A TIME TO SERVE

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email: info@hellgatepress.com

Editor: Laura Meehan
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For my friend Alicia I. Gutierrez, who is one in a million.

Other Books by Willam B. McCormick

What Am I Doing Here?
Stories from the 174th Ordnance Detachment in Vietnam

Are You Ready to Ride?
Or...Heat, Dust, and the Smell of Dead Deer

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TIME TO SERVE

OR...WAS THERE LIFE AFTER VIETNAM?

WILLIAM B. McCORMICK

Preface

WHEN THE WHEELS OF THE JET LEFT THE RUNWAY in Vietnam, cheers of joy rang throughout the plane, and we all congratulated each other for surviving the past year. We did not concern ourselves with the thought that our Vietnam service would put us in a rather exclusive club in the future. The joy was tempered for some of us, because we knew that after our thirty days' leave, we had to go back to the Army and fulfill the obligation we swore to uphold. But after what we had endured in the past year, we figured the upcoming duty could never be that bad. Little did we know that the months ahead would make many of us look back upon the past year with fond memories and reverence. Some fled the duty and did indeed go back to endure the danger once again—but at least had a sense of purpose.

In Vietnam, there was war everywhere. Stateside, there was no war, only drudgery in the guise of duty. In Vietnam, each company had a mission, and everyone worked to accomplish that goal, no matter what it was. But the Stateside Army seemed to have lost that and just floundered along.

Those of us who had served, figured the job we had been drafted for or volunteered for, which was serving in Vietnam, had been completed. And now that *that* duty was done, we asked, "What are we doing here?"

In the following pages, I hope to convey the absolute loneliness, frustration, boredom, and anger that surfaced while I served in the Stateside Army after duty in Vietnam.

I arrived at Fort Riley, Kansas, and the 823rd Ordnance Company, a newly promoted sergeant E-5 fresh from of a tour with the 174th Ordnance Detachment in Vietnam. I hoped the 823rd Ordnance Company would not be like the 227th Ordnance Detachment I had served with down at Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, Alabama, before leaving for Vietnam.

The 227th was a company with no real mission other than acting as a holding company for men going to Vietnam or for men who had served in Vietnam and were just serving out their time. That company was a nightmare of petty inspections and do-nothing work. Fact is, I never even saw a live round of any type while stationed the 227th. The 823rd, on the other hand, turned out to have a mission: training. The company was formed around the idea of fighting a tactical nuclear war, using nuclear weapons on a battlefield, which even I knew was never going to happen in 1969, in the age of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). But we trained for it anyway, by going out in the field for one week every month. We slept in tents, ate C-rations, were devoured by mosquitoes, got sunburned beyond belief, developed heat stroke, and froze in the winter, all for something that some of us figured would never happen. But I suppose many just did not care, one way or another.

While you are reading these pages, I hope you find yourself shaking your head at the insanity of it all, laughing at us and with us, calling the officers or senior NCOs buttheads under your breath, wondering how we kept going, and most of all, remembering your own service. When you look up from these pages and stare out into space and suddenly remember the time some officer or senior NCO yelled at you for some stupid minor infraction, and all you really wanted to do was laugh in his face instead of saying, “Yes, sir, I will get right to it,” then I have succeeded.

This book is dedicated to all the men who served with me in the 823rd, but everyone who served Stateside during this time has my respect, especially those in the enlisted ranks. These men managed to wade through the BS and not go crazy, hit anybody, or tear their hair out, and still leave with an honorable discharge. And even those who lost the battle and ended up in the stockade get an honorable mention, for at least they tried for a time.

I would like to thank my editor, Laura Meehan, who it seems can take what I have written and turn it into what I was trying to say in the first place. Without her expert help and guidance, I would just be another wannabe writer.

One

I Just Had to Leave

MY MOTHER GAVE MY FATHER A SIDEWAYS GLANCE WHEN I announced that I was leaving for my next duty assignment, earlier than expected. I could never figure out if that glance was a sign of relief or worry for my well-being, or maybe a combination of both. I know that getting along with me after my year in Vietnam was perplexing for my parents, to say the least. Instead of the son who had climbed aboard the airplane at Travis Air Force Base in September 1968, they got back a swearing, loud, smoking, drinking, and profane stranger who looked the same as their son but was not in so many ways, and they did not know quite what to do.

