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If Veterans don't help Veterans, who will?

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Night Journey

The staccato thunder of an approaching
helicopter's double-bladed rotor
as it beats against the heavy air
of a sultry summer evening in suburbia,
something that is felt as much as heard,
followed closely by the once-familiar snarl
of a tail rotor passing directly overhead
spirits me away to another time and place
so many years and miles removed from this one,
reminding me that we were soldiers once,
and young, and full of youthful piss and vinegar,
and like every generation gone to war before us
innocents, ignorant of blood and bullets, death and dying,
at least when first we started down that path;
And like those of our predecessors,
our minds were full of images
of the grandeur and the glory
of the noble task we'd set before ourselves
to do our nation's bidding.
And so our generation also came of age a bit too soon,
and lost its innocence somewhere in the fog of war,
its youth abbreviated of necessity
as we sweated through the jungles, skies and paddies
somewhere in Southeast Asia.

The commanders who held our fates in calloused hands
seemed to us such old men back then,
and though our memories make it seem just yesterday,
the offspring of some of us who made it home alive
hold similar ranks and roles
in the armed forces of the present,
and are yet another generation's "old men" at the helm,
though they seem such youngsters to us now.
And by the passing of the years since our time of trial,
we now can scarcely recognize ourselves
in our own old photos from those times,
and find it near impossible
we could have ever been that young.

And while the intervening years
seem to have flown so swiftly past
the realization has slowly dawned
that for every one of us who fell in battle,
cut down in the very flower of his youth,
still others lost their lives to war,
yet never knew it 'til a generation later:
those who beat the bullets and the booby traps
only to come home as "dead men walking,"
victims eventually to every kind of cancer
and disease the mind can conjure;

they and so many others of our comrades
who made it home alive
have already now been taken
by this host of silent killers,
while the rest of us are fast approaching
the limits of the pathways paved
by what's coded in our genes;
the dying part has always been what's easy,
but for the experience of a bit of pain;
what's hardest now,
as it was back then,
is to watch your brothers die around you.

But death deferred is death regardless,
and what we once escaped by skill or luck
awaits us still, though we know not where or when;
every day our numbers dwindle by another few;
and those of us still breathing are wont to wonder
if we've well-used the extra time thus granted,
and who among our shrinking cohort
will own the claim to "last man standing"?

It seems our honored dead are with us always,
and in the gathering darkness
I can see the faces of my fallen friends
and hear the echoes of their voices
now, as then, forever young;
I think my own face could have,
maybe should have – been among them,
as I should have twice been dead
But for a little extra luck or else
my guardian angel's intervention;

Then with the fading of the rotor's beat
into the deepening darkness,
the gentle summer sounds and scents
return me slowly to the here and now;
and the chorus of the tree frogs and the crickets
seems to softly whisper "Welcome home."

L.D. Smith
Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron-161
RVN '69-'70

~Gerald Ney~