



OUTSIDE THE WIRE

A MULTI-GENRE PROJECT FOR VETERANS

GRIEF EDITION

RUTGERS-CAMDEN

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OUTSIDE THE WIRE



NEW JERSEY COUNCIL
FOR THE
HUMANITIES

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS



Welcome to Outside the Wire, a curated space for reflections on this year's theme, Grief. We feel honored to be working with Warrior Writers and the talented individuals represented in these pages.

As with any theme as universal as grief, the scope can seem overwhelming. How can individual experience rise above the general theories of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross? How can a voice express itself in a different register to the eloquence of Joan Didion? Or, to paraphrase Raymond Carver, what are we really talking about when we talk about grief?

In this collection, we hope to bring you some answers to these questions. As the editors, we are privileged to have read the submissions from veterans who shared their stories not only of grief, but of healing, empathy, and community in such vivid, creative, and moving ways. Reflecting both the past and the present, war and peace, the collection within these pages represents the enduring humanity that connects all our lives, as well as the unique pain that is bound to specific times, particular places, and individual lives.

We were so impressed by the voices of all our contributors, and are grateful now for the opportunity to share those voices with all of you.

To the writers, artists, readers, and everyone else who has made this project possible: thank you.

Tembisa Aborn, Bronwen Everill & Sienna Zeilinger

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DON'T MEAN NOTHING

By Richard “Dick” Epstein

Tim slept in the hooch
across from me.
I saw him every day.
Last night his bunk was empty.
Sarge came today to get his stuff.
He left without a word.

No one said he was missing.
We knew he had a girl in town and
he'd been acting kinda strange.

I think there's something above
that laughs as it stirs a large black pot
and suddenly people we know are gone.

Every time I lose a friend
there grows another hole.
A hole too big to jump across

and I can't just walk around.

AFTER...

By Carl “Papa” Palmer

small smiles
one arm hugs
weak hand shakes
pats on the back
empty promises

to visit soon
to stay in touch
to invite me over
to call later

all depart
leave me here
without a map
no guiding hand
to help me find
my way back home

Little Jack Duffy went off to war.
In 68 he went back for more.
His stature was slight and his courage immense.
But his bravery and valor were just a pretense.

His pain was unknown, repressed and unseen.
Seeking solace in bottles and drugs was his thing.
All the psychiatrists, doctors and men
couldn't make little Jack better again.

Life in the Navy was all that he knew,
and when it came to an end, he was dour and blue.
Retired, alone, with a bottle of rum.
Last night Little Jack Duffy swallowed his gun.

The clerk conveys the information with utmost indifference. I leave the municipal office, annoyed that the new requirement will cost me an extra \$400. The door slams behind me, and I yank my car keys out of my purse.

I notice the cap on top of an old man's head as he approaches me. It's black, with a row of colorful ribbons splitting the embroidered words *Vietnam* and *veteran* in two. Decades occupy the space between us, but he deserves to be acknowledged. I raise my head and hear my mouth say, "thank you for your service, Sir."

My words emerge like liquid foam. Not reverent enough. He has already heard me though, and nods. In order to accentuate my gratitude, I offer my hand. He lets me shake his. It's dry, with protruding veins. The grip is solid and as his palm meets mine, I wonder what this hand and the man attached to it experienced over there.

Do not ask, the voice inside my mind tells me.

I want to shrink the space between us and tell him I'm a veteran too. Even though I only served stateside. Instead of establishing a connection though, I walk away. Uncertain that more words would mean anything at all.

I'm home again and waiting to meet my new realtor. After 18 years, it's the right time to sell my condo and settle into a real house. I chose this realtor because he had a nice voice on the phone. I like nice voices. A knock on the door announces his arrival. Once inside, Gregory introduces himself and enters my living room, clasping a cane and limping. As I show him around the condo, pulling curtains aside from windows and turning knobs

on closet doors, one shoe moves slower than the other. When we're done, he sits-falls onto the couch, propping his cane against the wall. He's Dad's age.

"Can I offer you some coffee?"

"Yes, sure. No cream, just black as mud." He tells me that he doesn't take sugar either because he's a diabetic. Perhaps that's why he limps.

He asks me questions. He takes notes. He offers me a checklist. I give him a mug, and it clinks when it settles onto the glass side table. His hand is bony and has a prominent scar.

We talk about permits and appraisals, contracts and market prices. We discuss my plans to buy a house after I sell the condo.

"I'm going to apply for a VA loan. Zero down payment from what I'm told."

"A smart move. You're a veteran?"

"Yes. Air Force. My Dad's an Air Force vet, too."

"Ah!" He takes another sip of coffee, emptying the mug but still holding it in mid-air. His gaze meets the flawless paint on my wall. Last week, I spackled and sanded all the nail wounds from years past, then repainted the wall in flat white. Now, no one can tell the holes even existed at all. It is a long, quiet minute before he puts the mug down.

"You should apply now. Can take months to get approval." He shifts in his chair, then we chat until all questions have been asked and answered. He eases himself off the couch, takes his cane from the wall, and leaves.