Looking back, I am not too sure why I thought returning to duty would be better than staying at my parents' home, maybe because it was familiar. It had become what I knew and was comfortable with. Being gone for a year had made their house too small and confining, and I had to leave. And so I packed my duffel bag and grabbed my AWOL bag and left the home I had dreamed about for a year. I guess what they say is true about dreams: the reality is never as good as the anticipation.

Maybe the problem was a complete lack of stress in everyday life. Stress became kind of like a drug; everyone who served in Vietnam was under so much stress all the time, although very few of us realized it then. Suddenly living completely free of this strange drug we were addicted to took more than a little getting used to. It was both euphoric and maddening at the same time, to be free of our Vietnam lifestyle and trying to rejoin a culture where not much happened on a daily basis and that was seemingly without any stimulus. For lack of a better word, daily life had become boring.

At least once I got back to familiar Army life, I hoped I might be able to talk to everyone. I had a problem talking to normal people—"normal people" being someone other than another GI. I would stutter and sweat like crazy; it was very odd. Maybe it was the difficulty of trying to talk without swearing all the time that made conversation so hard. I remember the time, I literally ran away from a friend I had bumped into while shopping at the local mall. Small talk was just beyond me. The area between hello and good-bye was a minefield. I just could not think of anything to say. I think it took about six months Stateside before I could carry on a conversation with anyone, especially women. Everyone must have thought I was a raving lunatic, from friends to neighbors, but it was a really difficult period, and I began to wonder about myself after a time.

In addition, I had a crushing case of claustrophobia after returning. This manifested itself the first night I was back, when I found myself standing outside the house in my underwear, staring at the stars, and breathing like I had just run a marathon. Although that specific problem never happened again, I could never go to bed without having the door open, or be in any closed-up room for that matter. I suppose that was because in Vietnam we had spent much of our time outside, and the barracks

were just one long room. Vietnam was a world without walls, just space, so being confined in a small room took some getting used to. Over the years, this problem gradually disappeared.

I was somewhere in town one day and ran into an old high school friend. He spoke of my friend, John E. Nelson, and said that he had seen him the day before he left for Vietnam. When I mentioned that I had seen John the night before he left, my friend exclaimed that I was the last one to see him alive, and shook my hand, as if I had won some sort of prize or something. I did not know if I should run away or club the son of a bitch. Conversations like that made me very wary of speaking of Vietnam or anything close to it.

One heavy burden I carried with me after coming back from Vietnam, was dealing with John's parents, my neighbors across the street. John had been killed in Vietnam in April 1968. And even though I was military escort at his funeral, and though I did all I could to help the healing process, it seemed apparent that anything I did was never going to be enough or bring John back in a positive way. Maybe all I did was bring back uncomfortable memories. The whole thing made me feel like I should have had an excuse for living and coming home. Maybe it was just me being paranoid when I assumed a sideways glance was about me, or when I would go over to John's parents' house and it seemed his father always left the room. But regardless, I was sure the family must have asked, "Why our son?" because both another neighbor who served and I and came back in one piece.

If I suffered from "survivor's guilt," then what did his family feel toward me for surviving? Survivor's anger? They never said anything, but I could feel the tension in the air, especially from his father. When I think back on it now, it is a wonder I lasted at home as long as I did before fleeing, and I really believe that's what I did. I have always wondered if the very sight of me, alive, might have angered or nauseated them when they thought about

what might have been, and now never would be. I guess it shows that not all casualties of the war happened in Vietnam.

I suppose the problem was that home had become a foreign culture, and getting used to a new culture causes a lot of problems and discomfort. This was especially challenging because no one thought there would be a problem to begin with; they expected me to just get in step with everyone else, assuming that this was still my culture. And even I, the subject in question, was not aware that I didn't belong anymore, but of course everyone around me was.

So my parents dropped me off at the airport and probably breathed a sigh of relief as they drove away, figuring now I was someone else's problem child. My flight would take me from my home in Sacramento, California, to Denver, Colorado, and then on to the Manhattan, Kansas, airport, which was about halfway between the fort and the town of Manhattan. As I waited to board the plane, I thought, "It feels good to be on the move again." If I had known what the flight was going to be like, I would not have been quite so glad.

