

The "Manchu" Comes Home. Narrative of An Early Psychotherapy with a Vietnam Combat Veteran¹

By Edward Tick

Abstract: As the war in Vietnam entered its crucial, bloody third year, the author of this article began his long journey and career as a Jungian therapist assisting the veteran Rod, who had come back from overseas with severe spiritual injuries. This article tells how the author built a gradual interpersonal connection with his patient through the exam of his dreams, in which symbols and archetypes played a relevant role as structures able to elaborate the trauma buried deep below. For the therapist too, this journey was a challenging endeavour insofar as he had never come across the horrors of war and Rod's crude testimonies constituted his "close encounter" with an unpopular and bloody conflict. This article thus offers an insightful view from the inside of the therapeutic approach to PTSD from the holistic perspective of a Jungian therapist, who worked on the archetypal content of his patient's dreams to tackle trauma.

Keywords: PTSD, Jungian psychotherapy, holistic psychotherapy, Vietnam war, veterans healing

Introduction

This is a narrative of one of my own early "close encounters", my first psychotherapy with a Vietnam War combat veteran. It occurred early in my psychotherapy career more than forty years ago in Troy, N.Y. This therapy was with Rod, a man who had been through such severe war trauma that he was assigned to a doomed unit and not expected to survive.

My first psychotherapy with a combat veteran demonstrates one form of *close encounter in war*, the encounter of a young non-veteran therapist with a ravaged combat vet. The narrative demonstrates several types of encounters. It shows the encounters and impact on a poorly raised young man relentlessly overexposed to combat trauma. It exposes the extreme hardship of daily living for such a man struggling to return home from war. It portrays a young psychotherapist striving to learn the ways of war and warriorhood and undergo a transformation in his personal and professional identity. It lays bare the extreme stress caused by harming others that society foists upon its veterans to carry alone. For both veteran and therapist, these close encounters over war and in the therapy experience opened worlds.

Christmas

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I was introduced to my combat veteran patient Ron by a representative from Vietnam Veterans of America. I was volunteering to serve as a post-war therapist. The veteran representative was trying to rescue Ron from endless empty days on a day hospital ward and endless doses of medications that he took, as he said, "to keep the raging beast under control."

Though Rod hardly talked during our first meeting with the outreach worker, he had not yet had "civilian psychotherapy" and agreed to see me again. Next time, and for as long as I could make it work, Rod and I would meet alone. No intermediary would help Rod approach his civilian therapist. No one would help me, the civilian, approach this war-ravaged soul. The representative, a vet himself, had carried in his wounded comrade. He was off again, not into the jungle but to hospitals, bar rooms, apartments where other vets lurked alone. He had done his job. Now it was up to me to do mine.

Built like a bull, Rod looked taller than his short-medium height. His face and frame were squared, short dark hair stiff and unkempt. His thin mouth seemed frozen in a straight line across his thick jaw. Sitting like a mine whose trigger he held in place, he spoke in soft monotones, never raising his voice. His large hands constantly played with his lips or an earlobe. His small, dark eyes, avoiding mine, would focus on the floor or far wall.

At the day hospital, "I go to films and discussion groups to learn how to handle my war neurosis", Rod explained. "They keep my rage under control" through heavy sedation. At the cost of depression Rod downed a dozen pills a day to squash his rage and a second dozen to counteract the depression. "I'm a zombie", he said, "but it keeps the psychotic killer inside all locked up."

Rod had had numerous counselors in his years at various Veterans Administration hospitals. I was his first civilian healer, approaching therapy with different goals, values and expectations. His VA counselors had worked to adjust him to a permanently war-disabled condition. I recoiled at the thought that his useful and active life was already over. Rather, I gently challenged Rod's acceptance of the identity of psychological cripple. I hoped for at least some healing. That scared Rod.

I was scared as well. I was Rod's first therapist not relying on medication or locking away all dangerous emotions. Rather, consistent with psychodynamic theory as it has evolved since Freud, I believe it is not events themselves, but the repressed and denied feelings about those events that emotionally *trouble us*. The road to health is in large part the rediscovery of the honest, raw responses we originally had to various events. The more traumatic the events, the more

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painful and difficult the recovery. But recovery is necessary nonetheless. Expression of the original responses provides us with purgation, release, and purification. It also tells us the truth – what we actually saw, felt, knew at the time but could not admit if we were to survive. When we have recovered our original responses we can honorably rebuild our identities based on the truths we have experienced.

I did not know if this strategy would work for Rod. I feared the rage, pain and terror locked inside him. It was not only the popular media image that warned me away. Rod said, "Don't get close. I'm too dangerous. Inside, I'm a crazy, wounded wild animal. I have to be drugged – or else." I, too, was frightened of meeting what the media at the time called a "tripwire vet" or, worse, of creating one.

Rod lived in a small apartment in a dingy blue-collar neighborhood with his chain-smoking stepfather. He spent his days on an open hospital ward where lonely veterans watched television, engaged in small talk and received medications and lunches. At home, Rod lived in front of his TV. He spoke to no one but family.

Rod had been raised in similar neighborhoods where he learned to fight well to survive on the streets. Of French Catholic background, his church had been around the corner from his home. A few streets away were the Polish, Irish, and Italian Catholics, each with their church. Whether with fists, in sports or through pageantry, Rod and the French were constantly at war with the Irish, Italians and Poles.