Two years ago, a friend and I visited a wall. *The* wall. In silence, we read unfamiliar names etched into mirrored granite. I could not imagine their faces, but I could sense their profound and hollow absence. Did Dad know any of these men? Had he played cards with hands that no longer exist? Had he shared jokes with them, or helped them light their cigarettes? He never owned a "Vietnam Veteran" cap and never wore any other veteran gear. Yet when I bought him an "Air Force Dad" cap, he wore that with

pride. We had fun comparing our basic training experiences - his in the late sixties, back when they could curse, and mine in the late nineties, when they had to say fudge instead of the real F word. Did he ever visit the wall? Would he tell me about Vietnam?

Do not ask.

I call Gregory to tell him the electrician's coming on Friday. It'll cost \$400, I say.

"I can't talk now. I'm in the ICU with a dear friend."

Gregory's voice quivers. "His wife is dying from COVID and...uh...he's suffering with the hardest decision he has to make." I feel a balloon swelling in my throat. I look at the ceiling. The fan spins above me, each quiet blade turning in slow motion.

"I'm so very sorry." These empty words do not suffice. I pause, evaluating the gap in our conversation. "If it's alright, I'd like to share a quote that may help your friend." He says ok. I hope my words will come out right this time.

"Every storm runs out of rain." An image of rain enters my mind and lingers. He does not reply for half of a minute.

"Gregory?" I pull the phone away to check if it's still connected.

"What a beautiful saying. Thank you...I'll share it with Joe."

Gregory calls later. He's fully composed now.

"When I told Joe what you said, his face was behind the mask. But I saw the tears in his eyes...he couldn't speak...your words truly touched and comforted him." I imagined Joe bent over his wife in a wrenching posture of devotion and despair.

He asks me about the Air Force. I wonder at his change of subject. I answer his questions, then tell him that I consider my service both an honor and a privilege.

"I served in Vietnam," he says. Oh. Like Dad.

Do not ask, the voice whispers.

"Thank you for your service, Gregory. I um, I never ask Vietnam vets...or any war vets about their experiences. It seems...well, it seems hurtful to them, uh to you, to ask."

“You can ask me. Sometimes it helps to talk about it.”

I look at my spackled and sanded, painted and perfect white wall. A vision of that black granite wall begins to emerge. It beckons. I have permission. To ask.

“How was...what was your experience like in Vietnam?”
It’s the first time I have ever said this, and it feels intrusive.

For the next two hours, Gregory speaks. My heart sags with sorrow for him. For all of them.

“I got drafted in ‘65. A Company, First Battalion, 8th infantry, 4th infantry division. Then special ops. Almost all of us were drafted. We trained in mock villages, mock tunnels, with mock booby traps. For a year, all one unit. As soon as we arrived in Vietnam on October 4, 1966, we were told ‘Look to your left, look to your right. Half of you guys are not coming back.’ They were wrong. More than 70% did not survive.”

Invisible wounds. Unlike the one on his hand.

“We’d come back from fighting and look around to see who was still there, and who wasn’t. And if you were still there, you’d feel guilty for being alive. I did things I am ashamed of. I killed people I should not have killed. Some of the guys even shot kids. We were trained killers you know. When I got home, I threw all my medals into the river. I was so ashamed of what I’d done. And people shouted at us. They called us baby killers. I mourn the people I killed every day of my life. I mourn my fellow soldiers, my brothers, with unconsolable pain. The shrapnel from a grenade tore up my leg. You probably noticed that I have a limp. I deserved far worse.”

His words shadow me. No, he deserved far better. They all did.

“I cannot visit the Vietnam Memorial. See their names. The nightmares still come and catapult me back to Vietnam. I suffer from PTSD, but I have found some ways to heal. They made a documentary about us called *Honor in the Valley of Tears*.”

“It’s hard to know what to say, Gregory. But thank you for sharing this with me. I have so much respect for you. And I will track down that documentary.”

His tone of voice becomes lighter.

“When I returned from Vietnam with a bunch of other guys, we rented a beach house for a week. But it rained every day. The house was surrounded by flowers. We’d often stare at the ocean. For hours. But after almost every rain, a rainbow came out. I’d look at the rainbow, and feel a rare and desperate sense of peace. I want you to know something. Your words...that quote...every storm runs out of rain. It reminded me. Thank you for that.”

Later, I call Dad.

“Maybe we can have lunch at that seafood place you like. It’s been a while. And there’s something I’d like to ask you.”

I will tell him about Gregory. The rain and the rainbows. And then, I’ll ask.

