

VIETNAM

V.A. DAY, AUGUST 2014

Veterans Administration:

Chalmers P. Wylie Veterans Clinic

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Unit Civil Engineer Squadron "A" Shift Crash and Rescue, 1969-1970

Crap! The alarm is going off. It can't be time to get up already! I peek over at the clock with one eye and see it is 5:15 a.m. I turn it off and roll back over. Gently I feel to see which way Vikki is facing. I decide that a few minutes of spooning would be preferable to getting up so I snuggle up against her. Soon the alarm comes on again.



In the dim early summer light, I see our sheep pasture taking shape out of the window facing south toward the rear of our farm. In a moment a mop of strawberry-blond hair comes out from under a pillow and sleepily says, "Remember its V.A day! Are you working half a day...what time is your appointment?"

I don't answer; I am in denial that I have to go today. Then I think, "Oh well it's not *Oncology day* it's just *Dermatology*. Darn, I can't believe six months have gone by.

I continue to spoon. I love my wife, she is pretty and has stood by me through injury and illness and was the main force in making me believe we could make it through the hard times. My nickname for her is *Diane Keaton*. I call her that because when she and Diane were young, Vikki was a dead ringer for her in the "Annie Hall" movie. Years later I will admit, the features are similar but Vikki is aging better, right down to the fact that she has let her hair go back to its natural strawberry-blond color, rather than continue to dye it Iron Gray...*so she says*.

"Get up and go support me, you will be late for work." Then the pillow covers up the streaming light on her face.

I decide that I am going to work half a day—my V.A Hospital appointment is at 1:30 PM.

For thirty years I was a builder. After One Hundred and fifty four houses and probably as many room additions, a bunch of commercial buildings, and whatever else it took to keep going, I am now a State Building Inspector.

At the office my supervisor asks me how much I can get done before I leave. I look at the schedule and say, "Everything except the three late foundation footers. He smiles and says, "Ok, don't rush." He knows he can count on me because I bring military discipline and a former self employed person's mindset to the work place.

On the Way to the *Chalmers P. Wylie's V.A. outpatient clinic*, I have the radio on in my Ford Focus.



The D.J. Announces: “Hey Listener land, forty- five years ago today we were at Woodstock! Where were you—*were you there?*”

Then for the millionth time in my life Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young come on with “[Suite For Judy Blue Eyes](#).” This I assume is to honor Woodstock. I think back to where I was during the event, and Vietnam begins to roll in my mind...*again*.

Then In a voice meant to imitate Tom Hanks character of Forrest Gump I yell, “I was in Khanh Hoa Province, *Jenny!*” In South Ah-- Viet---*NAAAM!* I was there so all you Hippies could run around naked in the mud, *Jenny* (*Jenny* was Forrest Gump’s girlfriend”)!
[Woodstock: Grace Click, Jefferson Airplane](#)

In a move uncharacteristic of me I give the radio, Steve Stills, Graham Nash, David Crosby, Neil Young and Woodstock *the finger* and turn the radio off. *Long nights on line-standby, crashing F-4 Phantoms, Screaming rockets, Puff the Magic Dragon raining red tracers, all come back to me*, and a few miles of driving slipped by unnoticed by me.

After a while I turn the radio back on and as I pull into the VA parking lot *Jay and the Americans* are serenading me with “[Some Enchanted Evening](#).” ‘Ah yes...innocent High school memories. Somehow high school became *Vietnam* very quickly back in the 60’s.

I deliberately park as far away from the building as I can. As I start to walk toward the clinic a shuttle pulls up beside me and the driver shouts, “Need a lift buddy?” I wave him off, straighten up, and quicken my pace; too proud to ride.

I go to the VA primarily to deal with the effects of Agent Orange. Because of my disability rating I’m privileged to use all the facilities and they are much appreciated! I started coming here in the late 90’s, and at that time there were still lots of WW2 guys around...sadly, now they are mostly gone. The Korean War vets are the older ones.

Lately though I have noticed that most of the vet guys in the wheel chairs and gurneys are wearing Vietnam hats, and look like old broken down men. I can’t help but think of the movie, [We Were Soldiers Once...And Young](#), and realize for many of these aging vets they are approaching five-decades out from our war. I see how appropriate that title chosen by Lt. Gen Moore (Ret.) and journalist Galloway is. I am blessed to still be in contact with a lot of the guys I was in the service with. Most all of them are dealing with health issues. All of the guys I was with in Nam with are dealing with some kind Agent Orange issues: Ray Kastner and Kevin (Harpo) Paddock deal with diabetes; Matteo Guiliano and Hal Watts are dealing with feet and knee issues.

As I walk into the building I think, “Lord, how did this much time go by so fast—where *did* our youth go?” To a man my friends have all told me they would serve again. Harold Nobles (aka “Skate”) continues to send all of us any patriotic information he can find. He has the most photographs of Vietnam, and to look at the pictures *when we were young* will make even the most hardened of us feel like weeping.

