

Digging Up a Warhead III

Captain,

I don't remember any rocket tail assemblies but the more I think about it I wonder if that was when they walked the mortar fire through the cook tent and hurt that one cook pretty bad. You had finished your shower. Do you remember the shower? I think I'll try to write that one up next. That was the only time I remember firing point blank across the hill at the muzzle flashes from "Charlie". Is that what you remember? I do remember you ordering me to grab the radio and then heading out into an empty field of fire with shells landing. That was a different time.

We were in some large base camp, it was probably Camp Eagle, there were above ground hooch's on cement pads with wooden walls that went half way up and then screening. There were cots, the old canvas cots that looked like stationary stretchers and felt amazingly comfortable after what we had been sleeping on. Rounds started to hit in the open field next to the hooch's. You yelled out to me to grab the radio. I was on the floor. By this time in country the reflex to hit the ground, floor, ditch was so ingrained that I remember having the thought long after the action had been completed. A round or rounds would be whistling through the air and automatically I'd note whether they were in coming or out going and if they were incoming I'd yell "incoming", think to myself you'd better hit the dirt, and most of the time I'd be on the ground as I thought about it. The action would be completed before the articulation in my head could be.

After the first hit I'd start moving towards, my gear, the radio, the fire, to see what was going on, who was hit, where it was coming from and by the time I got to the door you were there telling me to follow you out into the explosions. I must have paused or hesitated because you went into a long explanation of what we were going to do and how it was going to be all right. You said, "C'mon Early, it's ok, whenever a gun fires it jumps and when it jumps it changes direction and angle a bit and so no two rounds ever hit in the same spot" The whole time you were speaking to me as if we were on a training exercise and this was the lecture part we were walking, albeit at a crouch, out into the fire. "OK" I'm

thinking they don't land in the same spot but they're still landing. There are still real loud explosions going off where you're taking me and then as if you read my mind you said "We're going to dig one up and see where it's coming from and then we can sight back on that azimuth and have our guns blow up their guns. I swear you thought this perfectly reasonable and even a little funny. You pulled out your bayonet and went on "Look see here, here is a crater where a round went off. When a round hits the fuse ignites the round and usually sits in the ground the way it hit". You started precisely digging away at the hole to find the fuse and continued the lecture as the explosions went off a little further away. You looked up occasionally to see if I was paying attention, not to see where the rounds were landing. I was paying real close attention because I found it calming to and because I thought there might be a test. When you had the fuse exposed you bent in closer and then said "Damn" and then popped out the fuse as if the direction no longer mattered. You grabbed the phone and called battalion and said something like "This is Capt. Yore, A Btry we're being shelled by a 105 unit, call around and find out whose 105 unit is firing out." "Yeah I'm sure. They're probably firing 180 degrees out" "Tell them to stop" "Thanks". Then you handed me back the phone, big old black Ma Bell handset and said, "We're being shelled by our own guys, 105 unit" "Can you imagine?" and then you walked away shaking your head. You weren't pissed or crazed that some jackhole had just shelled us and could have killed us. It was just another day at the office. You weren't frantic or even particularly worried when the shells were landing, and you told me to follow you. It was a problem, this is how we solve it, very cool. For me I would do this crazy stuff and take my cue from you. He's not worried I guess I don't have to be. It is what it is.

Many years later I went to England on a grant and studied Shakespeare at the Globe. Now I teach it to seniors. One of my favorite quotes that sums up your attitude, as I understand it now, is from Julius Caesar, "Cowards die many times before their deaths, the valiant never taste of death but once. Of all the wonders that I yet have heard it seems to me most strange that men should fear, seeing that death, a necessary end, will come when it will come."

Once you become a fatalist and understand the absurdity of worrying about matters over which you have no control you're free. "Death will come when it will come."

When we were still at Nui Dat during the Tet offensive I remember being paralyzed with fear. I was in a hooch just like the one I described above, having been released from the gun for a night off. We had finally gotten some replacements in and as they arrived we put them into the rotation. After a week or so it was my turn to have some beer and smoke, a warm shower, clean clothes, and I got to sleep on a cot.

That's why I associated those cots with comfort. When we were on the gun and short handed we fired night and day, lugging two hundred pound rounds out to the gun, sometimes through the blast wave as the gun fired right over your head as you brought the round to the rear of the gun, and pulled duty like burning sh—, and filling sand bags, guard duty. When we had a break, we would lie down where we were, on top of some sand bags, wherever. If we went into our hooch it was to sleep on a plywood pallet with maybe a bamboo mat the kind we bring to the beach now. One time just before Tet and prior to the replacements I was so exhausted I lay down in a puddle and snoozed peacefully for thirty, forty minutes, between fire missions. When I was asked how I slept I said, "Pretty good, it was a warm rain."

So, this one night we got hit and there were men in the wire and tracers in the air. By the time I got my boots on and hit the blast wall out side of the hooch I could see the tracers and hear the rounds ripping through the air and I thought of my Father who had been at Iwo Jima. He had said on a number of occasions that he could remember the sound of the rounds as they went by. "They sounded like angry bees." He had told me that at VFW clambakes with other Veterans who had been in combat nodding in agreement. Now I could hear it. I looked out towards the berm and told myself it was time to move, to hit it, but my feet wouldn't move and each time I leaned out to leave the blast wall and move through the fire I shrank back, a little smaller with each effort, frozen with fear.

After about two eternities of trying to "screw my courage to the sticking point", I thought I'd never move and then I remembered this pudgy, pasty, replacement from the week

before. After he had been on the gun for seventy-two hours or so, he was a newbie, he worked straight through, he cracked. He broke down in broad daylight during a fire mission. He dropped the round he was carrying and sobbed. At first that young protégé of Sergeant Neff's screamed at him to get back to work and he collapsed on the ground, on his knees. Then the fire mission was called off, I was on the phone and called out the command to cease-fire. Then it got real quiet except for the sobbing. The crew chief might have yelled a little longer but the scene was so pitiful and embarrassing that even he stopped and felt ashamed. I don't remember how it ended. Somebody, the Chaplain?, took him away. No one could look.

That's all it took, that image of failure and cowardice, the minute I conjured it up I was off and jogging, heading to the spot on the berm I was to cover. As soon as I got there I flipped off the safety and fired a few rounds out in to the last explosion I saw. I just wanted to feel the recoil. I wanted to feel that punch in the arm that said we're going down swinging if we're going down. Within moments the First Sergeant was at my side demanding to know what I was shooting at. I told him I thought I saw something. He said, "No more shooting unless you see something for sure." And he was gone.

Now that we're old, I'm 62, I spend a fair amount of time thinking about warriors and violence and their place in the scheme of things. Do you?

A buddy of mine, from over fifty years ago, has a son named Steve who's on his third tour in Afghanistan. He's a lifer. I was thinking of cc'ing him on this. Maybe start an intergenerational warrior communication.

Sorry this took so long but grades were due and I'm prepping them for a field trip to Richard the Third so it got busy. Hope everything went well in Florida.