The irony has ripened
Freedom endures
but so does the rest
Confirmed kills
Definite death
Somebody's father
Somebody's son
But we are safe
Our troops are protected
I heard their voices
and then I didn't
Triangulate
Obliterate
Everyone cheered
I followed suit
so I did not stand out
for grieving the enemy
I celebrated death
while I died inside
The mourning comes
after each night
after the dreams
of fatherless children
Freedom endures
What freedom is this

absent is the joy and celebration no more music and dancing
gone is the laughter and singing
shots heard shots fired explosions of blood screams and
cries of terror
woman grabbed men assaulted gagged voices
cycle engines roar inferno of fire violated bodies
communities plundered homes looted cadavers under rumble a
massacre attack with no conscious un-human/in-human
unspeakable terrifying madness rape hostages taken
panic jolts a nation
TV images *flashes of insanity* *are sanitized*
save us from the wilderness of our grief the unbearable loss
broken hearts cracked souls
the desert absorbs the wretchedness and stench there are no
safe rooms

RADICALIZED

birthed from a pot of oppression left to boil over
swollen wounds rage and bitterness mushrooms a society
unseen a people unheard hopes defeated tongues are slashed
no RIGHTS partitioned checkpoints NO VOTE divisions
isolation rationed water health care restricted oppression is
lethal

retaliation and revenge politics and power demand an eye for an
eye *KILL* them all
buried in underground tunnels the IDF cobra seeks and strikes
again and again
homes buildings hospitals. schools everything anything
that moves
camouflaged in plain sight *STRIKE - STRIKE* and the virus of war
s p r e a d s...

ANESTHETIZED by TV clips “IMAGES MAYBE
DISTURBING”
the sea is full of their blood your blood our blood
they cry we pray and march for PEACE PEACE
PEACE
pleas unheard collapse like the scorched soil and where is our
shared humanity?

because *ALLIED* our bullets our missiles our rockets our
dilemma the great paradox
ENOUGH of fragmented promises shattered dreams we
shoulder the wounds
 the cancer of war survives and thrives
return the loss ones the taken ones the dead ones

and your children
our children
they are bruised fractured disappeared

PLEASE create a **PEACE -STOP**
for the children

MY ANSWER TO A VA MEDICAL CHECKLIST

By Richard “Dick” Epstein

So, I have a disorder?
This is all one big joke.
It’s why I’m here, doc.
Isn’t it?

I have nightmares,
flashbacks,
anger issues,
anti-social behavior too;
but that’s because
I don’t like
most people.

And there’s panic attacks:
like when I see
something out of place
like a book or a bag
alongside the road.
That’s MY list!

Your questions are stupid!
No, I don’t know what triggers me.
Stupid people, I guess.
Stupid questions too.

Our society has it way too good.
There's too many choices,
too many decisions.
That tends to annoy me too.

Too many people
have nothing. They sleep
on the streets. They use drugs
to help them cope.
We have it too good, doc.
I need something worthwhile to do.
I need to be needed, Doc.
And I don't think I'm needed here.

As I enter his room
he focuses upon me,

silently begging me not to ask
of his absent roommate.

Empty bed freshly made,
side table tidy and neat,

surrounding area cleared
of anything personal

in that part of the VA hospital
where patients go missing.

RECOVERY

By Harry Mayer



Telling the truth is not as simple as not telling a lie, there are moments, there are times when the truth may be even more destructive than saying nothing, than trying to point someone towards hope that is unfounded, maybe even miraculous. Then there are the times when the lie is the long pause, the words which were not included. Sometimes truth is edged out of the way by humor easing its way in.

Sarcasm brings its own special color to a lie, to that lack of clarification because the question need not be asked, when the information was just given, and someone demonstrates that they were not listening as is demonstrated by the words they have just spoken. When I would give students their workout, whether swimming or running and before we began someone would ask again what it was, I would just tack on a longer distance, or additional reps, which was not the truth I stated before, but I struggle with seeing that as a lie, since they were not listening. Which as you get older becomes even more of a struggle to hear and see the requirements for many of us. The words and serial numbers are too small to read without glasses of a magnifier, things that you are certain where put away are not where you last left them. Maybe for those students it was hard for them to hear, hard for them to see what was written on the white board because they needed glasses and it was not daydreaming and inattention that kept them from seeing and hearing what the workouts were. Their willingness to ask, that was a compliment, that they wanted to know what we were doing and instead of restating the plan, I just added to it, lied to them and told them something different.

Accountability is hard, not just the paying attention part, but the check in, punch in, be officially here. The struggle is real for me in every job I have had where I had to check in and out. Whether it is on a whiteboard or with a time card, there are many times I am at work, and I did not clock in. Which makes things harder for my supervisor, and they have to call to see if it was a Day off, or as usual just another instance where I was in a hurry to be present for someone in need and forgot to clock in. In other jobs I have had to clock out as well, and that is just as much an struggle to remember to do. When it is just moving a magnet or making a mark I am in a perpetual state of wrong, forgetting to complete the end of the Day ritual so it would appear that I was still working because I did not sign out, or change the entry on the whiteboard. One would think I would be more attentive to this process, with my lack of compassion for those who ask questions about what was just stated, and know the importance of tracking who is where. I Have spent time looking for kids at the pool or lakeside because they did not put their token back to the side that said they were out of the water. Finding them laughing and playing with others gives the sense of relief that washes away the fear and trepidation that came from having unclaimed tokens on the board at the end of the swimming period

I find myself lying in conversations, when someone asks if I have time, and I really do not. I smile, and start to listen, while inside my head, in the pit of my stomach I am just letting the engine rev up about why they are going on and on, can't they see I have places to be and things to do. When I get a call, and I knew before I answered it that it was from someone who rambles for longer than I have time for, but that is so much easier to pause now and listen, than to try and catch the voicemail, and have to call them back and hear the whole story over again and then some more because they have me hooked on the line. It is not OK, I do not have time, and I may not even really care about the situation or action that they are so passionate about. That is not the truth I

Speak out loud, instead I lie to them, act attentive and listen, because that is the role that I play. I am supposed to have time, drop everything, be there in the instant that they need me, because no one else can be trapped and stuck having to listen in their world.

