

October 2, 1994

The Vietnam in Me

By TIM O'BRIEN

LZ GATOR, VIETNAM, FEBRUARY 1994 -- I'm home, but the house is gone. Not a sandbag, not a nail or a scrap of wire.

On Gator, we used to say, the wind doesn't blow, it sucks. Maybe that's what happened -- the wind sucked it all away. My life, my virtue.

In February 1969, 25 years ago, I arrived as a young, terrified pfc. on this lonely little hill in Quang Ngai Province. Back then, the place seemed huge and imposing and permanent. A forward firebase for the Fifth Battalion of the 46th Infantry, 198th Infantry Brigade, LZ Gator was home to 700 or 800 American soldiers, mostly grunts. I remember a tar helipad, a mess hall, a medical station, mortar and artillery emplacements, two volleyball courts, numerous barracks and offices and supply depots and machine shops and entertainment clubs. Gator was our castle. Not safe, exactly, but far preferable to the bush. No land mines here. No paddies bubbling with machine-gun fire.

Maybe once a month, for three or four days at a time, Alpha Company would return to Gator for stand-down, where we took our comforts behind a perimeter of bunkers and concertina wire. There were hot showers and hot meals, ice chests packed with beer, glossy pinup girls, big, black Sony tape decks booming "We gotta get out of this place" at decibels for the deaf. Thirty or 40 acres of almost-America. With a little weed and a lot of beer, we would spend the days of stand-down in flat-out celebration, purely alive, taking pleasure in our own biology, kidneys and livers and lungs and legs, all in their proper alignments. We could breathe here. We could feel our fists uncurl, the pressures approaching normal. The real war, it seemed, was

in another solar system. By day, we'd fill sandbags or pull bunker guard. In the evenings, there were outdoor movies and sometimes live floor shows -- pretty Korean girls breaking our hearts in their spangled miniskirts and high leather boots -- then afterward we'd troop back to the Alpha barracks for some letter writing or boozing or just a good night's sleep.

So much to remember. The time we filled a nasty lieutenant's canteen with mosquito repellent; the sounds of choppers and artillery fire; the slow dread that began building as word spread that in a day or two we'd be heading back to the bush. Pinkville, maybe. The Batangan Peninsula. Spooky, evil places where the land itself could kill you.

Now I stand in this patch of weeds, looking down on what used to be the old Alpha barracks. Amazing, really, what time can do. You'd think there would be something left, some faint imprint, but LZ (Landing Zone) Gator has been utterly and forever erased from the earth. Nothing here but ghosts and wind.

At the foot of Gator, along Highway 1, the little hamlet of Nuoc Man is going bonkers over our arrival here. As we turn and walk down the hill, maybe 200 people trail along, gawking and chattering, the children reaching out to touch our skin. Through our interpreter, Mrs. Le Hoai Phuong, I'm told that I am the first American soldier to return to this place in the 24 years since Gator was evacuated in 1970. In a strange way, the occasion has the feel of a reunion -- happy faces, much bowing. "Me Wendy," says a middle-aged woman. Another says, "Flower." Wendy and Flower: G.I. nicknames retrieved from a quarter-century ago.

An elderly woman, perhaps in her late 70's, tugs at my shirt and says, "My name Mama-san."

Dear God. We should've bombed these people with love.

CAMBRIDGE, MASS., JUNE 1994 -- Last night suicide was on my mind. Not whether, but how. Tonight it will be on my mind again. Now it's 4 A.M., June the 5th. The sleeping pills have not worked. I sit in my underwear at this unblinking fool of a computer and try to wrap words around a few horrid truths.

I returned to Vietnam with a woman whose name is Kate, whom I adored and have since lost. She's with another man, seven blocks away. This I learned yesterday afternoon. My own fault, Kate would say, and she would

be mostly right. Not entirely. In any case, these thoughts are probably too intimate, too awkward and embarrassing for public discussion. But who knows? Maybe a little blunt human truth will send you off to church, or to confession, or inside yourself.

Not that it matters. For me, with one eye on these smooth yellow pills, the world must be written about as it is or not written about at all.

LZ GATOR, FEBRUARY 1994 -- By chance, Kate and I have arrived in Nuoc Man on a day of annual commemoration, a day when the graves of the local war dead are blessed and repaired and decorated and wept over.

The village elders invite us to a feast, a picnic of sorts, where we take seats before a low lacquered table at an outdoor shrine. Children press up close, all around. The elders shoo them away, but the shooing doesn't do much. I'm getting nervous. The food on display seems a bit exotic. Not to my taste. I look at Kate, Kate looks at me. "Number one chop-chop," an old woman says, a wrinkled, gorgeous, protective, scarred, welcoming old woman. "Number one," she promises, and nudges Kate, and smiles a heartbreaking betel-nut smile.

