



# VIETAM: THERE AND BACK

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PO Box 3531  
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*email:* info@hellgatepress.com

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*For all the soldiers we lost in Charlie Co. 1/6th 198th Light  
Infantry Brigade from February 1968 to February 1969.*

*For all infantrymen who have carried the scars of battle from  
all the wars that the U.S. has been involved in.*

*For all who lost their lives in the Vietnam War.*



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# **VIETNAM**

## **THERE & BACK**

*A Combat  
Medic's Chronicle*

**JIM "DOC" PURTELL**

HELLGATE PRESS



ASHLAND, OREGON





## Acknowledgments

**A**FTER WRITING THE INITIAL DRAFT OF THIS MEMOIR, I sent it to Al Torsiello, my platoon mate with whom I served in Vietnam. He read it and, without telling me, allowed a friend of his, a university instructor, to read it. His friend liked it, saying that he thought it was “honest and authentic.” However, he suggested that I find an editor.

Because his recommendation made sense to me, I spent time thinking about people I know whom I would trust with my story. I decided to approach Barbara Wuest, the wife of a long-time friend. Since Barbara is a former English/Writing professor and a poet, I thought she might be able to help me out with the editing. Thankfully, she agreed. After numerous edits, she was able to make the sentences more clear and therefore easier to read. What I am most grateful for is that she was able to make needed changes without eviscerating my voice.

I also want to thank Al Torsiello who read several different drafts. Not only did he serve as an excellent sounding board but he also wrote the Foreword. For both, I am truly grateful. He and I have been friends since we met in the jungles of Vietnam and will be friends to the end.

Another good friend, Rudy Cardin, was also instrumental in the making of this book. Rudy went through medical training with me at Fort Sam Houston in 1967. He and I also went through

Vietnam orientation together in Chu Lai in February 1968. He served as a combat medic with an infantry outfit. After reading my story (in one sitting), he told me that my experience was also his experience. Because he understood my story as well as he did, he was able to make valuable recommendations for changes that I ended up adopting.

Finally, I want to thank Mary Nigl, my girlfriend of many years, who read the book and enthusiastically encouraged me to publish it.

## Foreword

**N**OT MANY GOOD THINGS COME OUT OF WAR, but for me a close friendship with Jim “Doc” Purtell is one. Doc (as he would be known to this day by anyone who served in combat with him) became my friend in February 1968 when he stepped off of a chopper in the jungles of Vietnam. He was there to replace our former medic whom we had lost in combat a few weeks earlier. I’d been in country only a few weeks myself, and we bonded immediately. Doc was a medic, not trained for combat like the rest of the men he served with; but when the shit hit the fan, we could always count on him. No one he served with would dispute that.

We fought together for most of our time in country and shared all the same experiences, which turned out to be what we both feel was our way of coping with the aftermath of the war once we were home. I never thought anyone who hadn’t been there with me would believe my stories. In fact, my wife of over 40 years has heard none of my war experiences. It was only with Doc that I was able to discuss the things that happened to us in Vietnam.

I was home from the war for a few years and only just starting to experience the effects of PTSD, but not knowing what it was. I hadn’t seen or heard from Doc since we got home from Vietnam. Then about six years later, he turned up on my doorstep,

and we started telling each other about how we were feeling. We both feel that these talks are what kept us sane through the aftermath of our war experience. I highly recommend this book to other combat veterans as well as their family and friends. It could be a good way for other veterans, who come home from war feeling lost and confused, to see that they are not alone, that many others are going through the same difficulties of assimilating back into society.

Although Doc and I live in different parts of the country, we still see each other and speak on a regular basis. We don't always talk about Vietnam but it still comes up, and it's still good to know there is someone to rely on when the old demons emerge.

*Alan Torsiello Charlie Company  
1st Battalion 6th infantry Americal Division  
Feb. 1968 to Feb. 1969*

## Preface

**W**HEN I WAS A YOUNG BOY, I was an eager reader who consumed biographies of famous Americans. I also read several historical novels, but the one that I read and re-read several times was Steven Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*. I was struck by the stark realism of war in that book. It was like nothing else I had read at the time. The author did such an amazing job of pulling the reader into the scenes that I could easily imagine being there participating in the war effort. I never dreamed at that time that I would actually be exposed to so many of the situations that I'd read about as a young boy, the struggle between self-interest and group obligations, individual survival, courage, manhood, honor, maturity and mortality.