Rod's father was an alcoholic tavern keeper. His parents divorced when he was eleven. From then on Rod cared for the house and his younger sister. His father installed a permanent, personal beer keg in one end of his bedroom.

A formal education was not for him. Rod wanted to work with his hands and could not keep out of trouble. At 17, he dropped out of school and enlisted. He expected the military would pay him a small but decent salary while providing training as a wireman that could lead to a career as a radio technician.

This was Rod's version of the American Dream: safe service in the armed forces with vocational education and lifelong benefits. Honorable discharge and a secure job that paid decently and had a future. Establish a family, purchase a home, and raise kids to be decent, patriotic and safe from alcoholism and street violence. This dream seemed promised by American ideals and the advertising campaign waged by the armed forces. It was 1967, the height of the Vietnam War, yet Rod discerned nothing that might derail his dream.

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By December, four months after we met, as if putting pennies in a treasure chest, Rod was entrusting me with the details of his sad life. I appreciated how different were our fates, determined not just by choices made during high school. Rather, I had been shaped into "college material" as certainly as Rod had been shaped into "army material". When Rod was a high school junior dropping out to enlist, I was a high school junior protesting the war. At the same time that I was awakening to the carnage across the ocean, Rod was unaware there was a war on that threatened his dream and would nearly take his life. It was not only the draft, but who became educated and who did not, who remained ignorant and who was shocked into awareness, who marched off to the slaughter and who agonized trying to avoid or stop it – ultimately, who lived well, who barely survived, and who died – all were doled out by some huge, invisible, macrocosmic lottery system. Fate was not democratic. Our country was not equally fair and nurturing of all citizens. Rather, opportunity was determined by socioeconomic status and doled out in arbitrary and unfair fashion. I felt foolish that, in our youths during the war, these differences had been lumped together into the single question: are you for the war or against it?

To be attached, Rod believed, only led to unbearable pain because your comrades would inevitably be killed before your eyes. Other veterans called me "brother", Rod never. His eyes hardly ever met mine. Yet I patiently, steadily accompanied Rod no matter what story he told. I let him know that I wasn't scared, I wanted to know what he had seen and done, I would never judge or condemn him. Slowly, from a terrible darkness, Rod reached tentative fingers toward mine.

I wanted people to know of Rod's ache and despair, feeling forever different because of his participation in the war. If the public was going to know about the plights of men like Rod, it might not be the vets themselves but others who came to understand them who would speak. I felt a growing anger that much of our society did not know about the countless vets like Rod. The suffering we had caused during the war was not the only moral outrage. So was ignoring the suffering of both veterans and victims that resulted from the war.

Christmas arrived. Rod wanted to give his three children, living with his ex-wife, a happy holiday. But his unrelenting gloom made him wish the season would speed by. Alone, Rod wandered gaily-decorated shopping malls, staring at children on Santa's lap. He dragged his feet beneath the tinsel stars and hanging bells, a stranger in a land that did not see or know him. Rod retreated to his apartment to sit in darkness and silence. I wrote my first article on our veterans. My editorial, printed on Christmas Eve Day, read:

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As I sit in therapy sessions with Rod during this holiday season, I count our blessings.

Rod's blessings and mine are not the same. I can work; he cannot. I can sleep peacefully at nights; Rod is haunted by nightmares. I can travel wherever I want to; Rod can only drive back and forth between the hospital and his home. I have many friends; Rod is terrified of loving and trusting others.

Still, Rod can count some blessings... Rod did survive two tours of combat. Unlike thousands of vets, his body is whole and strong. He suffers from deep depressions, but unlike more than 50,000 other Vietnam veterans to date, he may prove stable enough to resist suicide.² He has his own apartment and is not a permanent resident of an institution. He is compensated for his disability; the VA pays him \$18,000 a year in benefits. Unlike many others... Rod will never go hungry, never be short his rent or fuel money, nor, on this holiday, funds for Christmas gifts.

In this season of hope, Rod is hopeless. Every night he closes his eyes, his dreams return him to combat. While in Viet Nam, he learned a killing rage. Now he is afraid of people because he fears this rage will surface and he will hurt someone he cares for. Worse, he lives with terrible guilt for having killed... innocent Vietnamese people. Fired at from a village hut, Rod's squad fired back.

Later they found the bodies of women and children that the enemy had used as barriers and he had unknowingly shot. Rod's worst enemy is this guilt for committing crimes he did not choose and could not help.

Christmas is the holiday on which we celebrate the birthday of the Prince of Peace. Rod is working for a new birth out of that land of nightmares. But when one has seen such destruction and death as was rampant in Viet Nam, it is hard to imagine daily life or Christmas ever being normal again. And what is peace? It is not merely the absence of war but is a state of mind Rod may never feel.

We all wish Christmas would bring comfort, the New Year hope. But many veterans, the poor and destitute... the lonely and troubled feel turmoil, isolation and loneliness rather than peace and comfort, despair rather than hope.

It is for all of us... to reach out to these people with a Christmas offering. We must make ourselves a little less comfortable by giving of our hearts, skills, homes or finances. Out of love for humanity, the Prince of Peace was willing to suffer. In order to bring a bit of hope and comfort to our community, country and world, we must do the same.

A year of dreams³

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Rod and I were a patrol of two prowling the shadowy alleys and dripping forests of his night world.

In sleep, Rod relived the battles he had fought twelve years earlier. He saw himself killing again, his friends killed again. He awoke trembling, in a cold sweat, staying in bed until birdsong, traffic noises and clanging pots in the kitchen proved to him that he had not unleashed the raging monster from its cage.