Two

Should've Taken the Bus

THE THREE-HOUR PLANE RIDE FROM SACRAMENTO to Denver was uneventful, except for the usual turbulence you'd get landing at Denver. It was the second half of the trip that would test my mettle.

Denver is about five hundred miles from Fort Riley, so it should not have taken long to get there. However, I hadn't realized at takeoff that the plane would make a stop every hundred miles, with Manhattan being the fifth stop. It was a nightmare of a flight.

Without a doubt the words "rough" or "turbulent" would be gross understatements, not even coming close to describing the beating we were subjected to. I had never been seasick, carsick, or airsick, but that plane ride came dangerously close to making me motion sick. At every stop I got up and went to the door of the plane to get some fresh air, and that helped keep the nausea at bay. The lightning flashed, the thunder roared, and I began to think we were in a football game, but we were the ball. Talk about a white-knuckle flight. I thought the woman across from me was going to rip the armrest off. That plane slewed up and

down, and I know it flew sideways for awhile. I don't think the plane flew upside down, but it might have.

The beating we incurred in-flight combined with landing and taking off every hundred miles or so made me wish I had taken the bus, and I'm sure everyone else was thinking the same thing. I don't know how much the pilots were paid, but they sure earned it that day.

The only bright spot on this flight was the stewardess—or flight attendant, to use today's terminology. She was a tall and slender brunette with the deepest blue eyes I have ever seen—striking would be a good description. She came by my seat and I commented that she had smeared her mascara, but she said it was a birthmark, and I felt so stupid. Later on she sat next to me and tried to talk to me; she probably just wanted to make small talk to pass the time. Or maybe the flight was getting to her and she thought talking to me might help distract her—but so much for my help. I suddenly became tongue-tied. I stuttered and sweated so much she finally got up and left me to face my demons by myself. She must have wondered what kind of idiots were in the Army. There a few things I regret over time, but failing to at least introduce myself to her is one of them; I still kick myself for being the blockhead I was that day.

Finally we arrived at the Manhattan airport and our airborne torture was over. I grabbed a cab and took off for Fort Riley, thinking I was free from the torture, but only about to step into it for the long term. The plane ride simply served as a warning of how the next few months would play out.

Three

Fort Riley

Fort Riley, Kansas, dates back to the Indian Wars of the nineteenth century. In 1968, Chief, the last official cavalry horse, was buried there, since the post used to be the main cavalry training center. The fort is divided up into four unequal parts: the main post, Custer Hill, Camp Forsythe, and Camp Funston. The main post was where the PX was located.

Since Fort Riley was the headquarters of Fifth Army and all posts under its control, Fifth Army stockade was located here. Historically, Fort Riley was one of the main posts in the west and I assume it had always had a large stockade; it was only designated Fifth Army in modern times. The stockade was a jail where soldiers were incarcerated for lesser crimes; for serious crimes, troopers would end up in Fort Leavenworth Penitentiary.

All of the upper-field-grade officers also had their housing in the main post. Custer Hill was where the infantry was housed—First Division in 1970, Twenty-Third before that—and the buildings were made of brick.

Camp Funston and Camp Forsythe were the poor parts of this equation, the Army's version of the other side of the tracks. The

barracks had been built of wood, probably in the thirties or maybe during World War II. The two-story buildings all looked exactly like the barracks I lived in at Fort Lewis, Washington, during basic training. Even at Aberdeen Proving Ground, where I had originally been sent after basic training, the barracks looked the same. The only difference was that by the time I arrived at Fort Riley, the heating system was electric and not coal. In Fort Lewis, during basic training in 1967, we still had to shovel coal to generate heat. I had volunteered to be a fireman, the one who did this task; it was the only time in the Army I volunteered for anything. The incentive was that we would only have to do KP one time, and believe it or not, they actually kept their word.The 823rd had four barracks; for each, the orderly room, the day room, and the arms room were across the street, and the battalion mess hall was down the street. This same plan was repeated over and over again throughout Camp Funston. Sticking to that old Army maxim that everything looks alike, I guess, each street was a clone of the other, with the only modification being the large elm trees lining the street that had been planted sometime in the past. They provided some shade during midday formation, and they helped breaking up the stark outlines of Camp Funston. I'm sure I should be thankful to some forgotten squad of GIs sweating under the Kansas sun, for planting the shade we appreciated so much.

