

****Honorable Mention****
2013 Student Storyteller

UN-BREAKABLE EMBRACE
BY RON FARINA

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I met him three days after landing in Da Nang, the morning I arrived at Marble Mountain, home operations for Marine Air Group 16, Aviation Crash Rescue. He'd been ordered to check me in. Initially thrown together by circumstance, a strong natural bond quickly grew between us, drawing us together like brothers.

He came from outside of South Boston, a rogue to the core, at times an irascible schemer, a short-timer with less than a year left on his enlistment. With my nine months in the Corps, raw and unworldly, I was his polar opposite and I flourished in the shadow of his experience. He invited me into his circle and I entered eagerly. To a naive kid just turned nineteen, Cpl. Albert James Rose walked on water.

We both volunteered for duty further north, deeper into Vietnam and on a dawn morning we boarded a CH-46 flying together before going separate ways. I departed at Phu-Bai, an air base outside the ancient capital of Hue. Al continued north to Dong Ha. At Phu-Bai the flight crew tossed my gear onto the runway before taxiing away. I turned in time to see Al smile, flip me off, mock salute and disappear into the morning sun.

Forty-five-years later on a July morning in 2010 I walked the campus of CCSU. Tucked within the inside pocket of a navy blue blazer the re-admittance letter, the ticket to fulfilling a lifelong dream, rose and fell with my breathing.

Passing familiar landmarks I wondered if I could successfully return, full time, and finally earn a degree. In December of 1965 I withdrew after one semester. Three months after withdrawing I stepped off a bus at Parris Island, home of the United States Marine Corps, and by October 1966 I landed on a runway in Da Nang, Vietnam.

The morning I returned to campus I checked into the Veteran's Center, delivering form DD-214, Honorable Discharge, Service Republic of Vietnam, to the Army captain running the center.

"You served in Nam?"

"Yeah, long time ago."



“Were you a grunt?”

“No, Marine Air Wing rescue.”

“Did you see a lot of shit?”

“Enough.”

Done answering his questions I saluted the captain before leaving for Admissions. It felt strange. I had not raised my arm in salute in 45 years. I remembered the training: wrist straight, fingers extended and rigid, hand flat, thumb tight along the index finger, lift the arm crisply, keep the elbow level with the shoulder, touch the fingertips to the brim of cap and hold the salute until returned. Uneasiness began crowding my sense of well being

The familiarity of the Admissions office surprised me. I had been in this room before. Disquiet fell over me like a late day shadow. The air thickened and the room tightened its grip around me. The face of the male student sitting behind the counter blurred, replaced by the superimposed face of a woman; a face I had seen before, a voice first heard in 1965.

“I have to notify the draft board. You will be classified 1-A, available for immediate military service.”

I signed some paper and left the building, dazed, sweating, breathing hard, not certain how I came to sit on a bench near admissions; hands covering my face, silently weeping.

The image of a charred corpse took shape. I smelled the burnt flesh and saw the contorted limbs seared into grotesque positions. Torched hands reached out in a renewed gesture of embrace. The sounds and smells of Vietnam burst through walls I had built over 45 years and I remembered . . .

A few weeks after settling into the Phu-Bai airbase I had watch. The radio crackled with a call from Dong-Ha. Be advised, “Under attack, med-e-vacing dead and wounded to field hospital, your location, Phu-Bai.”

The choppers arrived at first light and we carried the wounded and dead. The decks of the helicopters were slick with blood. Mingled with exhaust fumes the blood created a caustic stench that coated my skin, stuck in my throat and I choked back vomit and tears.

By mid-morning, med-e-vacs carried mostly KIAs. We unloaded the burnt body of a marine, no more than a third of the corpse remained. A wounded marine walked through the exhaust and dust, slipped a blanket from his shoulders and covered the body.

The last of the choppers left and I returned to the rescue station with other members of the crew.



Someone collapsed next to me, time erases the name. Tears tracked down his dirt covered face. He bent forward mumbling through blood and dirt caked fingers.

“The KIA on the stretcher was Rose,” he said.

Forty-five years later memory turned inward on unhealed wounds and I could no longer hide from what never goes away.

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Ron Farina first attended Central Connecticut State University (CCSU) in 1965 before joining the Marine Corps and serving in Vietnam in 1966 and 1967. After a successful business career as a national corporate Headhunter and President/Owner of Management Search, Ron returned to CCSU to fulfill the lifetime goal of earning a college degree. Currently in his senior year, Ron is a Creative Non-Fiction Major/Music Minor. Ron has published two essays on Vietnam service: “Jerry Winn, A Vietnam Odyssey” and “A Keyhole” published in the anthology In-Country and Back. Excerpts from A Keyhole were featured on NPR with John Dankowski. Ron is currently working on a memoir Full Time, A Vietnam Veteran’s Experience Returning to College.



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