It's almost as if I walk around with a sign that says, talk to me, I'll listen, with a smile and even a prayer if you want. Then I have to lie again because the truth is not what they want to hear.

I get calls asking for Last Rites, which is better than being asked for Extreme Unction, which means it really has been a long time since they last attended church. Often it is for a Family Member who is no longer able to speak with me which makes it hard to do authentically. Anointing for Healing, Commendation of the Dying both are liturgies we want to go through with the patient while they are still able to speak, share, hear and respond. They are getting to confess their sins, the Family is asked to leave the room during that time, and they are being encouraged. When they cannot respond it is primarily feeding a need for the Family members who made the request, we do not know how the patient is comforted by those prayers. I tell myself that they are, they are comforted. Is that a lie?

I used to expend energy explaining that it is now Anointing for Healing or if we know they are Dying, Commendation of the Dying. But now I just lie and say that I will do that for them, I parse carefully how I respond because when the patient can't speak it is just a prayer, just a blessing. When we go through the liturgy for Anointing it starts with Confession and Absolution, which when the patient cannot speak they are not asking for forgiveness. Sure I can wordsmith the prayer and talk to the Family about how their loved one can speak to God through their heart and mind, even though we cannot hear the words. That can happen, prayer does not have to be said aloud for God to know what it is. I tell myself they can let God know they wish to be forgiven, God can hear the words formed in their heart and mind. That is not a lie? While I sit with them and their Family they can still get a prayer, a

blessing, a kind word, but it is not what the person asking for was thinking based on what they may remember being done for their grandparents, great grandparents or saw on TV or in a movie. That lie makes them feel better, gives them an action that is done to provide and demonstrate care for their loved one. While the Dr's cannot make them better, medicine will not heal them, they were able to get them a prayer.

With those prayers the lies continue, because I do not know what they all believe or even if they all believe. People are making their own meaning and adding to what their personal beliefs are beyond what is in Scripture and mainline Christian traditions. When the Family is all there it is not uncommon to learn that they do not all believe the same things. The reason I am getting the call is they do not go to church any longer, have not for a long time. Sometimes it is because they live in a facility, at others because they married someone with a different faith, and not only because it is end of life are they being turned back to the faith of their childhood. Some are angry, angry at the church, church leaders, angry at life, angry with God. Many are hoping for healing, to get up out of the Hospital room and return to a more regular way of life, to be back home. Home can be a relative term. I wanted to go home the whole time I was at War, and I knew that home could as easily be St. Louis, as it could be my Heavenly Home. I can pray for patients to go home, it just may not be the same intended place among the thoughts of Family, Staff, the patient and myself.

Reflecting then on the merits of the words, for words have meaning, is it a lie if it brings comfort and helps people in their moment of crisis. Is the value of the words and the hope they bring more important than the truth. The struggle is real, because in times of crisis, in times of need, to care for people I am called on to lie.

Rainwater rattles in the drainpipes, an urban waterfall
Light drops fall steady on Kyiv's streets and alleys
Yellow Cathedral with blue domes stands heartily
The dog shakes off the rain, wagging tail with joy
Fog of war sometimes is just a light mist
We all seek moments of peace during war
Seconds, minutes, hours are all they are
Death, mourning, suffering never subsides
Some days they just ebb and flow like tides
We ride the blood red waves of these days
Surfers on a sea of death and raging battles
Heroes will rise and enemies will fall

Enemies will kill and Heroes will die
And for those who fight, we will stand tall
One day some sort of peace may come
Now is not the time, we worry it will be never
That the rest of our lives will be spent fighting
The sun may rise but will this war ever end?
Hard questions, brutal truths, a waiting game
We have faith and still do not lose hope
Rain drifts slowly past the window, the dog naps
War mists glide in and out of my thoughts
Prayers rise from deep within my darkened soul
Drift into the grey mists searching for the Master.

on the precipice of the depression
squeezed tight
hours of light rare
darkness creeps closer circling
knotted breath
help from doctors meds
advise her
meditate *walk* *pet a dog*
unmask the shame the suffering
tumbling
traumatized in mind on body
splintered
sleep away the blues
smiles disappear
rescue a soul
my soul
up
down
not moving need to move
the blank
sometimes not always
but always sometimes
more pieces fall off
abandoned prayers
stop the hemorrhaging
if only only if
i could dance

Naval Air Station Lakehurst
New Jersey, 1979

Despite bright mercury lights, it seemed dark in the old blimp hanger. Flapping pigeon wings echoed in the large empty space. When I looked up, several birds were joining the flock that had made their home on the rickety catwalk. The wooden catwalk was a death trap, 120 feet above the floor, with missing boards and a broken handrail. But this didn't bother the pigeons, they happily built their nests near the massive hanger doors. Just below the catwalk white bird droppings splattered the old walls too high above the floor for maintenance workers to clean. This gigantic building once housed the Navy's Zeppelins that patrolled the East Coast hunting submarines. It felt like I had stepped into an old black and white war movie, and I half expected to see Gregory Peck in a leather flight jacket briefing the pilots in the Ready Room.