Years later, when I was at work, a woman I knew asked me some question about the service, and I told her about life at Camp Funston. She looked at me and asked, "So it was really fun to be there?"

I said, "Why would it be fun?"

She said, "Well, you called it Camp Funston, so I figured it was a really fun place to be."

"No," I said, "It was called Camp Funston after General

Funston, not because it was a fun place." Good grief, talk about a total disconnect. People seemed to have no idea what life was like in the Army.

When I arrived, I reported in to the first sergeant, who was rather surprised to see a sergeant standing in front of him, since my orders stated I was a specialist four. My promotion had come through right after I left Vietnam. So at first they were a little nonplussed as to what to do with me. As you will see, this was compounded time after time at Fort Riley.

The day I arrived, I thought it was odd that just about everyone was in their dress greens, the dress uniform, and mentioned this to someone. He told me that they had just concluded a battalion awards ceremony, where a trooper was promoted to staff sergeant (SSG, E-6). When someone pointed him out, I expressed my surprise, stating that he was kind of young to be an E-6. Everyone around me started laughing, and agreed with me that he was pretty young.

Now the official story was that this young man was the best of the best, the poster boy for STRAC troops. STRAC was originally the acronym for Strategic Army Corps, but it had morphed into a term for anyone who had their shit together uniform-wise. And even though he hadn't even been in the Army two years, he was being promoted to SSG. He had volunteered for the Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) Academy and had been promoted to acting jack (meaning he had sergeant's stripes but not the pay) to do so, and then graduated at the top of his class. By doing all this, he was awarded with the promotion and a nice cushy job in Europe after graduation.

The unofficial word among the enlisted men I knew and spoke to was that he was a brown-nosing motherfucker and did not deserve shit. Whose story was right? Maybe more than a little bit of jealousy crept in there. Either way, he got his promotion and got to leave Kansas, so more power to him, I guess.

That same day I was wandering around the company area and spotted my friend Mike Dominguez sitting at a table with four or five other men. Mike and I had served in Vietnam together, so I proceeded to walk over and say hello and shake his hand. As I approached the table, everyone tried to hide the beer they were drinking, as it was not allowed in the company area. I shook Mike's hand and said how glad I was to see a friendly face. And then Mike turned to the other men and said, "Don't worry about Mac. He's cool and won't say anything." Thus began my credibility with the lower ranks that lasted through my whole time at Fort Riley. But as you will see, it had its limits.

The company clerk, SP/5 Crocker, showed me to my quarters in the second-floor NCO room. The room was about twenty feet long and ten feet wide. There was a set of bunk beds against each wall, and four footlockers lined up against the window facing the street. On the opposite wall were eight lockers, or two per man, one for dress greens and fatigues, and the other for civilian clothing. This left an open space of about ten feet by five feet—not much space for four grown men to move around in, especially in the morning, when everyone would be getting dressed.

Later on, I bought a small fourteen-inch TV, which was our link to the outside world. Of course during football or basketball games, the room was filled with select friends watching TV, smoking cigarettes, drinking sodas, and hollering for their favorite team, so weekends were crowded in the tiny room. Not originally being a big sports fan myself, I soon became one, since I was surrounded by them. Even in 1970, in order to watch in Kansas you had to have cable TV. No cable, no TV. Compared to cable TV today, it was not much, just a few channels and the weather, but it was all there was. The cost was modest, less than ten dollars a month.

My roommates, if you want to call them that, were Sergeant Charles Barton from Gower, Missouri; Specialist Five Frank

Preciado from Chula Vista, California; and Sergeant William Hatch from Key West, Florida. We were all Vietnam vets except Hatch, who had done a tour in Korea. Curiously, Frank Preciado and I had served in the same battalion in Vietnam at the same time, lived within a few hundred feet of one another, and eaten in the same mess hall, but I never met or remembered seeing him.

Like I said earlier, I'm guessing the barracks were built during World War II or maybe slightly before. At best they could be called "utilitarian," because there was nothing attractive about them. Painted a neutral grey on the outside and institutional green on the inside, they would never be called warm or homey. And after twenty-five or thirty years of use and abuse and Kansas winters, they were definitely showing their age.

