

A photograph relieves one GI of his lingering guilt about a tour cut short by a VC sniper's bullet

Over the years, the memories of my experience in Vietnam were becoming more and more faded. Had I actually spent some 60 days in the war? My never-ceasing reminder that yes, I had been there, was the pain in my right knee. I had been wounded by a sniper on May 12, 1968, shortly before completing my second month in country.

The fading memories suddenly became vivid a few years ago when, during a visit to a traveling Vietnam Memorial Wall, someone told me about a Web site for my old unit, the 19th Combat Engineer Battalion. I posted a message on the site, asking if anyone remembered me. That evening I received a phone call from Ken Smith of Houston, Texas.

He had read my message and asked me whether I had red hair and had been wounded in the right knee area. When I replied yes to both questions, he told me that he had a picture I might want to see and that he would e-mail it to me. He said he'd had the picture all these years with no name to put on it, and seemed as excited to hear from me as I was to hear from him.

The e-mail arrived later that night. Opening the attachment, I was completely overwhelmed by what I saw. The picture on my computer screen, in full color, immediately brought all the old memories rushing back.

There I was, a youngster of 19, lying in the dirt with a medic working on my knee wound. Some other soldiers were gathered

around, but unfortunately their faces were obscured. Still, now I had something other than my pain and a scar to make the experience real again in my mind.

I had built up a lot of guilt over these many years: of not completing my one-year tour of duty; of leaving my comrades to continue the job in Vietnam while I recovered for two months in the hospital in Hawaii; of then being sent to Okinawa instead of back to Vietnam after I recovered.

That picture played a big part in helping me deal with that lingering guilt. I had done my job well. It wasn't my fault that a sniper had targeted me. I can now recall my time in Vietnam and feel good about what I did there.

I can also think about the soldier I met at the aid station in Chu Lai while we both awaited treatment. He showed me his bandaged right hand and told me that he

him that I had a small .30-caliber bullet hole above my right knee and that I would probably be back with my unit in a couple of weeks or so.

A medic came to check us over, and we soon learned that we were both wrong. When the bandage was removed from my new friend's hand, the extent of the wound overwhelmed the poor guy. All but his little finger had been blown off. He began screaming, realizing that not only were his fingers gone but so was his life's dream. It took three medics to finally restrain him.

My turn came next. I had not seen my wound since the doctors worked on me at Duc Pho. There, they told me that the bullet had shattered, and that a small fragment had been left in my leg, as it would have caused more damage to try and remove it. I had seen enough war movies not to be very worried about my wound.



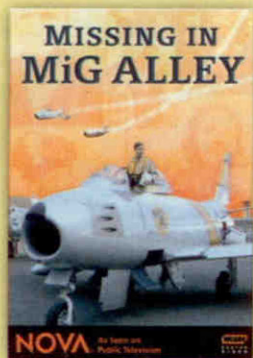
TOM PEACOCK

When this picture of Tom Peacock surfaced more than 30 years after he was wounded, it unleashed a tide of memories that helped him reconnect with his war experience and overcome long-lasting guilt.

had been a minor league baseball pitcher when he was drafted. He was emphatic that his wound was minor and that he would still be able to pitch again. I told

You know, they dig the bullet out, they sew you up, and a week later you're back in the field. But how wrong I was! When they removed the bandage and I looked at my

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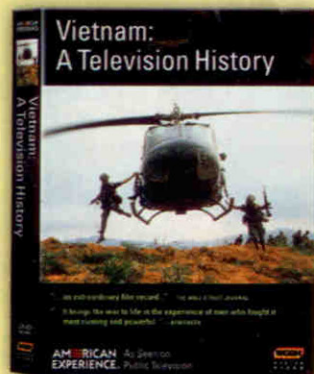


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knee, expecting to see a small wound, instead there was a gaping 3-inch-by-3-inch hole. At that moment, everything went black as I passed out. When I awoke I was in a hospital bed.

The next day in the hospital was the scariest of my time in the war. On my right was a soldier with a very bad stomach wound. On my left was a soldier who was missing most of the bottom of one of his legs. The one with the stomach wound was convinced that he was dying and had given up hope of ever seeing his wife again. I did all I could to comfort him and build up his spirits. Suddenly, we heard mortar rounds going off in the area, and saw doctors and nurses running around. A soldier stuck his head in the ward, yelling to us that the compound was being overrun and that we should get under our beds with a mattress over us.

I immediately realized that we couldn't possibly defend ourselves, and that most of us couldn't even get under our beds on our own power. I can still feel the sense of utter helplessness and fear that we all suffered in that ward, completely defenseless and abandoned as the fighting raged around us for about an hour. While the hospital itself may have been breached, fortunately no enemy made it to our location. That incident, however, and the hopeless feeling I had, would haunt me for decades to come.

The following day a sergeant major from the Americal Division stopped by to present Purple Hearts and other medals. He went to each patient and inquired as to which unit he belonged to. When he got to me, I told him that I was with D Company, 19th Engineer Battalion at LZ Thunder. He replied that he was very sorry, but he could only award medals to men from his own division. Somewhat awkwardly he asked if I wanted any candy or cigarettes, as he could give me those. I could tell he felt bad about the situation, and he reassured me that someone would soon be along with a Purple Heart for me.

No one ever came with a medal for me, but later that day the ward was treated to a visit from entertainer Chris Noel, and I did get an autographed picture of her. While stationed in Okinawa, I applied for the medal, only to get a reply from D Company that it

had no record of my service with the company. My records had apparently been lost. It wasn't until more than 30 years later that I finally got my Purple Heart. The bureaucratic snafu only compounded my sense of disconnect from Vietnam. This was one more reason why seeing my picture went so far to make the experience real again in my mind.

Over the years, I had developed the sense that I hadn't done much in Vietnam. I was "just a combat engineer, not an infantryman." Now the returning memories were erasing these thoughts from my mind. I began to recall how we went out on daily patrols to clear the highway of mines and booby traps. Our patrols consisted of two point men, two mine detector operators, two probes, a

radioman, a gun jeep with driver and gunner, and a 5-ton dump truck armed with a machine gun.

After receiving that picture, I finally got up the courage to read the letters I had written to my parents from Vietnam in 1968. I began to recapture how I had felt as a 19-year-old tossed into a war that knew little about. The letters reveal a naiveté that I was soon to lose. I had written about being glad that I was assigned there, and not

wanting to be anywhere else—if I had to be gone from my Rockford, Ill., home. I inquired whether there were draft riots there and I sheepishly asked for goodies—"if it would not be too much trouble." I asked frequently about my dog Bebe that I'd had since I was 8 years old.

I seem to have kept a sense of humor through everything. In one of the letters I described walking point on a mine sweep patrol, surviving a booby trap, finding a blown-up bridge and being warned on the radio that we might encounter an NVA ambush. I closed that letter by saying there was nothing left to write about, as it had been "a pretty dull day."

I owe a debt to the Internet and how it enabled me to reconnect with my comrades and my own experience. Without it, I fear my memories would have continued to fade away until I probably would have believed it was all a dream, my scar and pain being something that was just there. But now I will never forget. If the memories start slipping again, I'll just look at the picture, or e-mail someone from the 19th Engineers. ☆



Today, Tom Peacock frequently portrays George Custer in living-history events.