Dressed in a green flight suit, I entered the Ready Room and hung my aircrew survival vest over the back of a chair. A row of squadron cups hung on a pegboard near the coffee mess. I didn't rate a squadron cup yet because I was only an aircrew candidate. Once I earned my wings, I could hang my cup on the wall with the others. I poured a cup of stale black coffee into a Styrofoam cup and took a seat to wait for the Pre-Mission Brief to begin. I arrived an hour early since this was my first flight as an enlisted aircrew candidate, and I was filled with apprehension. With only two drill weekends under my belt, I still had a lot to learn. One of the things I liked about the Naval Reserve was that I

could earn extra money during the week to work on my qualifications, the perfect part-time job for a college student.

With time to kill before the briefing I pulled out a sealed envelope from my helmet bag. I had been struggling in Professor Dobbs English Literature Class. I didn't particularly care for Professor Dobbs. She struck me as a pedantic woman overly obsessed with social justice. With her blond hair tied in a tight bun and wearing a frumpy sweater her eyes would light up when she talked about the anti-war movement of the 1960's. She could turn any discussion into an obscure lecture on the evils of the American defense industrial complex.

While I usually read her assignments, I rarely participated in class discussions. I found the course material boring. Our most recent assignment had been a 5-page essay on *The Role of Madness in Hamlet: Insanity or Strategic Ploy*. I read every analysis of the Danish prince I could get my hands on. I was sure I nailed the assignment this time.

I took a deep breath and tore open the envelope to review my grade. In bright red ink across the top of the page was the letter "D" with a frowning smiley face. Then I read the comments, "Mr. Mayer, while this is certainly a well written paper, I have a sneaking suspicion that someone else wrote it." My face turned redder than the ink on the page. I muttered, "That Bitch!" Petty Officer Perdue, who was sitting in the row of seats ahead of me, turned and said, "Did you say something?" I sighed, "It's nothing." I stuffed the paper back in the envelope.

Petty Officer Perdue, a first-class petty officer with over 1,000 hours in Sea King helicopters was my NATOPS instructor. After the mission brief, I followed Perdue to the flight line. A blast of hot jet exhaust from returning Helicopter 552 hit us in the face. Its burning JP-4 smelled strong and pungent. Helicopter 552 engines screamed on deck while its large rotor blades beat the air. A plane captain, wearing a cranial head protector and goggles signaled the returning flight crew to shut down as we headed to our

aircraft. We conducted a walk around pre-flight inspection of our bird. I read the checklist and Perdue showed me what to inspect. Once onboard I took the right seat near the window, Purdue took the inside one. He showed me how to plug into the Internal Communication System, once I did, I could hear the pilots talking in my helmet. Perdue said, "Tonight's going to be simple. We're doing some touch and goes, and if we have time, we'll do some practice with the hoist. Are you up for riding the wire?" I nodded.

I listened to the pilots recite the actions from the take off checklist. Then a voice from the tower said, "5-5-5 your clear for takeoff." The helicopter aircraft commander brought the engines up to speed and pulled back on the collective. We took off at twilight. I watched out the window as we rose into the early evening sky. The red and white checkered water tower and the enormous Lakehurst hangers grew small as we climbed above the Naval Air Station. I marveled at the beauty of the Pine Barrens at dusk, the sky's vibrant red, blue, and orange colors slowly fading to black as the sky darkened. Soon the red lights came on inside the cabin as we flew into the night.

Perdue called to the pilots, "Pilot-Sonar. Request permission to unstrap to conduct post takeoff inspection."

"Permission granted."

Perdue unstrapped from the seat and meticulously inspected the interior of the aircraft. He inspected the control cables, hydraulic lines, and the integrity of the air frame. Then he strapped back in his seat. "Pilot-Sonar. Post takeoff check complete." For the next three hours the pilots practiced their take offs and landings. Then a voice came over the ICS, "Sonar-Pilot. You guys want to get some practice with the rescue hoist?"

"Sonar-Aye."

Perdue signaled me to follow him to the back of the helicopter. He handed me a gunner's belt and showed me where to fasten it to the air frame. Once we were properly hooked up, he slid open a large door at the back of the helicopter. After we were

in a stable hover, he hooked me up to the hoist and then pushed me out of the door. I dangled out of the helicopter suspended on a tiny wire while he lowered me to the pad. Once I hit the ground I unhooked and waited for the chopper to return. As our flight was coming to an end, we practiced auto rotations, an emergency procedure for engine loss. Once at altitude the pilots disengaged the rotor head, and we dropped from the sky. It felt like the first large dip on the giant roller coaster at Great Adventure Amusement Park. Although this was my first flight, I was hooked. I knew I was going to love this job and couldn't wait to come back.