Or Rod dreamed of battles in other wars or the Bible, of family or neighborhood accidents or disasters, of nuclear holocaust. There were two protagonists in these dreams. Rod was always there, as each of us is the protagonist in our own unconscious world. But another was with Rod, appearing as a soldier, a fire, a dog, a funeral, a judge, a river, a bomb. Rod was its instrument, its antagonist, its intended. Its name was Death.

Rod's nightmares were haunting and brutal, and he had no means for interpreting them. I heard his story and anguish as the warp and woof of his dreams and help him decode them. Rod hated his nightly nightmare wanderings and also hated remembering what he had done. I could witness it, not change it. We could, however, use his dream images as revelations. He might use them like the biblical Joseph to shape a new future or like Oedipus to collapse before his past.

Convinced that his story was repugnant to humanity and his dreams as dangerous as the bush had been, Rod watched my face and words. He was afraid to put me on the mountain, in the cave, swamp or prison camp from which he could not escape. Combatants had used the buddy system to help them survive in Viet Nam. Rod made me his buddy. His survival in America depended on my watchfulness and care, so he believed my survival in his inner Viet Nam depended on his watchfulness of me. On the home front, we were guarding each other's backs.

It wasn't easy. While guarding, watching, guiding and interpreting Rod, I, too, walked through muck and gore. It took weeks or months to squeeze the fragments of battles or childhood memories out of Rod's blasted, medication-dulled and reluctant memory. Months of sorting through dripping shards until I could piece an entire battle puzzle together. More months identifying the shards and fragments as they appeared in his dreams. And there were no guidebooks for this effort.

I felt honored and cursed, uplifted and disgusted, curious and repulsed. I was led through infernal regions the way Virgil led Dante through the Inferno.

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Every shard was a piece of witness to cleanse, preserve and bless. I could not help but carry the stink and shock of pollution so that my days and questions became ponderous.

Rod's days were boring and lonely, but his nightly flashflood made dreaming his nearest experience to combat since returning home.

I remembered Chuck, an alcoholic patient I had worked with. Chuck had weaned himself from alcohol and high-speed night driving on back country roads. He graduated to marijuana. Smiling, he said that getting high was better than boozing, night driving or having sex with his wife. She left him.

Chuck needed a fix that would provide the thrill he craved. He graduated again – to sky diving. Hurling through empty space, he had found the ultimate high. By the time he could free fall a mile, he left therapy. Though he had broken his arm, leg and several ribs, he was clean of drugs and alcohol, maintaining his job and a new relationship. And he was happy.

Even the clatter of falling bowling pins or the clack of colliding pool balls could trigger Rod's rage. He avoided them. At my urging he took brisk walks. Later, he sometimes felt safe enough to beat his pillow. That helped, but he despaired of weaning from his heavy drug dosages. He called it "my Catch-22". He craved and feared his highs and craved and feared his drugs. Aching for relief, he took me walking through the shell holes and caverns, firefights and floods of his nightmares.

Nov. 19: Rod was a bedraggled Union soldier of the Civil War, slogging through mud, leading and protecting a wagon laden with a black family fleeing the white hooded Ku Klux Klansmen pursuing them on horseback.

Nov. 23: Rod was Christ entering the sprawling orgy of classical Rome, chased by Roman soldiers. He could hear their pounding footsteps drawing closer.

These two dreams, occurring months after we started therapy, marked the first times Rod saw himself as moral and capable of doing good. Rod had gone to war as a soldier of the Union striving to liberate the oppressed and enslaved, as a soldier of Christ fighting evil. Not me, Rod said, but the KKK and the Roman soldiers – society's white and powerful representatives – were "evil and vicious". One lesson of Viet Nam was that "America is a vicious society, passing the blame for its cruelty onto its veterans." Rod feared he could not escape his oppressors.

December 10: Rod was fishing for trout in a big lake. He kept running to the

store for lures and trying each new one, but none worked.

Water – depthless, fluid, filled with strange creatures – often represents the unconscious. Since becoming disabled, Rod had tried numerous medical and psychiatric doctors to help him go fishing in his unconscious. “That’s it!” Rod cried with rare glee, pouring forth a memory stream about military doctors and his frustration at his unsuccessful work with them.

Early in his VA treatment, Rod had been injected with sodium pentothal, truth serum, to help him discuss his battles. Not trusting his doctors, his self-control was strong enough to resist the drug. Instead of talking war, he talked about Shirley Temple movies. A psychiatrist labeled him paranoid schizophrenic. “But I knew what I was doing. At the cost of being labeled insane, I beat the shrink at his own game.”

I feared Rod would try to beat me at the game too. Ignorant of the ways of the combat zone, I feared I might not recognize it if he tried. My best hope was to not leave Rod’s side as he told his battle or dream tales. That meant that, no matter how, I could not deflect or avoid or scream or run in fear or run away in disgust. It was the strategy that demanded the most. It is easier to erect defenses than to let ourselves see and hear what nobody should. For endless hours Rod and I were taking me to war in my imagination.

Dec. 15: Rod was playing hockey on a frozen swimming pool. The dream brought back pleasant memories of playing hockey on such a pool as a child.

It might occasionally be possible to skate atop the inner depths and have fun. But the waters, like his feelings, were frozen. Frozen and numb- his hope for sport.