One really annoying problem with the buildings was the windows. Over the years they had become so loose in their frames that not only did they fail to seal out any cold air, but also closing the door caused them to rattle around. We rarely closed the door anyway. But the problem was Camp Funston's location—we were only a couple of miles from the impact range for the artillery training. The detonation of the round would cause those windows to bang around in the frames, sounding like someone was throwing rocks at the building. We got to where we could tell what was being fired from the amount of banging the windows did, and of course this always happened in the wee hours of the morning

Through the front door of the barracks, the latrine was to the right down a couple of steps, with gang showers, gang toilets, and gang urinals. There was no such thing as privacy in the barracks. To the left were the bunks of the lower ranks, E-4 and below. There were two small NCO rooms at the other end of the building; these were one-man rooms. At the top of the stairs to the right was our room, and next door was another room that the cooks used, which was set up the same way as the NCO room.

The rest of the top floor was laid out the same as the bottom floor, with bunks lined up along each side of the building.

Nothing was ever in the middle of any Army barracks I was ever in; we're talking Stateside here, not in Vietnam. The middle, just open floor, was always kept spotless and buffed to a high shine, and no one was allowed to walk across it unless they were wearing socks, and even that rarely happened. If someone was wearing their boots and walked on this area, he would be hollered at and called any number of expletives. Come to think of it, I don't believe I saw anyone walk across the middle of a barracks, socks or no socks. It is amazing to think that most of the square footage in a barracks was never used, since every barracks I was ever stationed in was set up the same way. It was a curious fact that the barracks itself might be fifty years old, but the center flooring would still be brand new and never have been walked on.

In hindsight, it is easy to see that the average barracks was set up to mirror the average Army base. With the parade ground in the middle and the barracks lining the edges, each barracks was a base on a small scale. Old North Fort Lewis would be a good example of this setup, as was Aberdeen Proving Ground, at least in 1968. The only major difference was that we were more than welcome to walk—or should I say march—on the parade ground or center of a base, much to our dismay. This might have all been a coincidence, but knowing the Army the way I do, I sincerely doubt it.

I don't know about today, but during my time in the service, every barracks I stayed in was kept clean enough to make the most acute sufferer of obsessive-compulsive disorder green with envy. They might get a little messy on weekends, but during the week, it was amazing how clean and neat the average barracks was kept. And during inspections, those old decrepit buildings were really made to shine. Of course it took a GI party to make

them look that way. If you don't know what a GI party is, then good for you; those of us who do wish we did not, I'm sure.

Let me explain what a GI party is, for the blissfully ignorant. These "parties" were usually held before a big inspection, like when the colonel planned on making our lives miserable. Ordinary life would cease, and everyone would work on cleaning the barracks. Of course this would always take place on our time, never during duty time. Men would be divided up into gangs with specific duties with regards to what to clean, which believe it or not included the tops of the building's rafters. As an NCO, I would have to be there to watch and make sure everyone was working and that the job was done and was inspection-proof. Then the NCOs that lived in the barracks would get to clean our own areas and get our own gear squared away.

After the barracks was done, then everyone would then turn toward getting their areas in shape. This meant footlockers, wall lockers, shoes, and boots. Remember: all underwear and T-shirts rolled into six-inch rolls—dollar bills make handy measuring devices, since they are six inches long—and handkerchiefs folded in three-inch squares; socks rolled just so; razor and razor blades, shaving brush and shaving soap, toothbrush, and soap dish in the correct order on a clean towel. It was the old saying: "Everything in its place and a place for everything." And don't think if anything was not as it was supposed to be that it would not be noticed. I have seen field-grade officers throw a fit just because something was not right with someone's display. Of course there was always the handy diagram inside the lid for us to refer to, just in case any of us forgot exactly where something needed to be placed.