\*\*\*\*

It was 1968, one of the worst years in American history since the Civil War. The country had already buried Martin Luther King, Jr. in April and Robert Kennedy in June, both reportedly murdered by lone assassins. And I was in one of the most dangerous places in the world, during the worst time of the Vietnam War, on top of a hill in the Central Highland with only about twenty-five other guys. We were in foxholes we had dug hours before, and the night was eerily quiet.

We'd been hit so hard in previous months that we were told to avoid encountering the enemy, to the extent possible, because our numbers had grown dangerously small. The still of the very dark night was broken by hand grenades thrown from positions directly below us. The enemy was so close to us that our lieutenant called for gunships. He thought we were so exposed and vulnerable that we'd all be overrun and killed. Afraid for my life, I desperately longed for the safety of my home back in the States where I was born nineteen years earlier.

# PART ONE





## Growing Up in the Midwest

**I** WAS A WILD KID. ACCORDING TO MY MOTHER, I was born with a vivid imagination and a very independent streak. I grew up in a rural area with eleven brothers and sisters. Back in the '50s, families in general were larger than they are today. So, besides having my siblings all around, I also had plenty of neighborhood kids to hang out with. We'd often get on our bikes and race around the local streets. Sometimes we'd stop and raid the neighbor's currant patch or stop at a fort we'd built in a nearby wooded area. Back then, before computers and cell phones, we entertained ourselves. We usually had enough players to form teams for a baseball, basketball or football game, depending on the season. We'd often play for hours and hours until we had to go home for meals or for the evening.

When I went home after playing all day, I could count on my father being there ruling the roost with an iron fist. Later in life, I began to better understand why he was such a strict disciplinarian. Back in the '40s, long before women's liberation, my father had to become the "man" of the family. He had three older sisters and an older brother, Tom. When Tom was younger, he had been accidentally hit in the head with a wooden bat in a pick-up baseball game. Because of this accident, he needed care

for the rest of his life; and my father was the one who had to look after him. When Tom would disappear from the house, my father was always the one called upon to search for him. Often the only way he could find Tom was with the help of the police. My father became resourceful at an early age. He developed a very aggressive manner about him, a manner that instilled fear in most if not all of his own children.

In my early years, I was very afraid of my father. After all, he was the one who administered the punishment in the family. Giving time-outs or putting a kid in the corner were not forms of punishment used in the '50s, at least not in our household. We did get our share of spankings, though. For me and my brother, Dic, the spankings started first with a bare hand on the buttocks. It then graduated to belts. When the belts were worn out, he used double-edged razor straps on the buttocks and upper legs. It's likely that, today, this type of punishment would constitute child abuse.

In my teen years, I got into more than my share of trouble. The more juvenile acts I committed the harder my father was on me. Because I had become a very fit, tough and strong teenager, the punishment changed from physical to mental. For example, he would make me copy in long hand several pages of small print from the classified section of our local newspaper. It would take me hours to finish. If my father found a single mistake—and he always did, be it a misspelling, an omitted punctuation mark or word—he would rip the pages and throw them on the floor. Then, I had to do the whole thing over. This happened to me numerous times.

Once, in my early teens, we kids were playing baseball in our yard. When I got up to bat, I accidentally hit my younger brother Bill's forehead as I was bringing my wooden bat back. Bill was inexperienced and, as the catcher, too close to the batter. As a

result of this incident, I had to spend a week during the summer in the foyer sitting on a chair during my waking hours. Not only did I have to take my meals there alone, but my siblings were told not to speak to me. I wasn't even allowed to have anything to read or look at but the foyer itself. I was supposed to just sit there and think about what I had done. Believe me, I had done a lot of things that I should have been disciplined for, but this was an accident, not something I did deliberately. In my father's defense, however, I understand now that his overreaction may have to do with his own brother's head injury that resulted in learning and social disabilities that ruined his life. I get this now; but at the time, I felt I had been punished unjustly.

Despite the difficulty I had enduring my father's harsh discipline, I was still cocky and rebellious in high school. Having observed my older brothers before they moved on to more mature activities, I stepped in and assumed their leadership positions in our neighborhood group. Although I wasn't conscious of it at the time, I was much more of a leader than a follower. As a result, over time, I was elected vice president of my freshman homeroom and president of my homeroom class in my sophomore, junior and senior years. Also, in Catholic grade school and high school, I played basketball and football, enjoying football more because of the physical nature of the game. With good coaching, I developed my skills and became a good athlete. Having been lucky enough to play on some good teams, I received the usual athletic achievement awards.