As I walk toward a VA elevator I must weave my way through a sea of wheelchairs and Hover-rounds, and all of them carry Veterans being assisted by loved ones or well-meaning attendants, or just scooting along on their own by propelling themselves with either hand-power or their feet (like a snail, only the foot goes out, hooks the floor, and drags the wheelchair forward).

A very good looking young girl comes up to me and says in a somewhat condescending way, "Sir...sir do you know where you are going, do you need assistance?" She then smiles and waits for my answer. She is willing to take me to my appointment. I know she is a volunteer and means well. She probably has a father or grandfather who is a Vet.

Part of me wants to fake like *I am lost and dense*, but like the proud old geezer I am, I calmly say, "No, I have been here before. I'm going to Dermatology, 3rd floor." She moves on, unimpressed, to another geezer and repeats her hopeful-mantra.

The elevator is taking its sweet-time coming down, so I pause to look at a display of military uniforms on the wall. Most are decorated with ribbons from my era. I look and count to see how many of the medals I have. Then I walk on.

Today is Dermatology day. The worst visit I have to make is the twice a year Oncology visit. It really is very hard for me. I liken waiting out in the hall with the others for my appointment, to what it must have been like waiting to go to the guillotine, or to an old Russian film in black and white where POWs are trudging in line, seemingly in acceptance to their immanent-hanging fate; the trapdoor falls—*thunk*—the line advances one route-step, like a worm crawling, or an old veteran scooting his wheelchair forward with his feet.

When I get to Dermatology the clerk looks at me and says, "You gotta go back to the lab to draw blood." I look at the crowd of vets waiting and think that I am losing my place in line—*again*.

At the lab I draw a number and after a very short wait I hear, "Mr Elo or *Eli*." I look up to see if it is my old squad Sgt. 3rd Trimester. I mean *really*—how hard is *Eley*? The clerk politely asks, "Did I say it right?"

I say for the *billionth* time in my life: "Ah, it's just like saying Robert—*E-Lee*: Eley.

As I wait a volunteer brings a wheelchair-veteran in who has muscular arms, a big chest, gray dreadlocks and both legs missing slightly below the belt. Another attendant called to the vet, "*Hey Carl...what's up today?*"

Carl sighs, "Ah nothing...just seeing what's in front of me."

"*Where are you going today man?*"

"Wherever he pushes me I guess." That's all he says as he glances at the attendant behind him.

When Carl is gone the man in the seat next to me leans over and says. "The brother lost his legs to a mine in '67— hasn't taken a step since then, man."

Back at Dermatology the clerk says to me, "We have four doctors today—you're up in fifteen minutes."

I start to read a magazine about the 173 Airborne. In less than a minute a man comes over stands in front of me and asks, "Were you in the 173rd?" Without waiting for an answer he says, "That's me, *there on page 31*, with Little Snake, Claw and Bummer."

I look at him and reply, "No... I was not in the 173rd."

Without another word he goes back to his seat and says something to his wife, she looks at me like I am standing on her kitchen floor with my barn-mucking boots on. I look at the picture on page 31, but it is impossible to tell which one he is. I hear him say to his wife, “He is a straight leg.”

Straight Leg...infantry; I hadn’t heard that term for a long time, and it makes me think of all the nicknames of the guys in the service I knew:

Boss Bear, Filbert, Skate, Harpo, Squeak, Pops, Magnum, Rhino, Sloth, Granny, Mug, Raunchford, Eagle, I could go on forever. I realized there were a lot of vets known only by their nicknames who just dropped out of sight and you never heard about them again—*can’t find nicknames* on The Wall.

The young attendant comes back in wheeling another old vet that has patches on indicating he was in Korea and Vietnam.

To no one in particular he is saying, “So...what they would do was put a grenade under each arm pit and try to sneak past us— after we took a few casualties we started making them strip down—*Ha*— some of those young girls were darn pretty—I didn’t mind that duty. But now let me tell you about how they could sneak under the wire on the perimeter.” His eyes kind of glaze over and I realize he doesn’t give a crap if anyone is listening (although everyone *is* listening), and he starts preaching to the choir: “I had a guy in artillery in Korea that married his hooch girl, never heard from him again; say—does anyone have the *Stars and Stripes*—What’s Bob Hope doing this year?” He looks at me and starts to ask me if we served together.

I resist quipping that Bob Hope is *pushing up daisies in San Fernando*, just as a beautiful young doctor who is to be my *dermatologist for the day* comes out and expectantly announces, “Mr. *Elia*.” I stand up and figure what the heck! *Close enough*.

Why do sixty-six year old men—*who are scarred, weathered, sun beaten ,and have had enough stitches whereas they look like an old leather saddle*—get these young doctors who have never had a blemish in their life, I ask you!

She is very nice and checks me out (as I check her out) for potential problems and pronounces me good for another six months. I thank her and make my next appointment and on the way out grab a comment card and write positive-things about the entire VA from Dental to Oncology.

I start to head out, my thoughts drifting, and all the way down the hall I see posters encouraging us to *stay fit and eat right*, which is ironic because I am about to pass *Heart Burn City*—my name for the cafeteria. I can smell the greasy burgers and chicken wings 100 feet away (smells great!), and the tables are full with people eating *artery-cloggers*.