I choose something white. Fish, I'm guessing. I have eaten herring; I have enjoyed herring. This is not herring.

There are decisions to be made.

The elders bow and execute chewing motions. Do not forget: our hosts are among the maimed and widowed and orphaned, the bombed and rebombed, the recipients of white phosphorus, the tenders of graves. Chew, they say, and by God I chew.

Kate has the good fortune to find a Kleenex. She's a pro. She executes a polite wiping motion and it's over for her. Eddie Keating, the Times photographer whose pictures accompany this text, tucks his portion between cheek and gum, where it remains until the feast concludes. Me -- I imagine herring. I remember Sunday afternoons as a boy, the Vikings on TV, my dad opening up the crackers and creamed herring, passing it out at halftime. Other flashes too. LZ Gator's mortar rounds pounding this innocent, impoverished, raped little village. Eight or nine corpses piled not 50 yards from where we now sit in friendly union. I prepare myself. Foul, for sure, but things come around. Nuoc Man swallowed plenty.

THE SONG TRA HOTEL, QUANG NGAI CITY, FEBRUARY 1994
-- It's late in the evening. The air-conditioner is at full Cuban power. Kate's eyes sparkle, she's laughing. "Swallowed!" she keeps saying.

In 1969, when I went to war, Kate was 3 years old. Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, McNamara, Bunker, Rogers, Bundy, Rusk, Abrams, Rostow -- for her, these names are like the listings on a foreign menu. Some she recognizes not at all, some she recalls from books or old television clips. But she never tasted the dishes. She does not know ice cream from Brussels sprouts. Three years old -- how could she? No more than I could know the Southern California of her own youth.

Still, it was Kate who insisted we come here. I was more than reluctant -- I was petrified, I looked for excuses. Bad dreams and so on. But Kate's enthusiasm won me over; she wanted to share in my past, the shapes of things, the smells and sunlight.

As it turns out, the sharing has gone both ways. In any other circumstances, I would have returned to this country almost purely as a veteran, caught up in memory, but Kate's presence has made me pay attention to the details of here and now, a Vietnam that exists outside the old perimeter of war. She takes delight in things alive: a chicken wired to someone's bicycle, an old woman's enormous fingernails, an infant slung casually on the hip of a tiny 7-year-old girl. Kate has the eyes and spirit of an adventurer, wide open to the variety of the world, and these qualities have pushed me toward some modest adventurism of my own.

Now I watch her fiddle with the air-conditioner. "Swallowed!" she keeps saying.

Later in the night, as on many other nights, we talk about the war. I try to explain -- ineptly, no doubt -- that Vietnam was more than terror. For me, at least, Vietnam was partly love. With each step, each light-year of a second, a foot soldier is always almost dead, or so it feels, and in such circumstances you can't help but love. You love your mom and dad, the Vikings, hamburgers on the grill, your pulse, your future -- everything that might be lost or never come to be. Intimacy with death carries with it a corresponding new intimacy with life. Jokes are funnier, green is greener. You love the musty morning air. You love the miracle of your own enduring capacity for love. You love your friends in Alpha Company -- a kid named Chip, my buddy. He wrote letters to my sister, I wrote letters to his sister. In the rear, back at Gator, Chip and I would go our separate ways,

by color, both of us ashamed but knowing it had to be that way. In the bush, though, nothing kept us apart. "Black and White," we were called. In May of 1969, Chip was blown high into a hedge of bamboo. Many pieces. I loved the guy, he loved me. I'm alive. He's dead. An old story, I guess.

CAMBRIDGE, JUNE 1994 -- It's 5:25 in the morning, June 7. I have just taken my first drug of the day, a prescription drug, Oxazepam, which files the edge off anxiety. Thing is, I'm not anxious. I'm slop. This is despair. This is a valance of horror that Vietnam never approximated. If war is hell, what do we call hopelessness?

I have not killed myself. That day, this day, maybe tomorrow. Like Nam, it goes.

For some time, years in fact, I have been treated for depression, \$8,000 or \$9,000 worth. Some of it has worked. Or was working. I had called back to memory -- not to memory, exactly, but to significance -- some pretty painful feelings of rejection as a child. Chubby and friendless and lonely. I had come to acknowledge, more or less, the dominant principle of love in my life, how far I would go to get it, how terrified I was of losing it. I have done bad things for love, bad things to stay loved. Kate is one case. Vietnam is another. More than anything, it was this desperate love craving that propelled me into a war I considered mistaken, probably evil. In college, I stood in peace vigils. I rang doorbells for Gene McCarthy, composed earnest editorials for the school newspaper. But when the draft notice arrived after graduation, the old demons went to work almost instantly. I thought about Canada. I thought about jail. But in the end I could not bear the prospect of rejection: by my family, my country, my friends, my hometown. I would risk conscience and rectitude before risking the loss of love.