Dec. 17: Rod was one of eight eagles soaring over skyscrapers, becoming weak from starvation and frightened of the heights. The city below announced it would feed the starving eagles. Its army pushed tortoises off the skyscraper roofs. Rod and the other eagles dove to feed on the carcasses.

Rod said that the eagle was the symbol of America, his dream eagles American soldiers. Soaring represented his ideals. The city was our government promising to provide for its soldiers. Instead, it transformed the eagles into vultures, feeding them on the deaths of innocents to save themselves. I learned later that tortoises, the sacrificial food in Rod’s dream, are one of the four sacred animals of Viet Nam – our army killing turtles – the American military slaying the spirit of Viet Nam.

Dec. 21: In a recurring dream, Rod relived the battle at Nui Ba Den, the

boulder- strewn Lady Black Mountain in the Iron Triangle northwest of Saigon. Rod asserted that his unit had been pinned down under heavy fire for two and a half days and were almost out of ammunition. At one point, he and ten others retreated into a cave. They could not get to their wounded but only listened to their helpless screams.

Early in the battle, Rod had stacked up the bodies of two fallen friends to use as a shield against bullets raining down on him. He feared the men might have still been alive. "It was the worst thing I ever did except for killing women and children when I was ambushed from a hut and returned fire." Rod could not forget the sound of the bullets thwacking into his comrades' bodies.

I mentioned this brutal image to another combat vet.

"No", he yelled, "never! He's mixing up different battles." Dreams can condense numerous events into one, but the second vet was defensive. Was he upset because the story was true and he was terrified and his honor offended? Was I hearing the dream battle or an actual field report? Was my question a way to protect myself against the thwacking, thwacking, thwacking in my mind?

January 6: In a church basement, Rod built a reinforced wall and survived two missile attacks. After the attacks, he walked through the bombed city and saw his ex – wife with both legs amputated. He said, "Good. Good."

Dreams sometimes allowed Rod to picture what he could not feel when awake. Here was his rage toward his unfaithful ex-wife as well as his happiness in surviving war with his body intact. But he never wanted to see himself shout or strike out. He could not unleash his severely controlled impulses even in dreams. Instead, "let God take his course. He'll get revenge."

Jan. 12: During a nuclear accident, Rod circulated among the panicking people telling them that there was no war and the world would not be destroyed.

This night Rod again fought the battle at Nui Ba Den but in the dream that followed he helped while others destroyed. Not since Viet Nam had Rod experienced himself to be a helper. He had not imagined that he might finally help others after having been an instrument of war and destruction. His dull eyes brightened a bit with hope.

Feb. 4: Rod built a church and watched the North Star.

Feb. 4: Rod was a gorilla, as towering and mean as King Kong. He climbed a huge tree and growled.

Feb. 4: "They" were going to bomb a beach. Rod was trying to clear it of civilians before anyone was killed.

Feb. 4: Rod was a hit man killing innocent people while being pursued by the law. "An ordinary, everyday guy" he used his M-16 from Viet Nam. "In Nam, I was never separated from it."

He still wasn't. "I'm struggling between the viciousness in my unconscious and my search for tranquility and peace."

Feb. 9: Rod was on "Star Trek" with Kirk and Spock, who were on life support units. Others had put them to death, but Rod brought them back to life. Then "I destroyed the force."

Rod had killed in hand-to-hand combat. "I was sudden, quick and deadly. The first time I killed a man, I cried. After that, it became routine, just habit. I had no more feelings. I was empty and numb." Like Spock, "I'm a zombie. I don't have feelings and can't risk any." Yes, it is possible to save, "but only my own kind, and I still have to destroy to save." This man who had wanted to do good had only destroyed. He had had to kill his heart in order to kill another. Now he had to keep it in its coffin in order to live with it.

I sat softly with Rod, not shocked away but feeling like I was with a frozen man before a frozen gray tidal wave of grief. The might of the terror and the grief counteracted my fear and humbled me.

Feb. 11: Rod beat up his commanding officer and fought three battles. In one, most of his unit had been wiped out by machine guns. He talked with buddies who were now dead, especially "one very likable kid in a bunker".

Many men of Rod's unit had been killed two days after he left Viet Nam. They came back as hazy memories and dreams awakening in the graveyard of his unconscious. "The day they stopped the war I cried and said, 'All those lives wasted...'" After just a few months in country, Rod stopped believing we had any cause worth pursuing. "I wanted an American victory simply to justify the deaths of my friends."

Rod recalled faces of men left behind, but only a few names. One was Joey, who had been with him a year and a half. His death had left a crater in Rod's heart and confidence. Rod felt Joey asking him to bid goodbye to his family. But Rod could not recall Joey's last name and was afraid to search service records.

As a squad leader, Rod stopped getting close to his men "after I realized I would lose them all. I was in the bush for one and a half years. I lost 30 to 40 men in that time. All their deaths are my fault. Mine."

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All the more reason, I believed, that I must not lose you.

All the more reason, Rod would have countered, that you should.

Feb. 15: Rod was in a canyon with a flying horse. The only way out was to fly but there was not enough wind. The horse fell sick. Rod took it to a barn where he built a fire to save its life. The barn turned into a warehouse. His brother appeared. They walked down the hill away from the warehouse. Cement pylons tumbled down the hill behind them, almost killing them both, but finally only blocking a river.

