

Where was I; What did I do

RVN – the Delta – '68/'69

During our phone call
the quiet man, a Marine, a fellow veteran, asked me
what did you do in the war, when you were
where you were doing what you did ...
since it wasn't a combat mission- not on its face ..
-but, weren't we all involved
in some sort of a conflict- was it a personal one,
a moral one, a shooting one, a deciding one, a deadly
day-in-and-day-out one with few answers
or no solutions. Endless- at least for that year
of being away ...

I was there, half-way down close to the bottom
of the up-sided tear-drop
they called the Delta ..
seemingly endlessly flat as a table and seasonally as wet
as the rains could make the land to be.
Straight-arrow canals and peripatetic rivers fed
and drained with dikes and berms and man-built hills
in the way of the flow of everything.
The cities sat on their own barely-above-flood-level flat spaces
and the everywhere craters, built by the bombs that rained down
were also there, and depressed into their land.

Who did I do what to, or for; I guess was the question, really ...
how did I do what I did, what came of it during that year of efforts
expended quietly ... a cocked-headed query of a half-smile-
jus' askin' ...
we helped- to further the quest for information
about troops, machines of war, armament for the machines to expend
or to hide behind and throw things at the other uniformed people
walking by with their own guns ...

I roamed the countryside partly from the air
with aircrews of all stripes- and of all lineage, of all sizes
to go and watch, glean, assess, note; and report back
to the chain of superiority; breathless with a newness
which withered by the hour; by the minute ...
useless by tomorrow ...
yet they wanted to hear it all, way up there
at the Assistance Command; to sift, review, rewrite,

pass up and down, a story of a sighting that was very old news
the after minute it took place.

We talked to our people who came back in to us;
well, we listened to the stories
of oppression
of death
of endless conflict, hatred and resignation
that toggled by the day-
who was winning, by the engagement-
and by the human refuse left behind
in the free-fire zone.

Indian Country, we called it ...
out beyond the wire, beyond the beer the rice
and the steaks and the berm-guarded rear.

Our people went out there and came back
to report; stories fueled by Cognac
and Salem cigarettes- always the favorites ..
where were the bad men in pajamas
and in sandals, with AK's and mortars
walking interdiction and harassment and killing rounds
into the compounds, towns, airstrips, 'vills, hooches
and paddies ..

we were the strangers in that strange land;
with our guns and ideals and bravado and raining death
come here to save
a people who wanted to not be disturbed
again
by another bunch of foreign helpers.

Out of uniform; civilian, indigenous attire; aviator sun glasses
and hushpuppies; yeah, round-eyes
fitting into the surroundings- too tall, too white
too arrogant to really be of value to the conduct
of whatever ...

We knew people; we could get things accomplished;
we knew stealth; we hired the best- from both sides;
we flew the Phoenix flag; we helped to kill ...
neutralize the opposition, as it were.

we reported; we patrolled; we went out there
to find ... and men died for it.

Alcohol and chemicals fueled the guilt and the self-indulgent
angst back at the office; what exactly was expected
by who in the chain of bull shit that flowed
in both directions; on both sides ...
who really was in charge- it seemed to vary
and waver and re-focus by the day- the hour ...
the information trail was not straight
not controlled
not verified, nor acted upon in a timely fashion;
why even try anymore with anything ...

You traveled with a weapon
slept with the same weapon
ate with it
went downtown with it
maybe died with it; then it was given to the next guy
to use and treasure and cuddle
and pass on, if he survived.

What was the mission ...
-to support the allied forces
in the collection and transmission of on-the-ground information
to be utilized in the furtherance and support
of the war effort; to seek and to destroy; to gather
and disseminate; to overcome the communist forces
in the South.
To save the Vietnamese from the Vietnamese ...
For the Vietnamese.

Was all this an answer to that quiet man's query ...
perhaps not; perhaps there are really no answers
to be had; perhaps the answers are already on the books;
perhaps the answers come in the deep night
quietly- when you're awakened, with one eye, trying to remember
just where you are, just now; and who's next to you
there.

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For Jim; in answer to his query ..