I have written some of this before, but I must write it again. I was a coward. I went to Vietnam.

MY LAI, QUANG NGAI PROVINCE, FEBRUARY 1994 -- Weird, but I know this place. I've been here before. Literally, but also in my nightmares.

One year after the massacre, Alpha Company's area of operations included the village of My Lai 4, or so it was called on American military maps. The Vietnamese call it Thuan Yen, which belongs to a larger hamlet called Tu Cung, which in turn belongs to an even larger parent village called Son My.

But names are finally irrelevant. I am just here.

Twenty-five years ago, knowing nothing of the homicides committed by American troops on the morning of March 16, 1968, Alpha Company walked through and around this hamlet on numerous occasions. Now, standing here with Kate, I can't recognize much. The place blends in with all the other poor, scary, beleaguered villages in this area we called Pinkville. Even so, the feel of the place is as familiar as the old stucco house of my childhood. The clay trails, the cow dung, the blank faces, the unknowns and unknowables. There is the smell of sin here. Smells of terror, too, and enduring sorrow.

What happened, briefly, was this. At approximately 7:30 on the morning of March 16, 1968, a company of roughly 115 American soldiers were inserted by helicopter just outside the village of My Lai. They met no resistance. No enemy. No incoming fire. Still, for the next four hours, Charlie Company killed whatever could be killed. They killed chickens. They killed dogs and cattle. They killed people, too. Lots of people. Women, infants, teen-agers, old men. The United States Army's Criminal Investigation Division compiled a list of 343 fatalities and an independent Army inquiry led by Lieut. Gen. William R. Peers estimated that the death count may have exceeded 400. At the Son My Memorial, a large tablet lists 504 names. According to Col. William Wilson, one of the original Army investigators, "The crimes visited on the inhabitants of Son My Village included individual and group acts of murder, rape, sodomy, maiming, assault on noncombatants and the mistreatment and killing of detainees."

The testimony of one member of Charlie Company, Salvatore LaMartina, suggests the systematic, cold-blooded character of the slaughter:

Q: Did you obey your orders?

A: Yes, sir.

Q: What were your orders?

A: Kill anything that breathed.

Whether or not such instructions were ever directly issued is a matter of dispute. Either way, a good many participants would later offer the explanation that they were obeying orders, a defense explicitly prohibited by the Nuremberg Principles and the United States Army's own rules of

war. Other participants would argue that the civilians at My Lai were themselves Vietcong. A young soldier named Paul Meadlo, who was responsible for numerous deaths on that bright March morning, offered this appalling testimony:

Q: What did you do?

A: I held my M-16 on them.

Q: Why?

A: Because they might attack.

Q: They were children and babies?

A: Yes.

Q: And they might attack? Children and babies?

A: They might've had a fully loaded grenade on them. The mothers might have throwed them at us.

Q: Babies?

A: Yes. . . .

Q: Were the babies in their mothers' arms?

A: I guess so.

Q: And the babies moved to attack?

A: I expected at any moment they were about to make a counterbalance.

Eventually, after a cover-up that lasted more than a year and after the massacre made nationwide headlines, the Army's Criminal Investigation Division produced sufficient evidence to charge 30 men with war crimes. Of these, only a single soldier, First Lieut. William Laws Calley Jr., was ever convicted or spent time in prison. Found guilty of the premeditated murder of "not less than" 22 civilians, Calley was sentenced to life at hard labor, but after legal appeals and sentence reductions, his ultimate jail time

amounted to three days in a stockade and four and a half months in prison.

In some cases, judicial action was never initiated; in other cases, charges were quietly dropped. Calley aside, only a handful of men faced formal court-martial proceedings, either for war crimes or for subsequent cover-up activities, with the end result of five acquittals and four judicially ordered dismissals. Among those acquitted was Capt. Ernest Medina, who commanded Charlie Company on the morning of March 16, 1968.

All this is history. Dead as those dead women and kids. Even at the time, most Americans seemed to shrug it off as a cruel, nasty, inevitable consequence of war. There were numerous excuses, numerous rationalizations. Upright citizens decried even the small bit of justice secured by the conviction of Lieutenant Calley. Now, more than 25 years later, the villainy of that Saturday morning in 1968 has been pushed off to the margins of memory. In the colleges and high schools I sometimes visit, the mention of My Lai brings on null stares, a sort of puzzlement, disbelief mixed with utter ignorance.

Evil has no place, it seems, in our national mythology. We erase it. We use ellipses. We salute ourselves and take pride in America the White Knight, America the Lone Ranger, America's sleek laser-guided weaponry beating up on Saddam and his legion of devils.

