was, and calmly called the police. We met them at the street and explained the scene. Then I escorted the chief inside where he confirmed that life indeed was absent.

My mother weighed heavily on my mind. She cared for him a great deal. I could not bring myself to tell her what happened. I only revealed that Jack wasn't okay. In the end, it was the police chief that would finally tell her the grizzly truth. She was destroyed. Her whole world had fallen apart in an instant.

After several hours of working out the details with the police, we were allowed to leave. It still didn't seem real to me. I began to wonder if something was wrong with me as I had not cried, nor felt any real sadness. Didn't I care about Jack enough to cry in the wake of his suicide? I was sure I did, but still no tears came.

We drove an hour to my sister's house where my wife, infant daughter, and sister awaited our arrival. They did not yet know what had happened. After we arrived, the news was delivered, and they broke down into tears. No one knew what to do except to be together. It was the greatest source of comfort to just sit and talk with family. Eventually we decided to go and see Jack's children as they would likely need comfort as well. My wife and I stayed behind briefly in the apartment.

It was then that it all hit me like a ton of bricks. I hadn't been aware that I was in shock, and it was now wearing off. I burst out crying like a baby. It was like I was puking out all the pent-up tension and terrible images from the event. I felt human again, not like the stone figure I had been for several hours now. It felt good, but I also now had to face the reality of what had happened. Jack was gone.

In the years that have followed Jack's death, I have come to terms with some of what happened. He was a tormented man, suffering from PTSD following his experiences in Vietnam. Some issues remain. Jack used to speak of terrible nightmares that interrupted his sleep, images of his past that he tried to bury. I suffer from the nightmares now. Graphic interpretations of what my waking mind tries to hide. They aren't as bad as they used to be, and hopefully, if I don't hide from this reality, someday they will stop. I try to remember the good times with Jack. I try to remember how he helped my family so much, and how happy he made my mom. He was a good man, but a scarred man. The past finally got the better of Jack, but I thank God he was here long enough for me to know him.

Jack's example is now being used to help newly returning veterans with PTSD. The issue is getting more and more attention now as the consequences of ignorance are becoming more apparent. Our troops overseas are facing down terrible situations every day. They are bearing the weight of the world on their shoulders. While it is possible to bear this weight in the short term, they must have help in the long run. If not, the weight will eventually crush them.