I returned to college eagerly looking forward to the next drill weekend. I had a paper due on Friday on *The Tale of Two Cities*. I sat at the desk in my room and stared at the Underwood typewriter. I searched for words to fill the blank page, while Bruce Springsteen's *Thunder Road* played on the radio. Just as I started to clack and clunk on the manual typewriter, my train of thought was interrupted by the WJRZ news announcer. "Good afternoon, ladies, and gentlemen, this is George Jessup, we're breaking into our regular programing with this developing story. A naval reserve helicopter from Lakehurst Naval Air Station, on a routine training flight crashed in a farmer's field near Bordentown, NJ. Navy officials reported earlier today there were no survivors. While the cause of the crash is unknown, the Navy promises a thorough investigation. Our thoughts are with the families of the flight crew. Stay with us for continuing coverage of this story, we now return to our regularly scheduled programming." Even though I hadn't been in the squadron long enough to know the members of the flight crew, I had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. I lost all interest in my essay. Up to this point danger seemed abstract, like it would happen to someone else. For the first time I realized, I could get killed in the reserves, even in peacetime.

The next day, I waited with the rest of my class for Professor Dobbs. Our English Literature Class was supposed to begin at 10 AM but she still had not arrived. By 10:15 students

started to leave. A long-haired kid in an Army fatigue jacket said, “Man, I lucked out, I’m glad she didn’t show up today. I was partying last night, and I never completed the paper. What about you?” I said, “Hell yeah, I was working on it until midnight.” The next day I received a call from the HS-75 Duty Officer who told me there would be a memorial service at the *Cathedral of the Air* in Lakehurst on Saturday morning.”

Just beyond Red’s Tailor shop on South Chapel Road stood the *Cathedral of the Air*. A beautiful Norman-Gothic chapel nestled among the pines. Sailors gathered in dress uniforms outside the church. A blanket of auburn pine needles covered the ground. A cold November breeze blew brown oak leaves across the parking lot. We waited in respectful silence for the memorial service to begin. Black limousines carrying grief-stricken family members started to arrive. I was surprised when I saw Professor Dobbs get out of the second limo with her teenage son. She was dressed in a black dress with a black veil. She took her seat in widows’ row at the front of the chapel. Soft, colorful light filtered into the sanctuary through the chapel’s magnificent stain glass windows. The atmosphere was melancholy, yet peaceful as the organist played, “*Nearer my God to Thee*”. I took a seat in the pew near the back.

Captain Reynolds, the Commanding Officer walked to the podium. He said, “Ladies and gentlemen, officers, and men of Helicopter Anti-Submarine Squadron Seven Five. We are here to celebrate the lives of Commander Douglas Dobbs, Lieutenant Commander George Chadwick, and Petty Officer First Class Amelio Santangelo. Over the course of my career, I have attended too many memorial services. These brave young men, struck down in their prime only wanted to serve their country. They were America’s best, and I felt proud to personally know all three. These were men of character, who cheerfully answered their country’s call to duty when asked and served with honor in Southeast Asia.

We mourn their loss with great sadness and pray we are worthy of their sacrifice.”

Following the Skipper’s remarks, he invited family members, colleagues, and friends to speak. Professor Dobbs walked to the front of the chapel. Despite her bravest attempt to look stoic, she appeared fragile. She wiped away tears with a handkerchief. There was a long pause. She started to cry when she began. She said, “I’m sorry.” She paused again. Then she spoke, “Today, we are here to celebrate the lives of three wonderful men, George, Amelio, and of course my Doug.” Her voice quivered.

She continued, “Doug was not only the great love of my life, but he was also my best friend. Memories. So many memories. I remember when I was in graduate school, and he was a midshipman at the Naval Academy. He looked so handsome in his uniform. We would sit for hours on Sunday morning at Naval Bagels on Taylor Ave. He always knew the right thing to say, it was such a happy time. He would make me laugh when he spoke of some of the mischief he got into at the Academy. More than anything, he wanted to fly. His eyes would light up when he talked about flight school. He couldn’t wait to earn his pilot wings.

“When my oldest brother John was drafted, and later killed in Viet Nam, he comforted me. Doug was always there when I needed him. When I gave birth to Jason, he sat by my side in the delivery room for a day and a half holding my hand. He was my rock. I felt safe in his arms.

“My heart sank the day he broke the news to me that HC-1 was deploying to Viet Nam. He told me not to worry, he would be safe on the RANGER. I was scared for him. Dougie had the heart of a poet and wrote me some of the most beautiful letters, I’ll treasure those letters forever.

“When he returned from deployment he had changed. He had soured on the Navy and just wanted out. Once his initial service obligation was up, he submitted his Intent to Resign. I was ecstatic when he received approval. Once the war was over, he

became restless. He told me how much he missed flying. The worst fight we ever had was when he told me he was going to affiliate with the Naval Reserve. He still wanted to fly, and I was furious, but that was Doug, once his mind was made up there was no changing it.”