It's beginning to rain when Kate and I sit down to talk with two survivors of the slaughter here. Mrs. Ha Thi Quy is a woman of 69 years. Her face is part stone, part anguish as she describes through an interpreter the events of that day. It's hard stuff to hear. "Americans came here twice before," Mrs. Quy says. "Nothing bad happened, they were friendly to us. But on that day the soldiers jumped out of their helicopters and immediately began to shoot. I prayed, I pleaded." As I take notes, I'm recalling other prayers, other pleadings. A woman saying "No VC, no VC," while a young lieutenant pistol-whipped her without the least expression on his face, without the least sign of distress or moral uncertainty. Mad Mark, we called him. But he wasn't mad. He was numb. He'd lost himself. His gyroscope was gone. He didn't know up from down, good from bad.

Mrs. Quy is crying now. I can feel Kate crying off to my side, though I don't dare look.

"The Americans took us to a ditch. I saw two soldiers with red faces -- sunburned -- and they pushed a lot of people into the ditch. I was in the

ditch. I fell down and many fell on top of me. Soldiers were shooting. I was shot in the hip. The firing went on and on. It would stop and then start again and then stop." Now I hear Kate crying, not loud, just a certain breathiness I've come to recognize. This will be with us forever. This we'll have.

My notes take a turn for the worse. "I lay under the dead in the ditch. Around noon, when I heard no more gunfire, I came out of the ditch and saw many more. Brains, pieces of body. My house was burned. Cattle were shot. I went back to the ditch. Three of my four children were killed."

I'm exhausted when Mrs. Quy finishes. Partly it's the sheer magnitude of horror, partly some hateful memories of my own.

I can barely wire myself together as Mrs. Truong Thi Le, another survivor, recounts those four hours of murder. Out of her family of 10, 9 died that day. "I fell down," Mrs. Le tells us. "But I was not shot. I lay with three other bodies on me, all blood. Did not move at all. Pretended dead. Saw newborn baby near a woman. Woman died. Infant still alive. Soldiers came up. Shot baby."

Outside, the rain has let up. Kate, Eddie and I take a walk through the hamlet. We stare at foundations where houses used to stand. We admire a harsh, angular, defiant, beautiful piece of sculpture, a monument to the murdered.

Mrs. Quy accompanies us for a while. She's smiling, accommodating. Impossible, but she seems to like us.

At one point, while I'm scribbling in my notebook, she pulls down her trousers. She shows Kate the scarred-over bullet hole in her hip.

Kate nods and makes sounds of sympathy. What does one say? Bad day. World of hurt.

Now the rain is back, much harder. I'm drenched, cold and something else. Eddie and I stand at the ditch where maybe 50, maybe 80, maybe 100 innocent human beings perished. I watch Eddie snap his pictures.

Here's the something else: I've got the guilt chills.

Years ago, ignorant of the massacre, I hated this place, and places much like

it. Two miles away, in an almost identical hamlet, Chip was blown into his hedge of bamboo. A mile or so east, Roy Arnold was shot dead, I was slightly wounded. A little farther east, a kid named McElhaney died. Just north of here, on a rocky hillside, another kid, named Slocum, lost his foot to a land mine. It goes on.

I despised everything -- the soil, the tunnels, the paddies, the poverty and myself. Each step was an act of the purest self-hatred and self-betrayal, yet, in truth, because truth matters, my sympathies were rarely with the Vietnamese. I was mostly terrified. I was lamenting in advance my own pitiful demise. After fire fights, after friends died, there was also a great deal of anger -- black, fierce, hurting anger -- the kind you want to take out on whatever presents itself. This is not to justify what occurred here. Justifications are empty and outrageous. Rather, it's to say that I more or less understand what happened on that day in March 1968, how it happened, the wickedness that soaks into your blood and heats up and starts to sizzle. I know the boil that precedes butchery. At the same time, however, the men in Alpha Company did not commit murder. We did not turn our machine guns on civilians; we did not cross that conspicuous line between rage and homicide. I know what occurred here, yes, but I also feel betrayed by a nation that so widely shrugs off barbarity, by a military judicial system that treats murderers and common soldiers as one and the same. Apparently we're all innocent -- those who exercise moral restraint and those who do not, officers who control their troops and officers who do not. In a way, America has declared itself innocent.

I look away for a time, and then look back.

By most standards, this is not much of a ditch. A few feet deep, a few feet wide. The rain makes the greenish brown water bubble like a thousand tiny mouths.

The guilt has turned to a gray, heavy sadness. I have to take my leave but don't know how.

After a time, Kate walks up, hooks my arm, doesn't say anything, doesn't have to, leads me into a future that I know will hold misery for both of us. Different hemispheres, different scales of atrocity. I don't want it to happen. I want to tell her things and be understood and live happily ever after. I want a miracle. That's the final emotion. The terror at this ditch, the certain doom, the need for God's intervention.