All of this was interrupted when I was a freshman in high school, which is when one of the most tragic events of my life occurred. The first Irish Catholic President of the United States was assassinated in Dallas shortly after lunch on November 22, 1963. Like most Americans, I remember exactly where I was when I first heard the news. I was at Lourdes High School in

Oshkosh, a school taught by the Christian Brothers. At about 1:00 p.m. CST, Brother Anthony's voice came over the public address speaker telling us that JFK had been shot. A few minutes later, his voice came back on the speaker saying that the President had been killed. He said buses were to arrive in a few minutes. School was closed, and the scheduled basketball game was canceled. Of course, no one cared about the game. Totally devastated, we left school with heavy hearts.

Later that day, my father came home from his dental office with three French-speaking boys about my age in tow. They belonged to a touring French Catholic boys' choir called the Little Singers of Paris. Their concert in our area had been canceled. A call had gone out to community leaders asking them to take these boys in, as there were no rooms to be had in our local hotels. My father answered that call and accepted responsibility for these three boys. The country was paralyzed. So these boys, who couldn't speak a word of English, joined me and my eleven siblings and my parents—seventeen of us altogether—for the entire weekend. Like people throughout the United States, we positioned ourselves around the television and watched the events unfold. The weekend was particularly sad at our house because we were Irish Catholic and enthusiastic supporters of JFK. When the accused assassin Lee Harvey Oswald came into view in the basement of the police department and a man later identified as Jack Ruby shot him, we were all aghast at what we had seen. The French boys recoiled in horror too. Together we had witnessed the first murder on live television in the United States and possibly the world. I felt sorry for these young boys being so far from their home and so did my father. He allowed each of them to call their parents. At that time, long-distance calling, especially to Europe, was very expensive.

So I knew what a generous act this was on my father's part.

To this day I remember vividly not only my father's generosity but also the boys themselves. How strange it must have been for them to be with an American family during this tragic time. Later in life, I hired some French-speaking researchers and tried unsuccessfully to obtain a roster of the Little Singers in Paris. I wanted to know how it was for them to be here with Americans in our time of national mourning.

After these days of grieving, my father resumed his role as the harsh disciplinarian in our household. My need to be independent often conflicted with his need to rule. From the time I was twelve until I turned eighteen, he and I battled. I never won any of these battles. My father was not one to show love in any way. Though his kindness to the French boys might be interpreted as loving, I myself cannot recall ever having strong feelings for him that were returned in any way. Never did I hear the words "I love you" from him when I was growing up. I know I am not alone in this regard. Many people have been raised in a similar way, or far worse. All I know is that, for me, it wasn't the right way.

In 1967, as I was about to graduate from high school, I knew I was not going to go to college. Though I was a fairly good student, I was tired of the academic world. Besides, I was eighteen, which meant I knew all the answers. I was thinking about what I might do when I graduated, but I wasn't doing so very seriously. I was kind of adrift. So, in my senior year, I joined a rock and roll band, a group that I initiated for a talent day in high school with friends Paul Muetzel, John Prescott, Glen Wuest, Tom Thornton and Pete Searles. During the join-up phases of the band, I had to learn bass; so Glen taught me the parts to about forty of their songs, and I muddled my way through playing bass guitar at a very minimal level. Though I played only one or two gigs with them, I really enjoyed it.

Because I was kind of in the band, I traveled with them to

Wausau, Wisconsin, to listen to one of their weekend gigs. On the second night, after the gig, I was defending Pete (the current bass player who would be switching to drums) because a rowdy group of guys in the parking lot wanted to beat him up. I went outside and announced that I was the new bass player and asked the guys sitting on the hoods of their cars what we needed to do about it. A go-go dancer who had been dancing at the club that evening walked outside and tried to persuade these local guys to get in their cars and leave, but her request fell on deaf ears.

The reason they were upset is because one of them had sat in as drummer for both nights for one song. When it was decided that Pete would be the drummer, the guy (who was drunk) got upset. He felt he'd been deliberately upstaged. He directed derogatory, ugly and highly offensive racist remarks toward the Negro go-go dancer. (The terms "African-American" and "black" had not made their way into the mainstream language as yet.) When I verbally corrected him and defended her, the guy called me a "nigger lover" and struck me. One thing led to another, and I got in a major fist fight. The guy sucker-punched me and gave me a black eye, but he got the worst of it. When several of his buddies picked him up from the gravel parking lot and dragged him away, he was bleeding, seemingly, from every part of his body.

Looking back on this incident, I realize that I didn't have to go out in that parking lot when that crowd was calling for Pete to come outside. No one told me to confront them, but I thought I was tough. Since none of my band mates were fighters, I knew we were in a real predicament.