Maybe my vet friend Hal Watts was right, and maybe it was me that gave out all those nicknames to everyone; I mean *Heartburn City*? I had always told Hal that it was *Lecuyer* who had the quick wit. In Nam, Harpo Paddock was much more humorous than me. He was almost like a pro!

I must admit the huge steak fries look great, but I try to stay in shape. I do two miles a day (mostly) and series after series of Hindu-Pushups and pull-ups. When my youngest boy Matt comes home from college he will come at me with a series of kicks and quick jabs from his martial arts training. One of two scenarios can happen: Once I got a bloody nose, to his credit he did not get all wimpy he just said block that punch like this, rotate and come back across my face with your elbow; or Vikki might come in and say something like, “NO FIGHTING INSIDE—

take your *silly Kung Foo stuff* outdoors. We tell her patiently it's *Tae Kwon Do*, but she always gives us that *same-same mox-nix whatever* shrug.

"Well *whatever* it is, I can hear furniture moving and loud noises all the way upstairs, and I can't hear myself thinking and I'm trying to plan this Saturday for wagon ministry— and you want me to order your tractor parts—*keep it down and go outside*.

I look at her as she walks away and say, "*Diane Keaton—eat your heart out*." Then to Matt I say, "Secretly she likes me this way." We go outside.

I refocus as I am walking past mental health, knowing I have had to go there several times. The first two times were mandatory, it went like this, starting with the Doctor:

"*Do you know why you're here?*"

"No."

"*Well, we usually interview all the Oncology patients. Do you ever have suicide thoughts?*"

"No." I resist asking, *Do You?*

"*Ever have nightmares about Vietnam?*"

"Yes."

"*What are they like?*"

"We are called out for an emergency and I can't find my crew and I am running slowly and things keep getting in my way...and people, who were not there, in Nam, are there and they are in the way."

"*What do you think this means?*"

"Oh...I'd say...*non-resolution and a feeling of incompleteness, a desire to go back and redo it all*."

He looks at me smiles and replies, "*You are either a smart ass or you studied for this*."

The Doc continues: "*Did you like Nam?*"

I think the word Do could work just as well as his word Did. His question could easily have been: Do you like Vietnam. I reply, "I volunteered to go; I did not have a death wish if that's the next question...I wanted to serve." I feel he is enjoying our exchange now.

"*Mr. Eley, please let me know if there is anything I can do for you, we are here to serve*." I shake his hand and leave, wondering just how he would *serve me* in his notes.

I go over toward *Travel* (believe it or not we get travel-pay to and from home, and this is great), and *Imaging* is across the hall. In a moment a young Tech sticks his head out of the door and says, "Mr. Bellows, please." A man about my age gets up out of a chair—he has almost no ears, he has no fingers and all his skin shows the effects of old burn scars—and trudges stiffly but proudly to the door. For the tenth time that day I think, "*There but for the grace of GOD go I*."

It is raining now when I get to the door to leave. I start out the door, the same helpful young woman who was there earlier says, "Sir, do you need us to find your car? Sir, it's raining out...it's raining out... Sir!" I look back and smile and think, *this is not rain—the monsoons, now that's rain—rain like this is just a pleasant summer shower*. I felt really proud knowing the difference for *real rain*, and I'll admit a little smug for a wet old Geezer.

As I leave the grounds and pull out on Stelzer Road, I automatically look to the west side of the road and try to imagine where my friend Mary Ann's house was. An intrusive thought: *I remember it was at the end of the runway where we could set out and watch the Constellations fly over*. Mary Ann's parents' farm and home are long gone now.

The airport was in the Mifflin School District when I went to school back in the day. I remember in the summer of '64 how I had ridden my bike over to Mary Ann's house because I wanted to ask her advice on how to *ask a girl out* that I had a crush on. I shake my head thinking, *there is no way that's been fifty years*. I remember Mary listening to the Beatle's album, [*A Hard Day's Night*](#), and I think that if Lennon were alive he and Paul would both be well into their seventies. This has all happened so quickly, I muse, and here I am nudging seventy.

I pick up my cell phone; I am now on 270 west heading for 161 and then on to 314 for the 50 mile trip back to the farm in Knox County. I push V for Vikki and she answers.

"Hi, I am on the way home."

"Everything Okay?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Listen, do you want to go over to the Party on the Patio at Kenyon tonight? There is a great Jazz Band there tonight. And you'll be with the best looking girl there—I got my Hair and Nails done today."

I don't question that because she has been handling a lot of situations for us lately and this is just a little reward. When I hang up I thank GOD for the care I receive at the VA; it is not perfect, and yes there are flaws, but without them....



[Eley Farm: Larry Eley riding his Deer Tractor, 2014.](#)

On the radio the DJ is repeating the nonsense about Woodstock. I start to turn it off but they start playing [*White Rabbit*](#) by Jefferson Airplane, which is kind of an anthem to Vietnam vets. *Off in the distance I see a C-130 National Guard Plane and it all starts to come back again.*