The horse, Rod said, was a chopper and the canyon was the war he was trapped in. The gallant horse was ill and could neither save Rod nor be saved by his best efforts. The barn, a shelter for horses and growing things, had to be dismantled for fire. But it was a warehouse for equipment that could kill Rod and his brother.

This dream revealed the stages of Rod's disillusionment. The war had started out personal and hopeful but turned into something life threatening and mechanical. It had not killed him but had blocked the flow of his river – his mind, his life. "When I went to Viet Nam I believed in what I was fighting for but not when I came back."

I had never believed in what Rod had fought for. I had been hurt and baffled that boys like Rod agreed to the bad deal. I had once hoped that enough of them would see the war was wrong and stop. I was sure that a few of them refusing would be worth thousands like me. Now, finally, a few survivors were whispering their remorse and the collapse of their belief in home. I only saw more victims wounded by the same American violence that had perpetrated the war. I had never spit on them. I tried to welcome the wounded home.

March 4: Rod was a prisoner of war captured by the Russians. He had to clean up bodies that had been gassed. Then he was on a train carrying him to the gas chambers. He escaped and ran for his life.

At the time, American military intervention in El Salvador seemed imminent. Rod was frightened that El Salvador would become the next Viet Nam. A world war, he said, was being waged between the United States and the Soviet Union. But fighting in Viet Nam taught him that we were not the Good crusading against Communist Evil. Rather, his service taught Rod that the cold world war "was like the Holocaust. All of us caught in it were holocaust victims. Both superpowers are like the Nazis. Soldiers like me are only their Cold War pawns, used, then discarded."

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March 11: Rod was chased by a car full of tar. The tar blackened Rod's shirt but he outran it. Then his yard oozed and exploded and tar spread all over his neighborhood. A repairman appeared and led Rod out of the tar by following telephone lines. When he was safe, Rod met some happy clowns.

The tar was "my unconscious – dark, sticky and mysterious. It's always oozing, always chasing me. It can explode at any time and swallow my neighborhood." I was Rod's repairman, leading him out of the tar by following communication lines. At the far end of such talk, Rod hoped for clowns – happiness. And I hoped the repairman would be able to maintain these telephone lines no matter how bad the weather.

April: Rod's alcoholic father died. Rod became depressed. He "died too young and in a terrible way" from a ruptured larynx.

For weeks Rod neither dreamed nor thought of suicide. He did not grieve; that would have meant losing control. But he did remember some happy childhood moments. He relaxed too, as though finally accepting his father's fate as inevitable.

May 28: On a yacht on the ocean, Rod called a man, "Hick!" An arsenal exploded and eight "hicks" began a gun battle. Rod was outnumbered and terrified. Then his father appeared, neck swollen and larynx ruptured. Rod cried for help. His father answered, "No, son. I can't help you. I'm dead now." His mother appeared with the police to rescue him.

"The hicks are gooks and the arsenal is the war." Rod wanted protection from his guilt over the atrocities he had committed. Rod had wanted his father to help him, but the man could offer nothing. His mother as well as "police", society's representatives tried.

June 9: Rod was at his father's funeral. It was gloomy. His father, body bloated, was wearing a military pilot's cap. His coat was split down the back. Only Rod and his father were standing. His father, who looked like Frankenstein, was dead but leaning against a wall. Rod said to him, "I love you. I miss you."

While Rod was in Viet Nam, his father had feared for his life. Now that his father was dead, Rod feared for his afterlife. He believed that his father must be in purgatory or hell because of his drinking and womanizing. Rod now reversed roles with his father. Now the son worried and prayed nightly over his father's soul fighting for survival as it purged in fire. Only, he feared, his father's battle was eternal.

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July 28: Rod saw three children sinking into the sewer and then surfacing.

"I don't know who the kids were, but I have three myself." The sewer? "My mind. Viet Nam. This whole crazy world that we turn our kids lose in."

August: During August, Rod's house burned down. He might have been killed had he been there, "just like in Nam." In Viet Nam he had transferred bunks. Two days later a rocket landed on his former hooch, killing the occupant of his bunk. He believed he should have been dead instead of the man he hardly knew.

Sept. 7: Rod and other Americans were guerilla soldiers fighting the French. Rod was enraged at the French for starting the Vietnam War. Identifying with the Vietnamese, Rod saw himself fighting a guerilla war against the colonial power that first started the problem. Of French ancestry, Rod was also angry with his people and his childhood for giving him this fate. Rod's disability was an internal guerilla war against his own existence.

Sept. 14: In a world war, Rod again fought the French. His brother fought the Germans. After four years they were reunited on the front. Then the war ended.

Rod and his brother had been separated during Viet Nam. On the far side of the world, Rod fought the French war while "on another front" his brother fought the family war. Rod's brother became his fishing companion and only friend. Their monthly reunions temporarily rescued Rod from his own endless war.

A year passed. Rod was thawing. "Before I couldn't speak unless spoken to." Now he was less cold toward others, not as preoccupied with the past. He played pool with an old friend and felt his first attraction to a woman, a VA nurse, in years. "But I still have to get more trust in order to keep my sanity."

Black tar, dingy swamp, salty ocean full of sharks – these were Rod's pictures of his own mind. Nuclear and conventional warfare, rape, accident and disaster – these were the state of our world. Indifference, threat, ambush, betrayal, attack, explosion - these were what Rod expected. Then was healing possible? How much? How could you come home to such a world? Were men like Rod indeed wasted, not because they were unworthy but because they had been ruined by the lethal combination of childhood neglect and Viet Nam combat?