I went out and, in my own way, tried to defuse the situation. The dynamics were such that there was no easy way to resolve the issue. After all, because these guys were local and customers of his, the bar owner wasn't going to call the cops. So I knew we

were in big trouble, and we were ninety miles from home. It turns out that the fight did defuse the situation, as the parking lot cleared out shortly after. The owner of the establishment thought we had contributed to the problem and, as a result, docked our pay. Needless to say, it was a quiet ride home that night.

When I got home, it was very late. I made my way to my room and fell asleep. The next morning, unable to hide my black eye, I had to confront my father's anger. He didn't want to hear that I'd defended the go-go dancer and one of the guys in the band. He had no interest at all in my honorable actions. To him, it was just one more incident where I got into trouble. He said, "It's all over for you. You're quitting that band." I told the guys that I could no longer play in the band, which I loved, but I lived in my father's house and had to abide by his rules. After that forced curtailment of my musical career, I vowed then and there that my father would never make another decision that impacted my life. As it turned out, the fight and my father's subsequent punishment were defining events in my life.

I didn't tell my parents that I was thinking about entering the military, but I probably did share it with some of my closer friends near the end of my senior year in high school. I'd observed guys around me who went that route. My friend and neighbor, Bill Lageman, joined the Navy when he graduated from high school to get away from his alcoholic father. After seeing him decked out in his Navy uniform, which I liked, I decided to talk to a Navy recruiter too. Ultimately, I decided I didn't want to spend a lot of time out on a ship in foreign waters.

So I met with a U.S. Army recruiter instead. He fed me a lot of bullshit, and I believed him. The next thing I knew I was signing on the dotted line without telling anyone. The recruiter told me that, based on what I told him about myself, I should be what they called in the Army a "medical aid man." He briefly

explained what jobs medics performed. I must have been seeking some approval from my father (who was in the medical profession) because I didn't hesitate to choose the medical field. Furthermore, I had no interest in killing anyone. I preferred to help people.

The recruiter told me I'd work in a nice clean hospital in either Hawaii or Germany, two of the places I'd selected on the enlistment form. When I left that office, I had a good feeling about the recruiter. I thought he was a nice guy. Only later did I learn that recruiters in that era had to fill quotas. The Army would take any able body that walked in their door and could pass the minimum mental and physical requirements.

Since I was eighteen and didn't need parental consent, I kept secret the fact that I joined the Army, that is, until the next flare-up I had with my father. When that happened, I told him he wouldn't have to worry about me anymore because I had joined the U.S. Army and I'd be leaving for basic training after graduation from high school. For the first time in my memory, I saw some fear and apprehension in my father's face. He watched the news every night, so he knew better than I did exactly what was happening in the world, specifically in Vietnam. Because he served in WWII, he was well aware that the decision I made was cause for alarm. He knew I'd made a poor decision, but he never told me so. My mother was very upset. Although my brothers Tom and Tim had left home to go to college, I was the first to leave home to join the military.

After telling my family, I then told my friends and girlfriend. Since they were all aware of my ongoing problems with my father, I guess it was no surprise to them that I made this decision. No one asked me why I was doing this. Looking back, it's obvious to me that I had not thought it through at all. It was an impulsive overreaction on my part. I joined the Army because,



at the time, it was the lesser of the evils before me. I didn't want to go to college, and I didn't want to work and live at home. Back in the late '60s, kids didn't get apartments together the way they do now. If young people went to work after graduation, they usually still lived at home with their families until they married. Though I'm sure he didn't see it this way, my father was suffocating me. He became increasingly impossible to live with, so I felt that I had to get away from him at any cost.

While waiting to graduate, I started thinking about the situation I'd gotten myself into. I was aware that our country was involved in a war. Macho that I was, I told my other macho buddies that I wanted to go kill those Viet Cong for the red, white and blue. Some of them even encouraged me, saying I was doing the right thing, but they didn't know any more than I did. It was all false bravado. The truth is, I really knew nothing about Vietnam. Nor did I know anything about killing. In fact, I knew nothing about anything. At that point in my life, I had never really traveled at all. The farthest I'd been away from home was ninety miles. It was 1967. In my town, people my age didn't travel much. If they did, it was by car for the most part.

I graduated from high school in May of 1967, and on or about August 8, 1967, I left home to go to Milwaukee to take my Army physical which I passed with flying colors. Almost everyone passed and, for some reason, I didn't find that odd. It was only later that I realized that the country needed lots of bodies for cannon fodder in Vietnam, so very few people got medical exemptions. The next day, after the physical, I boarded a bus and traveled south toward Ft. Campbell, Kentucky.