C AMBRIDGE, JUNE 1994 -- I've been trying to perform good deeds. I bought a Father's Day card three days early. I made appointments for a physical exam, dental work, a smoke-ender's program. I go for walks every day. I work out, draw up lists, call friends, visit lawyers, buy furniture, discharge promises, keep my eyes off the sleeping pills. The days are all right.

Now the clock shows 3:55 A.M. I call NERVOUS and listen to an automated female voice confirm it. The nights are not all right.

I write these few words, which seem useless, then get up and pull out an album of photographs from the Vietnam trip. The album was Kate's parting gift. On the cover she inserted a snapshot that's hard to look at but harder still to avoid. We stand on China Beach near Danang. Side by side, happy as happy will ever be, our fingers laced in a fitted, comfortable, half-conscious way that makes me feel a gust of hope. It's a gust, though, here and gone.

Numerous times over the past several days, at least a dozen, this piece has come close to hyperspace. Twice it lay at the bottom of a wastebasket. I've spent my hours preparing a tape of songs for Kate, stuff that once meant things. Corny songs, some of them. Happy songs, love-me songs.

Today, scared stiff, I deposited the tape on her doorstep. Another gust of hope, then a whole lot of stillness.

T HE SONG TRA HOTEL, QUANG NGAI CITY, FEBRUARY 1994 -- Kate's in the shower, I'm in history. I sit with a book propped up against the air-conditioner, underlining sentences, sweating out my own ignorance. Twenty-five years ago, like most other grunts in Alpha Company, I knew next to nothing about this place -- Vietnam in general, Quang Ngai in particular. Now I'm learning. In the years preceding the murders at My Lai, more than 70 percent of the villages in this province had been destroyed by air strikes, artillery fire, Zippo lighters, napalm, white phosphorus, bulldozers, gunships and other such means. Roughly 40 percent of the population had lived in refugee camps, while civilian casualties in the area were approaching 50,000 a year. These numbers, reported by the journalist Jonathan Schell in 1967, were later confirmed as substantially correct by Government investigators. Not that I need confirmation. Back in 1969, the wreckage was all around us, so common it seemed part of the geography, as natural as any mountain or river. Wreckage was the rule. Brutality was S.O.P. Scalded children, pistol-

whipped women, burning hootches, free-fire zones, body counts, indiscriminate bombing and harassment fire, villages in ash, M-60 machine guns hosing down dark green tree lines and any human life behind them.

In a war without aim, you tend not to aim. You close your eyes, close your heart. The consequences become hit or miss in the most literal sense.

With so few military targets, with an enemy that was both of and among the population, Alpha Company began to regard Quang Ngai itself as the true enemy -- the physical place, the soil and paddies. What had started for us as a weird, vicious little war soon evolved into something far beyond vicious, a hopped-up killer strain of nihilism, waste without want, aimlessness of deed mixed with aimlessness of spirit. As Schell wrote after the events at My Lai, "There can be no doubt that such an atrocity was possible only because a number of other methods of killing civilians and destroying their villages had come to be the rule, and not the exception, in our conduct of the war."

I look up from my book briefly, listen to Kate singing in the shower. A doctoral candidate at Harvard University, smart and sophisticated, but she's also fluent in joy, attuned to the pleasures and beauty of the world. She knows the lyrics to "Hotel California," start to finish, while here at the air-conditioner I can barely pick out the simplest melodies of Vietnam, the most basic chords of history. It's as if I never heard the song, as if I'd gone to war in some mall or supermarket. I discover that Quang Ngai Province was home to one of Vietnam's fiercest, most recalcitrant, most zealous revolutionary movements. Independent by tradition, hardened by poverty and rural isolation, the people of Quang Ngai were openly resistant to French colonialism as far back as the 19th century and were among the first to rebel against France in the 1930's. The province remained wholly under Vietminh control throughout the war against France; it remained under Vietcong control, at least by night, throughout the years of war against America. Even now, in the urbane circles of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, the people of Quang Ngai are regarded as a clan of stubborn country bumpkins, coarse and insular, willfully independent, sometimes defiant of the very Government they had struggled to install.

"Like a different country," our interpreter told us after a long, frustrating session with representatives of the Quang Ngai People's Committee. "These people I don't like much, very crude, very difficult. I think you had horrible bad luck to fight them."

At noon, by appointment, a Vietnamese journalist named Pham Van Duong knocks on our door. It's a secret meeting of sorts. Nothing illegal -- a couple of writers, a couple of beers -- but I've still got the buzz of some low-level paranoia. Earlier in the day, our joint request for this interview had been denied by a stern, rather enigmatic functionary of the People's Committee. Impossible, we were told. Not on the schedule. The official offered little sympathy for our interpreter's reminder that schedules are man-made, that blocks of time appeared wide open. Logic went nowhere. Bureaucratic scowls, stare-into-space silence. A few minutes later, just outside the provincial offices, we quietly huddled to make our own unsanctioned arrangements.