With tears streaming down her cheeks she concluded, “Doug, you broke my heart, it’s so hard to say goodbye. I miss you, there is a piece of me that’s gone forever. My dear, you’ve left this world, but you will never leave my heart.” Then she broke down and cried. Her son hugged her and helped her to her seat.

There was a long silence in the chapel. The silence of empathy and sorrow. The service concluded with the Chaplin’s benediction and the playing of “*Eternal Father*” with its slow and dignified melody, but it brought little comfort.

I returned to school on Monday and resumed classes. I never mentioned I was at the Memorial Service, there was nothing I could say that would change anything. Professor Dobbs never spoke of the accident either. She continued teaching and remained outspoken on social issues. Even though she continued to be a fierce critic of the armed forces, I found I no longer hated her. I continued to be bored with her assignments and as you might expect, my English Literature grades never improved. But I no longer saw her as pedantic, only as a woman suffering a great loss. I admired her. She had been robbed of what she cherished most in this world, and nothing would bring her husband back, her life forever changed. I respected her strength and courage. She just pressed on.

HS-75’s aircraft were grounded pending the results of a safety investigation. Some aviators wanted nothing to do with flying after the crash. We waited for several months for permission to resume flight operations. Three enlisted aircrewman signed their Page 13’s to document that they no longer volunteered to fly. Some of the pilots even resigned their commissions. I couldn’t blame them; most had joined the reserves to earn extra money.

Now that the war was over, they felt safe returning to the Navy. The thought of dying from a part-time job was more than they had bargained for. When the safety investigation was completed the cause of the crash turned out to be a cotter pin. A simple cotter pin had been incorrectly installed and vibrated off in flight causing the helicopter to fly out of control into the ground from 500 feet. They didn't stand a chance. Five months later our sister reserve squadron on the west coast, HS-85, also had a fatal crash. One of the main rotor blades came off in flight and all three souls on board were lost.

It's been 45 years since the Bordentown crash. Though the events of that day have been lost to time, the accident still haunts me. I often think about how a simple cotter pin changed the trajectory of so many lives. In my case it was the realization of my own mortality. I could have been on that aircraft just as easily as the ill-fated crew of Helicopter 555. It's the luck of the draw, life's unpredictable that way. It doesn't matter how careful you are, when your number is up, it's up; and there is nothing you can do about it.

In late autumn I often sit on the deck behind my house and watch the Canadian geese. From my deck I have a nice view of Oliphant Lake. It astonishes me how those big clumsy birds can drift weightless on the air currents then lightly touch down in the water barely making a splash. Sometimes when I'm out there I'll hear the roar of military helicopters overhead. I'll look up and watch them returning to Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst. The sound of those gigantic helicopters take me back in time. It evokes memories of a time in my life when jet engines were screaming above my head, and I could feel the vibrations from those giant rotor blades slapping the sky. In those quiet moments of reflection, I think back to a time when I rode in those magnificent mechanical monsters and remember how thrilled I was to fly above the clouds just for the chance to soar like an angel.



A jury of your peers
and incidentally mine
decided that:
Consent was a massage
Consent was a provocative dance
Consent was a stolen key and an unconscious girl
“I was just returning your key,” you said
You could have slipped it under the door
“I was just checking on you,” you said
Do you often “check on” people by penetrating them
“Go ahead and report me” you said
I just wanted you to acknowledge that what you did was wrong
But you knew as well as I that it did not look good for me
You had done this before and you would do it again
Our old friend told me you tried the same thing with her
I knew what I had to do despite knowing I would be dragged
It went down much like I expected
They dragged me through the mud
While you walked away squeaky clean
But maybe, just maybe, it scared you enough to think twice
All I wanted was for you to understand
That it was unwanted
For you to take accountability
And for you to never ever do it again
I never wanted or needed for you to suffer
You lost nothing but sleep

You kept your clearance
You got the rank
You were stationed where I had wanted to go
I obsessed over your success
While I floundered and failed
But karma is strange in the ways it teaches us
I saw in your photos you had a daughter
the happiest looking little girl with Down Syndrome
I prayed for her infinite safety and happiness
And hoped that you would hope
she never encounters a man like you

I told Lewis to install a mine field along the west side of the village about 500 yards out. He posted signs in English. Come to find out, he installed a *phony* minefield to the west and dug in *blast mines* along the north.

I informed the village elder. Gave him a map showing the location of the blast mines. Several farmers with water buffalo left the village at dawn to work the rice fields. They walked north.

Three water buffalo and two farmers were injured. When I reported the incident, the Col. bit hard into his cigar, looked up from his desk and said: “Whoops.”

