

A Veteran's Return to Vietnam

Bill Ridley is a tall, broad African-American combat veteran from rural Georgia. He wears his hair plaited in neat parallel rows. "African warrior's braids," he explains.

It is the second morning back in Viet Nam for a group of veterans and civilians. I am leading on a reconciliation journey. We are eating breakfast in our hotel in Ho Chi Minh City, the old Saigon. Bill bursts into the restaurant, throws his arms open wide, and shouts, "I did it!"

We look up from our plates of sliced mango and dragon fruit and our bowls of steaming pho—Vietnamese noodle soup.

"I slept a full night. Six uninterrupted hours. It's the longest I've slept in thirty-five years. And I didn't have a single nightmare. This hasn't happened since the war."

During the Vietnam War, Bill was an army ranger patrolling the Central Highlands and coastal plains. He was in the battle that destroyed much of the old imperial city of Hue. His patrol also reconnoitered the hamlet of My Lai, where the villagers welcomed him and his comrades and fed them rice. His squad reported a safe, friendly village to their superiors. Three days later, Lt. Calley led the massacre there.

Because of late flight connections, Bill had arrived in Ho Chi Minh City after the rest of our group. He found himself alone in a large crowd of Asian travelers. For months, I had helped him prepare for this return to the country where he had fought. He knew that customs officers would be wearing the same uniforms the North Vietnamese Army regulars wore during the war. He understood that this was 2002 rather than 1967. Nevertheless, he trembled when a guard singled him out from the crowd and called him forward. "I knew they'd been waitin' for me all these years," he said. "It was time to get my comeuppance."

He stepped through the crowd and stood before the officer. He looked for weapons but didn't see any. His mind flashed through scenes of imprisonment, torture, execution.

"How long has it been since you've been here?" the guard asked.

I'm tall and black in a sea of Asian faces. Bill thought. It's obvious. They know. "Thirty-five years," he gulped.

"In that case," the man smiled, "you have a lot of catching up to do. Let me be the first to welcome you back. You are our honored guest." Then the Vietnamese officer escorted the dazed American veteran through passport control and out to the street.

I met Bill outside the airport. This incident was our first topic of conversation. "I've been afraid for months," Bill said during the taxi ride to our hotel. "You told me I'd be welcomed back, but with the war in my head, I couldn't believe it. Now I see that the Vietnamese are friendly and welcoming and that the fear I have is about things that live only inside me. I'm going to have to sort out this confusing new information."

At our hotel, I sat up listening to Bill's stories until the wee hours. Finally, he encouraged me to go to bed: "Doc, I was in Recon. I don't sleep. I always have one eye open and catnap the other for an hour at a time. I trained myself to it in the bush. But you've got to lead our group. Get some rest. I'll be okay."

The next day, we visited the old Presidential Palace. Bill stood before the Russian T-54 tank famous for busting through the palace gates on April 30, 1975, bringing the long war to an end. Bill remembered fighting these tanks. "My commander insisted the Vietnamese didn't have any tanks until they rolled through our wire and sent us running," he said. This day I took his picture as he leaned on the "metal dragon," smiling and relaxed.

Our second night "in country," Bill went to his room early. The next morning he boomed his news.

"The VA hospital has given me dozens of different pills in every combination for sleep, nightmares, nerves, stress, depression, and every damned PTSD symptom you can name," he expounded at our breakfast table. "Tell me why none of it ever worked. Then tell me why it only took two nights back in this country to get my first full night's rest in thirty-five years!"

Bill slept peacefully and without a single nightmare every night of the three weeks we were in Viet Nam. By the middle of our journey, he was having good dreams. "Haven't had one since childhood," he said. "Since the war I've been so frightened of nightmares I never let myself sleep long enough to dream. Now the dreams are sweet. Now I can sleep."

Bill's return to Viet Nam occurred in 2002. He has slept peacefully and well since. Many of his other PTSD symptoms have disappeared as well. Bill is calmer and far less anxious, angry, and reactive. He gets along better with his family members and in his community. He has become more active in veterans issues and works hard to help other traumatized veterans. He strongly recommends that they, too, take their search for healing out of our hospitals and return to Viet Nam. Returning to the country one fought against is not necessarily a miracle cure, nor does everyone who returns experience the immediate relief Bill did. Yet this story and many others like it demonstrate that radical, successful, and long-lasting healing is possible.

~ From War and the Soul