Now, as Mr. Duong sits down and accepts a beer, I'm feeling the vigilant, slightly illicit anxiety of a midday drug buy. Kate locks the door; I close the drapes. Ridiculous, or almost ridiculous, but for the first 10 minutes I sit picturing prison food, listening for footsteps in the hallway. Our interpreter explains to Mr. Duong that I will happily guard his identity in any written account of this conversation.

Mr. Duong snorts at the suggestion. "Only a problem in Quang Ngai," he says. "Officials in Hanoi would be glad for our talking. They wish good relations with America -- good, new things to happen. Maybe I get a medal. Sell the medal, buy Marlboros."

We click beer bottles. For the next two hours we chat about books, careers, memories of war. I ask about My Lai. Mr. Duong looks at the wall. There is a short hesitation -- the hesitation of tact, I suppose. He was 8 years old when news of the massacre reached his village nearby. He recalls great anger among his relatives and friends, disgust and sadness, but no feelings of shock or surprise. "This kind of news came often," he says. "We did not then know the scale of the massacre, just that Americans had been killing people. But killing was everywhere."

Two years later, Mr. Duong's brother joined the 48th Vietcong Battalion. He was killed in 1972.

"My mother fainted when she heard this. She was told that his body had been buried in a mass grave with seven comrades who died in the same attack. This made it much worse for my mother -- no good burial. After liberation in 1975, she began to look for my brother's remains. She found the mass grave 20 kilometers south of Quang Ngai City. She wished to dig, to rebury my brother, but people told her no, don't dig, and in the beginning

she seemed to accept this. Then the Americans returned to search for their own missing, and my mother became very angry. Why them? Not me? So she insisted we dig. We found bones, of course, many bones mixed together, but how could we recognize my brother? How could anyone know? But we took away some bones in a box. Reburied them near our house. Every day now, my mother passes by this grave. She feels better, I think. Better at least to tell herself maybe."

Kate looks up at me. She's silent, but she knows what I'm thinking. At this instant, a few blocks away, an American M.I.A. search team is headquartered at the Quang Ngai Government guesthouse. With Vietnamese assistance, this team and others like it are engaged in precisely the work of Mr. Duong's mother, digging holes, picking through bones, seeking the couple thousand Americans still listed as missing.

Which is splendid.

And which is also utterly one-sided. A perverse and outrageous double standard.

What if things were reversed? What if the Vietnamese were to ask us, or to require us, to locate and identify each of their own M.I.A.'s? Numbers alone make it impossible: 100,000 is a conservative estimate. Maybe double that. Maybe triple. From my own sliver of experience -- one year at war, one set of eyes -- I can testify to the lasting anonymity of a great many Vietnamese dead. I watched napalm turn villages into ovens. I watched burials by bulldozer. I watched bodies being flung into trucks, dumped into wells, used for target practice, stacked up and burned like cordwood.

Even in the abstract, I get angry at the stunning, almost cartoonish narcissism of American policy on this issue. I get angrier yet at the narcissism of an American public that embraces and breathes life into the policy -- so arrogant, so ignorant, so self-righteous, so wanting in the most fundamental qualities of sympathy and fairness and mutuality. Some of this I express aloud to Mr. Duong, who nods without comment. We finish off our beers. Neither of us can find much to say. Maybe we're both back in history, snagged in brothers and bones. I feel hollow. So little has changed, it seems, and so much will always be missing.

C AMBRIDGE, JUNE 1994 -- June 11, I think -- I'm too tired to find a calendar. Almost 5 A.M. In another hour it'll be 5:01. I'm on war time, which is the time we're all on at one point or another: when

fathers die, when husbands ask for divorce, when women you love are fast asleep beside men you wish were you.

The tape of songs did nothing. Everything will always do nothing.

Kate hurts, too, I'm sure, and did not want it this way. I didn't want it either. Even so, both of us have to live in these slow-motion droplets of now, doing what we do, choosing what we choose, and in different ways both of us are now responsible for the casualty rotting in the space between us.

If there's a lesson in this, which there is not, it's very simple. You don't have to be in Nam to be in Nam.

THE BATANGAN PENINSULA, QUANG NGAI PROVINCE, FEBRUARY 1994 -- The Graveyard, we called it. Littered with land mines, almost completely defoliated, this spit of land jutting eastward into the South China Sea was a place Alpha Company feared the way others might fear snakes, or the dark, or the bogymen. We lost at least three men here; I couldn't begin to count the arms and legs.