Rod relived the screams of the tortured and dying at Nui Ba Den often and with enough detail so that I saw the battle in my mind and later dreamed it too. And I dreamed of Rod trapped in a cave while dying friends screamed his name. Each time I bolted awake in my bed, pain like a bayonet piercing my

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chest. I was terrified of what I saw and what it did to me. It didn't matter how strong or secure my background. It didn't matter how much professional training and experience I had had. There were limits to anyone's capacity to experience horror. It seeps into the psyche. It is a cancer. It survives by sucking the life of another. "It is a black crab feeding" (Hasford, *The Short Timers*). The battle at Lady Black Mountain was coming alive in me.

Yet I was at home, safe from physical harm, able to rest and refresh from weariness. I studied my dreams to learn what happened to a mind at war. The relentless bombardment of brutal, world shattering images and experiences overwhelms anyone's defenses, no matter how healthy and stable. The unconscious is poisoned and reconstituted. The personality becomes a fortress under siege. After enough warfare, within or without, our defenses collapse and slaughter begins.

Studies in military psychiatry reveal that a predictable and steady emotional breakdown occurs once a person has been exposed to enough of the stress and trauma of war, no matter what the emotional predisposition. Traditionally, to avoid a massive and debilitating collapse, a soldier must be evacuated from the combat zone for rest and rehabilitation no more than five or six weeks after his first exposure to battle. The Vietnam War's protracted jungle combat and year-long tour of duty in-country under conditions of unrelieved threat guaranteed massive numbers of psychiatric casualties.

This was not unique. In every American war at least since the Civil War, psychiatric casualties have far exceeded physical casualties.⁴ This may be an inevitable result of the horrific degree of slaughter perpetrated during modern technological warfare. Military experts knew these factors during Viet Nam, which was a testing ground for America's most deadly and destructive military hardware. Yet the country still sent troops into the kind of combat that far exceeded the stress limits people can endure. It was inevitable that the young men sent to war would break and that the elders would be their betrayers.

Against this eventuality, the culture offered young men the popularized mythic image of the warrior hero who can endure all horrors. Why was there such denial about the reality and extent of shell shock, battle fatigue, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder? Why did veterans find their claims so hard to prove? Why were our vets, from whom we had extracted all that gives life value, treated like refuse?

Again and again I reminded myself that I wasn't Rod and could learn to tolerate these glimpses of hell. My family was intact. My education had given

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me time and training to examine life before plunging into its sewer. And experiencing war for several hours a week and in my imagination was nothing like being a teenager fighting for my life in a steamy jungle.

Meanwhile, Rod continued to dream.

October 18: Rod was in a bathtub. Instead of water, he was covered with blood and guts, soaking in torn and broken human sinews.

October 25: Rod put a magnum in his mouth and blew his head off.

Poor boys

Rod dreamed of suicide. Helpless, despairing, he believed the only way out of his inner bloodbath was through death. He craved death not to end his life but to relieve his pain. He feared that if he opened his heart the pain would kill him. But if therapy was unsuccessful and his pain remained in its prison, it would be unbearable and he would want to commit suicide. Either way, death would be at his own hands.

For more than a year Rod and I lived in his nightmares. Previously Rod would never speak about Nam. Now he slept better, felt less angry and trusted me. And he allowed me to track a path that revealed his buried stories and how they had twisted him into a wounded beast-man.

I thought that if Rod might cry, wail, moan, beg, or rage, we might thaw the frozen waste inside him. Recovering memories and their associated feelings was essential to healing. But every story was like a sniper's muzzle pointing toward deeper grief and anguish. Every memory seemed to bring Rod more inexorably into the unredeemable darkness of the inner jungle.

Rod could not forget Nui Ba Den. His unit patrolled the boulder-strewn mountainside that had been reported secure. But Viet Cong soldiers seemed to sprout from every crevice. While their unit was slaughtered, Rod and nine companions hid in a cave listening to agonizing wails of pain. GIs were often tortured in order to bait their comrades for the kill when they attempted a rescue. Rod could only defend the mouth of his cave and listen to the screams. It took days for the evacuation helicopters to fly in. Finally, as their chopper hovered amidst flying fire, Rod and his nine companions sprinted for safety. Only he and two others made it.

I searched for any crack. "What did you see?" "How did you feel?" "How do you feel this minute telling me?" "Did you know any guys outside the cave?"

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"What did you say to each other in the cave?" "Can you remember their names now?" "What would you say to them if they were here in this office?" I tried using an empty chair so Rod could speak to those missing. I had Rod breath into his frozen heart. But my tools fell with a thud. Ralph Waldo Emerson tells of the sorrowful condition in which words are heartless and abstracted, unattached to the world. Rod answered with words; his heart would not move.

In Nam everything had come and gone with tracer speed and napalm intensity. Our pace was a relief, a luxury. Rod could examine events slowly and watch me closely. Fearing he might lose me in the retelling he set a pace he believed both could bear. He walked point for me, the FNG, the fuckin' new guy, to protect against pain and further loss.

Rod's combat narrative ran like detached scenes from a plotless movie. Each scene stood out in stark relief, brutal but having no continuity with other stories. The binding that made his life a continuous reel had been blown to shreds, leaving behind scattered yet unforgettable fragments that we labored to reconnect.