An interesting sideline about display items in our footlockers: they were never used, so they were always looking great. This includes the razor and razor blades. Years later, after I was out

of the Army, I went to shave one day and realized I was out of razor blades. I had the old style Schick razor, and the blades were in a small dispenser. I remembered my old display items from my Army days. I dug out the razor and blades, and headed back to the bathroom to shave. Well, when I went to put a blade in the razor, I found that the dispenser was empty. Since I had never used the razor or blades, I had to assume that during my time in the Army, on a number of occasions, someone—or maybe multiple someones—took a blade out of my dispenser. I wondered if the darn thing was empty during all those inspections we had. It would have been interesting if the colonel had found an empty dispenser in my footlocker. To this day it makes me wonder when or where or who used all my razor blades, and how they ever got to them since my footlocker was always kept locked.

Sometimes living in the barracks can be downright inane and borderline bizarre. One day I was sitting on my bunk, having just gotten off duty for the day. When someone came in and said that SP/4 Fullerton wanted to see me. I asked about what? But he just shrugged, and said Fullerton just wanted to see me about *something*. So I said ok, put on a shirt and grabbed my hat, and told him to lead the way. He took me over to the barracks next door and Fullerton's bunk.

I could see Fullerton sitting on his footlocker with his pants down around his ankles. I remember thinking, "What the hell, probably has the clap or something." I walked up to him and asked what he wanted, and he proceeded to show me his testicles, one of which was the size of a large orange. He then said, "Think I ought to go the dispensary?"

When I recovered from the shock of seeing his giant testicle, I said, "Hell yes, go right now, don't wait until formation tomorrow."

So he pulled up his pants and wobbled off somewhat bowlegged to the dispensary. He ended up in the hospital and

needed some kind of an operation. It was awhile before he was back on duty, luckily with both his testicles.

Not sure what that incident says about either one of us. It would be nice to think that the lower ranks trusted my judgment in matter such as this. But then again, it might say a lot about the Army's discipline and Fullerton, who thought he should ask someone before going to the dispensary when he had a testicle the size of an orange!

Another annoying feature of the barracks was the plumbing. If someone was in the shower and one of the toilets was flushed, then whoever was in the shower was scalded with hot water. Since the NCO room was right above the shower, I can still remember hearing the screams and expletives yelled by scalded GIs. I understand the fix was rather simple, but it was never done. Just another example of no one caring about the well-being of people in the Army—hey they're just GIs—who cares?

The complete and total lack of privacy while living in a barracks—taking showers and using the toilet in front of everyone, for instance—got really old after a while. I don't think anyone who has not lived in such conditions can really envision what life is like, living that way. At my civilian work, they always used to talk about getting along with my fellow employees. I always laughed to myself, thinking, "These people don't have the slightest idea of what getting along with other people means if they have never lived in a barracks with ninety people, day in and day out."

One day, four or five of us were coming back from the main post PX when we were made painfully aware of one of the many hazards on living on an Army post. We turned off the main highway to come into Camp Funston the back way. Just when we turned off the highway, we saw a deuce and a half, a two-and-

a-half-ton truck, about a quarter mile ahead of us turning off the road to the gas range and onto the road we were on. None of us thought much about it; but oh boy, we should have.

As we came up closer behind the truck, I started to get the sniffles, but thought nothing of it. But when two others in the car started to get them, we knew something was wrong. There was a familiar smell in the air, and it took a second for us to remember what it was. All of a sudden, two of us shouted, "TEAR GAS! SLOW DOWN!" but it was too late, we were gassed. The driver managed to stop, and we bailed out with our runny noses and watering eyes, hacking and coughing like a bunch of rioters gassed by the police. If you have never been tear gassed, then you are fortunate, because you have never seen snot until you have had a dose of the stuff. I could never figure out where all the snot came from, because it seemed there was an endless supply of it.

Of course, what happened was the truck must have been parked downwind at the gas range, and the gas had settled onto it, only to blow off while it was being driven down the road in front of us. For you that are ignorant with regards to tear gas, let me inform you. It is not really a gas, but superfine crystals that will stay suspended in the air until they find something to stick to, like the truck and our unsuspecting sinus passages.

After a few minutes of shouting expletives, blowing our noses and cussing the truck driver, and after making sure the driver could see well enough to drive, we headed back to the barracks as fast as we could safely drive, with all four windows down to get rid of any remaining gas. We all had a good laugh about it later—much later. That truck driver was one lucky son of a bitch that we never got a hold of him; but of course he was long gone by the time we had recovered. He was—and we were—lucky a couple of us were not killed, because our driver ran off the road when he could not see.