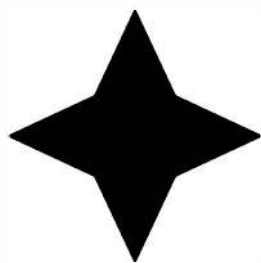
DON'T

By Carl "Papa" Palmer

I did it
reenlisted
stayed in the Army
for the money
times were tight
not many jobs
even if I had the education
long welfare lines
friends out of work

but I wasn't an infantryman
didn't wear a steel pot
carried no weapon
never slept in a foxhole
there was no war
I was a peacetime soldier
a radar technician
on a missile site
with unarmed missiles

now there's Iraq, Iran
you've been to both twice
three times in Afghanistan
you know you'll go again
you ask what I would do
ask if you should reenlist
don't
please don't
don't ask



CONTRIBUTORS

Rob Carter, Soldier for Life with 31 years of service as an Infantry, Medical Service Corps Officer and Chaplain. Service in Operation Enduring Freedom as an Embedded Trainer and mobilized for COVID19 response. Supported by his wife Deb, daughters Abby and Bethany and their dog Disney. Continues to work as a Hospital Chaplain and Lutheran Pastor.

Richard Epstein served in the U.S. Army, Signal Corps. He has participated in several Warrior Writer workshops and actively participates in its Lunch Time series via Zoom.

Juanita Kirton is a Black, gay, African American, elder woman; earned an MFA from Goddard College. The 2024 1st place winner of Oprelle Publication/Matter Anthology. Recently published in AVOW (American Veterans Women Magazine), Mom Egg Review, Narrative, Persimmon Tree, Stillwater Review, Stone Canoe, Veterans Voices. A member of Women Who Write, IWWG and Women Reading Aloud workshops; a teaching artist Crossing Point Arts, a Trauma informed facilitator for Warrior Writers, conducts writing workshops at Kirkridge Retreat Center. Her chapbook, Letters to my Father, (2020). Juanita is working on her first full-length book of poetry. Riding her motorcycle keeps her sane.

Harry Mayer's career spanned from the United States Marine Corps to the Navy, serving as a Deep Sea Diver and Bomb Disposal Technician. After 23 years in the military, he coordinated medical teams during catastrophic disasters. Harry's writings are

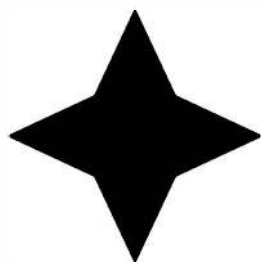
inspired by his experiences, which explore leadership, crisis management, and the human spirit, reflecting his profound service commitment.


Carl “Papa” Palmer of Old Mill Road in Ridgeway, Virginia, lives in University Place, Washington. He is retired from the military and Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), enjoying life as “Papa” to his grand descendants and being a Franciscan Hospice volunteer.

Alena Reed is an Air Force veteran native to greater Philadelphia. She served as a Persian-Farsi Linguist 2000 to 2004. Her contributions to real-time SIGINT reconnaissance missions in support of Operation Enduring Freedom earned her and her unit the NSA Director’s trophy and Outstanding Unit medal with valor. She is a new contributor to Warrior Writers though she has long been an avid writer finding catharsis in the written word - from poetry and love letters to essays and errantly long texts. She holds a degree in Community and Regional Planning from Temple University and is currently earning an End-of-Life Doula Certification at University of Vermont.

John Gordon Sennett grew up in Woodbury and spent his summers in Cape May Point. He served in the Army Reserves (357th Chemical Company-Camden) and the Marine Corps (MAG-13). John moved to Ukraine in 2020 and has stayed throughout the full-scale invasion. He assists with information warfare and military aid. John is co-author of *Accidental Ukrainians* with his wife of twenty-four years, Natasha. Their dog “Philly Cheesesteak” lives with them.

Virginia Wheatley is an aspiring creative writer and a U.S. Air Force veteran who served on active duty at McGuire Air Force Base from 1999 to 2003. Professionally, she holds a Master of Public Health degree from Rutgers, works in environmental health/food safety, and teaches public speaking on a part-time basis. In her personal life, she is a voracious reader, an experienced world traveler, a die-hard animal lover, and a vegetarian who is always searching for inspiration to enhance her writing projects.





OUTSIDE THE WIRE IS A MULTI-FORMAT HUMANITIES PROJECT THAT HIGHLIGHTS THE NARRATIVES AND EXPERIENCES OF AMERICAN VETERANS THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY'S HISTORY OF CONFLICT. THIS YEAR SUPPORTED IN PART BY AN ACTION GRANT FROM THE NEW JERSEY COUNCIL FOR THE HUMANITIES, THIS PROJECT INCLUDES GENERATIVE WRITING WORKSHOPS FOR THE VETERAN COMMUNITY IN SOUTH JERSEY AND PHILADELPHIA LED BY NATIONAL NONPROFIT WARRIOR WRITERS; AN ANNUAL PUBLIC PROGRAM FEATURING CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN RECENT VETERANS AND WRITERS/SCHOLARS/CURATORS WHOSE WORK INTERSECTS WITH ISSUES OF CONCERN TO VETERANS AND SERVICE MEMBERS, AND A LITERARY MAGAZINE CREATED BY VETERANS THEMSELVES.