Rod stepped through a tree line bordering a secure village. Suddenly sniper fire burst from the window of the nearest hut. Rod and his squad hit the ground, blasting with their M-16s "until the walls looked like Swiss cheese." Then they charged. Rod reached the window, threw his gun muzzle over the ledge and peeked in. In the middle of the floor was a trap door. In the corner lay a child, chest red peppered with bullet wounds. Rod ran into the hut, placed one arm under the child's neck and bent over his face. He brought his lips to the child's, trying to breathe life back into his heart and lungs. The chest rose, but the wounds pumped blood over them both. With one hand under his neck, the other on his heart and his lips on the child's, the boy died.

Terror, then rage, then anguish coursed through me. Tears pooled in my eyes. What could I do for this frozen man, that dead boy? I let my tears show so Rod could see them. If I cried maybe he could. But he sat stone-faced and said nothing.

Rod was in a secured jungle camp. His lieutenant went for a short walk. This officer, unlike other West Pointers, did not seek victory or mythic glory. He wanted his men to survive and go home. Protecting his men, he was loved by them.

The lieutenant did not return. Rod led a scouting party through the bush. Just out of sight of their camp, they found their officer stripped naked and hung by his outstretched arms between two trees. Rod looked at the ground. Between

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his legs lay his LT's severed head.

"That did something to us", was all Rod could say. No feelings or thoughts. It just "did something." Rod and his squad went marauding and returned to their camp only when each GI wore a necklace of ears.

"How did you get the ears?" "From whom?" "How did you feel taking an ear?" "How do you feel telling me?" "What is it like to wear a necklace of ears?" "Can you see yourself wearing that necklace?" "How do you feel now about what you did then?" "Put your lieutenant in that chair next to you. What would he say? What do you want to say to him?"

No anger, no guilt, no sorrow. Rod would not grieve.

Rod's patrol was ambushed. Rapid fire from all sides, from the trees above. They hit the ground, but bullets were everywhere, thwacking by his face, arms, torso and legs. He needed cover. The grunt in front of him was down, not moving, bleeding. Rod crawled to the crumpled body, hid behind it. He heard bullets thudding into the torso. "When I took cover, I didn't know if the man was alive or dead."

"If he were sitting here, what would you say?"

Expressionless, deadpan, automatic, "Thanks."

Rod re-upped for a second tour. "I hated it there. I wanted to go home. But I was a squad leader and knew the jungle better than my boys did. I had to stay to help them survive. But I couldn't. I lost everyone before my year was up."

The horror never abated. Rod became wild, enraged. He wanted to kill every Vietnamese, even the friendlies who crossed his path. Returning to base, he made a perimeter around his squad, telling them, "Get as much beer as you can. Stay inside the perimeter. Get stinking drunk. I'll stand watch." His boys tore into the beer like men on the desert dying of thirst. An officer ordered them to stop drinking, clean up and "act like real Marines." Rod aimed his M-16 at the officer's head and ordered, "Leave or I pull." He left. "Lucky for him. I would have gladly pulled the trigger. No sweat."

Rod was evaluated by a board of military psychiatrists. The panel concluded that he had been in the jungle too long and had lost his regard for human life. His mind was "no longer Western". Rather he thought, felt, and acted like an Oriental. "I'm fighting their war in their jungle on their terms. How else should I act?"

Instead of R & R or being sent home, Rod was reassigned to a company in

and near the Demilitarized Zone. It consisted solely of men who had "crossed over" and called themselves the Manchus. They worshipped death. Given the most brutal patrols, no Manchu had ever returned to the States alive.

"Your commanders were supposed to be like fathers, helping and protecting you. But they sent you out to be killed. They didn't want you coming back alive. How did you feel about that? How do you live with that today?"

Rod shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know", he said.

Rod survived and flew the Freedom Bird home. Within a few days he was off base trying to relax in a local bar. A man next to him looked at his uniform. "You one o' them baby-killers?" he sneered. "You helpin' us lose for the first time?" Rod went blank. When he awoke, he was in jail for murder. At his trial, his war trauma was not admitted as evidence in his defense. He was sentenced to a year in the stockade for manslaughter. "But all I remember is that I thought I was in a firefight."

Rod is not supposed to be alive. He was not supposed to carry back his stories. He and they were supposed to be blown up, burned or buried in Viet Nam. But Rod did return. One unacknowledged consequence of taking massive doses of medication was that the drugs did not just control his rage and depression but put him into a stupor so that he could not tell his stories. Was there some systemic conspiracy – nobody's plan but the inevitable result of our values and interventions? Did this conspiracy ensure that vets would not remember and the rest of us would not know? Americans use massive quantities of alcohol, legal and illegal medications and uncontrolled consumerism to maintain a dull and contented surface while storms rage below and in private. Rod was still far away from the rest of us. His stories were not supposed to infiltrate us in our shopping malls and offices. I could bear the stories but not the silence. And I could not stop seeing war's blueprint bleeding through all our endeavors.

After two years of therapy, Rod looked up an old pre-war pal. The friend was happy to reunite. It helped a little to realize that there had been life before the war and there could be life after. Rod and his friend went bowling once a week, in the afternoons, when the lanes were empty and noise levels low.

Therapy was still voluntary. There were neither fees nor contact with the VA and Rod was afraid they might stop our meetings. "I'm a Manchu. I'm not supposed to be alive, even to other vets." Without anyone knowing, it was just the two of us. We had the buddy system in place – a necessity for survival in the bush. But we did not have a squad – a necessity for action.