Today our little caravan is accompanied by Mr. Ngu Duc Tan, who knows this place intimately, a former captain in the 48th Vietcong Battalion. It was the 48th that Alpha Company chased from village to village, paddy to paddy, during my entire tour in Vietnam. Chased but never found. They found us: ambushes, sniper fire, nighttime mortar attacks. Through our interpreter, who passes along commodious paragraphs in crisp little packets, Mr. Tan speaks genially of military tactics while we make the bumpy ride out toward the Batangan. "U.S. troops not hard to see, not hard to fight," he says. "Much noise, much equipment. Big columns. Nice green uniforms." Sitting ducks, in other words, though Mr. Tan is too polite to express it this way. He explains that the United States Army was never a primary target. "We went after Saigon puppet troops, what you called ARVN. If we beat them, everything collapse, the U.S. would have nothing more to fight for. You brought many soldiers, helicopters, bombs, but we chose not to fight you, except sometimes. America was not the main objective."

God help us, I'm thinking, if we had been. All those casualties. All that blood and terror. Even at this moment, more than half a lifetime later, I remember the feel of a bull's-eye pinned to my shirt, a prickly, when-will-it-happen sensation, as if I alone had been the main objective.

Meanwhile, Kate is taking her own notes, now and then asking questions

through the interpreter. She's better than I am at human dynamics, more fluid and spontaneous, and after a time she gets Mr. Tan to display a few war scars -- arms, legs, hands, cheek, chest, skull. Sixteen wounds altogether. The American war, he says, was just one phase in his career as a soldier, which began in 1961 and encompassed combat against the South Vietnamese, Khmer Rouge and Chinese.

Talk about bad dreams. One year gave me more than enough to fill up the nights.

My goal on the Batangan peninsula is to show Kate one of the prettiest spots on earth. I'm looking for a lagoon, a little fishing village, an impossibly white beach along the South China Sea.

First, though, Mr. Tan attends to his own agenda. We park the van in one of the inland hamlets, walk without invitation into a small house, sit down for lunch with a man named Vo Van Ba. Instantly, I'm thinking herring. Kate and Eddie have the sense to decline, to tap their stomachs and say things like "Full, full, thanks, thanks." Cans are opened. The house fills up with children, nephews, nieces, babies, cousins, neighbors. There are flies, too. Many, many flies. Many thousand.

Mr. Tan and Mr. Ba eat lunch with their fingers, fast and hungry, chatting amiably while our interpreter does her best to put the gist of it into English. I'm listening hard, chewing hard. I gather that these two men had been comrades of a sort during the war. Mr. Ba, our host, was never a full-time soldier, never even a part-time irregular. As I understand it, he belonged to what we used to call the VC infrastructure, offering support and intelligence to Mr. Tan and his fighting troops.

I lean forward, nod my head. The focus, however, is on the substance I'm swallowing, its remarkable texture, the flies trying to get at it. For five years, Mr. Ba explains, he lived entirely underground with a family of eight. Five years, he repeats. Cooking, bathing, working, sleeping. He waits for the translation, waits a bit longer, then looks at me with a pair of silvery, burned-out, cauterized, half-blind, underground eyes. "You had the daylight, but I had the earth." Mr. Ba turns to Mr. Tan. After a second he chuckles. "Many times I might reach up and take this man's leg. Many times. Very easy. I might just pull him down to where the war was."

W

e're on foot now. Even at 59, Mr. Tan moves swiftly, with the grace and authority of a man who once led soldiers in combat. He

does not say much. He leads us toward the ocean, toward the quaint fishing village I'm hoping to show Kate, but along the way there is one last item Mr. Tan wishes to show me. We move down a trail through two or three adjacent hamlets, seem to circle back for a time, end up in front of another tiny house.

Mr. Tan's voice goes into command tone -- two or three sharp, snapping words. A pair of boys dart into the house. No wasted time, they come out fast, carrying what's left of a man named Nguyen Van Ngu. They balance this wreckage on a low chair. Both legs are gone at the upper-upper thigh. We shake hands. Neither of us knows what to say -- there is nothing worth saying -- so for a few minutes we exchange stupidities in our different languages, no translator available to wash away the helplessness. We pose for photographs. We try for smiles.

Mr. Tan does not smile. He nods to himself -- maybe to me. But I get the point anyway. Here is your paradise. Here is your pretty little fishing village by the sea.

Two minutes later, we're on the beach. It is beautiful, even stunning. Kate wades out into the water. She's surrounded by kids. They giggle and splash her, she splashes back, and I stand there like an idiot, grinning, admiring the view, while Mr. Tan waits patiently in the shade.

C AMBRIDGE, JULY 1994 -- Outside, it's the Fourth of July. Lovely day, empty streets. Kate is where Kate is, which is elsewhere, and I am where I am, which is also elsewhere. Someday, no doubt, I'll wish happiness for myself, but for now it's still war time, minute to minute. Not quite 11 A.M. Already I've been out for two walks, done the laundry, written a few words, bought groceries, lifted weights, watched the Fourth of July sunlight slide across my street-side balcony.