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A second fire in his apartment flicked his final switch. Cities were too noisy, too populated. He felt vulnerable, exposed, endangered. He moved to a small village near the Canadian border. He was happy to leave his daily VA attendance behind and felt a little more normal. The hospital had depressed him. He wanted to continue our therapy but could not manage the drive of several hours to see me. I referred him to veteran's outreach program near him and encouraged him to call. Instead long before the age of teletherapy he begged me to continue over the phone. It was the best he could manage. Though I felt inadequate trying to touch his heart over a machine, we continued for another year.

In three years of therapy Rod never once moaned, groaned, yelled or cried. Sometimes my own tears trickled. I left them in my eyes, hoping to be a model of grief and tenderness. Rod stayed numb as his best defense against overwhelming feelings of grief and despair. I understood why he did not want to feel and was grateful that the VA hospital provided him with 24 pills a day. "I have a rage inside me. If I ever let that rage out, I couldn't control myself. I might kill somebody near me. But I don't want to hurt anybody ever again."

There was more than rage in his frozen heart. Once he had thought the necklace of ears was justified, even funny. Now he was ashamed, guilty, full of grief, what we now call moral injury. He had never told that story. It was hard to tell me. He was surprised that I understood and did not condemn him.

The dead child would not sleep. After he sprayed the hut with his M-16 Rod's first impulse had been to save the child. His sleepless eyes stared through black nights wondering if it had been his rounds that killed the child. He hated the Viet Cong for using children. He hated America for putting him in a situation where he was forced to shoot children. He seemed to grieve that child but could neither cry nor rage. Rather, the slaughtered child became his indelible mark of Cain, never to be forsaken, never removed. The child was also Rod, the young man who lost his innocence and had killed and been slaughtered as well. Unable to save either child, Rod was both Abraham the slaughtering father and Isaac the bound son.

Rod fondly remembered his dead lieutenant. He had wanted that man to make it back. The LT was not just dead but profaned. And Rod's response felt profane. "It made us crazy", Rod said over and over again. Shakespeare's King Lear said, "This grief hath craz'd my wits."

I thought that if I could just stay with Rod long enough, touch him deeply enough, he might finally burst into rage or a flood of tears. He might mourn his

lieutenant, the child, the friends he left behind. But over time, phone therapy became unwieldy. Rod was isolated somewhere upstate, maintaining minimal contact with a few people and sleeping better. Relieved of the burden of carrying his story alone he refused to re-enter the human flow. He lived near the border of the country, of the demilitarized zone, of human existence. That's where he wanted to stay.

I, too, felt grief at not bridging the gap between this peer with whom I might have gone to high school, who flew to war as I bussed off to college. I felt like I owed him a debt that could never be repaid. Why? Because he took my place? Because I had not been drafted? Because the pull of a number should not allow us to slide past danger while those next to us did not? Because this fate was universally unfair. Because Cain was wrong and I am my brother's keeper. And later Abraham was wrong and never should have raised the knife to his son.

The Japanese call survivors of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki *hibakusha*. They are, literally, "explosion-affected people", different from the rest of us, living in another category of existence. Rod, too, lived in another category, another realm of fate, a land alien to the rest of us. His trauma was so severe, so beyond the range of anything ordinarily experienced, that it was impossible for him to return to daily life or feel normal. He had been sent into the DMZ to be a Manchu and die. Now, living, he was a Manchu forever.

I, on the other hand, was uneasy with this special category, this isolated class in which vets lived. Could we make room in our swift, stressful, workaday worlds for people who had been through such horrors? Could we provide them with support, validation, purpose? Could we offer them, rather than a disabled identity or some impossible version of their old selves, a new identity that included and transcended their war experiences? Could we give them a role, a class that would include their war experiences while encouraging them to feel honorable, empowered and enabled rather than disabled? There had to be some category other than PTSD that could carry the hearts and minds of such as these.

I called Rod to say this to him and to thank him for what he had taught me.

His flat voice perked with rare energy. "Yeah?" he said, "Maybe there's hope for some of us. Maybe somebody someday will listen."

"I hope so", I said. "I hope people will listen. I want all of America to listen and learn."

"It's a nice dream", Rod said, "but I don't expect much from this country

anymore. I'm a poor boy. The Vietnam War was a poor boy's war. Poor boys did the fighting and poor boys died. It's always been that way. Nobody cares about the poor boys."

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¹ Earlier versions of parts of the first two sections of this article appeared in my first book on working with veterans, *Sacred Mountain*.

² This was the number at the time I treated Rod soon after the war ended. To date more than 120,000 American veterans of the Vietnam War have committed suicide, more than twice the number killed in action. In all modern American wars the numbers of suicides during and after the conflict vastly outnumber the numbers killed in action, making death by suicide a far greater threat than death in combat. For fuller reports on veteran suicide see Coleman (*Flashback*); and Tick (*Warrior's Return*: 39-41).

³ Nightmares are a pervasive and disturbing symptom of war trauma and too often therapists do not know how to work with them. The result is that countless veterans are heavily medicated to squash the symptom – without relief or therapeutic benefit. It is incumbent upon veteran and trauma therapists to welcome the dreams as what I call "psychic shrapnel." They are important messages from the inner world coming to the surface and therapists must work with them therapeutically.

⁴ For a complete comparative list of combat and suicide casualties in American wars from World War I to the present, see Tick (*Wild Beasts and Wandering Souls*: 6).