And Kate?

The beach, maybe? A backyard cookout?

The hardest part, by far, is to make the bad pictures go away. On war time, the world is one long horror movie, image after image, and if it's anything like Vietnam, I'm in for a lifetime of wee-hour creeps.

Meanwhile, I try to plug up the leaks and carry through on some personal resolutions. For too many years I've lived in paralysis -- guilt, depression,

terror, shame -- and now it's either move or die. Over the past weeks, at profound cost, I've taken actions with my life that are far too painful for any public record. But at least the limbo has ended. Starting can start.

There's a point here: Vietnam, Cambridge, Paris, Neptune -- these are states of mind. Minds change.

MY KHE, QUANG NGAI PROVINCE, FEBRUARY 1994 -- There is one piece of ground I wish to revisit above all others in this country. I've come prepared with a compass, a military map, grid coordinates, a stack of after-action reports recovered from a dusty box in the National Archives.

We're back near Pinkville, a mile or so east of My Lai. We are utterly lost: the interpreter, the van driver, the People's Committee representative, Eddie, Kate, me. I unfold the map and place a finger on the spot I'm hoping to find. A group of villagers puzzle over it. They chatter among themselves -- arguing, it seems -- then one of them points west, another north, most at the heavens.

Lost, that was the Vietnam of 25 years ago. The war came at us as a blur, raw confusion, and my fear now is that I would not recognize the right spot even while standing on it.

For well over an hour we drive from place to place. We end up precisely where we started. Once more, everyone spills out of the van. The thought occurs to me that this opportunity may never come again. I find my compass, place it on the map and look up for a geographical landmark. A low green hill rises to the west -- not much, just a hump on the horizon.

I'm no trailblazer, but this works. One eye on the compass, one eye on some inner rosary, I lead our exhausted column 200 yards eastward, past a graveyard and out along a narrow paddy dike, where suddenly the world shapes itself exactly as it was shaped a quarter-century ago -- the curvatures, the tree lines, the precise angles and proportions. I stop there and wait for Kate. This I dreamed of giving her. This I dreamed of sharing.

Our fingers lock, which happens without volition, and we stand looking out on a wide and very lovely field of rice. The sunlight gives it some gold and yellow. There is no wind at all. Before us is how peace would be defined in a dictionary for the speechless. I don't cry. I don't know what to do. At one point I hear myself talking about what happened here so long ago,

motioning out at the rice, describing chaos and horror beyond anything I would experience until a few months later. I tell her how Paige lost his lower leg, how we had to probe for McElhaney in the flooded paddy, how the gunfire went on and on, how in the course of two hell-on-earth hours we took 13 casualties.

I doubt Kate remembers a word. Maybe she shouldn't. But I do hope she remembers the sunlight striking that field of rice. I hope she remembers the feel of our fingers. I hope she remembers how I fell silent after a time, just looking out at the golds and yellows, joining the peace, and how in those fine sunlit moments, which were ours, Vietnam took a little Vietnam out of me.

HO CHI MINH CITY, FEBRUARY 1994 -- We hate this place.

Even the names -- Saigon, Ho Chi Minh City. A massive identity crisis. Too loud, too quiet. Too alive, too dead.

For all the discomforts of Quang Ngai Province, which were considerable, Kate and I had taken pleasure in those qualities of beauty and equanimity that must have vanished from Saigon when the first oil barge steamed into port.

But we give it our best. An hour in the Chinese market district, which is like an hour in combat. Two hours at the old presidential palace -- as tawdry and corrupt as its former inhabitants. We risk periodic excursions into streets where the American dollar remains more valuable than oxygen, of which there is precious little. Maybe we've hit some interior wall. Maybe it's the diesel-heat. We visit a war-crimes museum, the old American Embassy and order lunch by way of room service. Western pop music blares at full volume from Government loudspeakers just outside our hotel. For hours, even with earplugs, we listen to "As Tears Go By" and "My Way." What happened to Ho Chi Minh? What happened to revolution? All we've heard comes from the Beatles.

In midafternoon, the music ceases. We go out for a short walk, do some shopping, then retreat to the rooftop swimming pool of the Rex Hotel. It could as well be Las Vegas. We don't say so, not directly, but both Kate and I are ready to evacuate, we're humming "We gotta get out of this place." Pretty soon we'll be singing it over loudspeakers.

For now, Kate lounges at the pool. She writes postcards. She catches me watching. She snaps pictures to show her children someday.

Tim O'Brien is the author of several novels, some of them based on his experiences in the Vietnam War. His latest book, "In the Lake of the Woods," is due out this month.

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