



April 30, 2002

Dear Terry,

It feels strange to be writing to you after all this time--34 years last February! The memory of the war, especially February and March of 1968, seems vivid, but after all these years I'm not really sure where to draw the line between reality and modified/blocked reality.

Who knows how I ended up in Danang February 22, 1968? I vaguely recall starting out early from Phu Bai with really crummy weather, running airstrikes (probably in the Ashau valley), and then must have diverted, because of the weather, to Marble Mountain airfield in Danang. I got the word that you were down—inside the walls of the Citadel—after running fixed wing all morning. You must have done a hell of a job putting the bird down inside the walls if your observer got out! You were burned beyond recognition. To this day I'm still trying to figure out what an FNG ([*expletive deleted*] new guy) FAC (Forward Air Controller) was doing in that battle in that weather; in hindsight, it seems incredibly stupid, regardless of who your backseat was! You couldn't have had more than 240 hours total flight time at that point...I've read several accounts of the "Battle of Hue"—you're always mentioned, but as the "Marine Bird Dog"!

It gets blurry here, but I got the word you were down when I landed. A few minutes later, the confirmation came in—you were dead. My first reaction was disbelief; remember Tet had just started a few days before and we hadn't lost any sticks yet; you were the first. In my shock, I grabbed a bottle of Chivas and walked across the runway to the beach. God, I was in a rage! I don't know how I got back across the runway to the hootch that night...The next day was strange; I wanted revenge in Hue hoping to kill the guy who got you. Who knows, maybe at some point I

did. I flew back to Phu Bai where the CO grounded me because of my FNG status and the weather.

That afternoon the CO called me in and handed me orders to escort your body back to Ohio. I told him to fuck himself, that I wasn't going to do it, and stormed out of his office. An hour later he tracked me down and pointed out that Connie and your Mother had requested me to bring you home and that you would have wanted me to do it. At that moment I would have gladly switched places with you. I flew down from Phu Bai to Saigon in a C-130 where I reported to the unit responsible for the dead—graves registration unit (?) there in the cargo area. They took me into a huge tent where hundreds of body bags were laid out on pallets for shipment to the US. They were arranged alphabetically so you weren't hard to locate. My orders said I was to escort you home so I sat next to you for several hours, keeping you dry, until the C-141 Starlifter arrived and they unloaded all of its cargo.

Then they began loading you and all the others into the bird with a forklift. The lack of reverence and callousness was to be expected, I guess, but I had to bite my lip. I can still smell the burning shit, the dreary cold weather, the smell of the rain all over the plastic body bags.

The Major in charge walked up to me and said "sign this". It was a bill of lading for 380 body bags to be transported to Delaware! I was in a daze, numbed by the last couple hours sitting there next to you. You were loaded in the first pallet so I could see you from the aft facing webbed seat which was attached to the forward bulkhead. Finally, about 2200 we taxied out and took off for Anchorage, AL. The crew had introduced themselves and then retired to the cockpit area for the duration (probably to get away from me!); they were a bunch of reservists who made the trip once a month (and got their combat pay!). By then, I had developed the "look" in my eyes, I'm sure. That's the look of someone who's been there--I can spot it even today if the subject of Vietnam

comes up. The look, in those days, absolutely guaranteed one without it would not have a pleasant encounter of any sort, with one with it and two with it would have a brief encounter...

I sat next to you the whole trip and was in shock—at the horror of it all; not just your death but all the young lives lying in front of me—the enormity of it was overwhelming. I remember waking up as we touched down in Alaska. It was bitterly cold—remember, I still had on only my jungle fatigues! After a quick breakfast (?) and refueling, we took off for Dover AFB. I was beyond numb with the pain of grief and exhaustion at this point. We landed at about 0300 in Dover, again, cold and dark, nothing to eat but from the machines. I was told to attend a briefing at 0700, got somebody to sign for the “cargo”. Sorry, no BOQ available, but they’d let me use the pilots’ shower in the lounge...I scarred the Hell out of my Father when I called so early. At the briefing conducted by a Chaplain, I received the first sensitive words I’d heard since you died. He explained what I was up against, what to expect, what was expected of me, gave me the military contacts, etc. and then sent me to the tailor who outfitted me with two sets of dress greens, complete with awards and decorations. The tailor was also the guy who would be doing you and our friends from the Starlifter. The Chaplain’s assistant had airline tickets from Philadelphia for you and me for two days later.

I rented a car and drove down to DC to spend the night with my folks. It was like I was transported overnight into a different world! Here I was driving down I-95 on a beautiful day—remember now, 7 hours before I was in the back of the Starlifter and two days before that I was in ‘Nam running airstrikes and getting shot at. It was a big mistake to stop by my folks’ place—I remember everyone being uncomfortable with me and me being uncomfortable with everyone—I was out of my element, to say the least. Believing that this was the last time I would ever see them,

the realization hit me that I was going to put them all through hell when I was killed, too.

The pro's at Dover AFB did a great job outfitting me in dress greens with all the trimmings. I didn't have the balls to call Connie and your Mom; the military folks at Dover were keeping the funeral home apprised of our progress toward Dayton. I was hoping that at any minute I would wake up from this nightmare; the thought of facing Connie was unbearable—as though I somehow felt responsible for your death. We loaded you up in a proper casket and I stayed with you on the tarmac, white gloves and all, until they loaded you into the cargo hold of each aircraft as we made our way to your Ohio. As the hearse pulled in to the funeral home, Connie, her folks and your folks were all there to receive you. Of course, you know how gracious they are and there were hugs and tears everywhere. I remember, very few words were said there at the home. Connie's Dad (didn't realize until then that he was a retired SMAJ!) was a strong pillar—the job I was supposed to perform. When the funeral home needed a positive ID of your body, he was the one who gently told me that he would take care of it (because I couldn't!). He was a great help to me with the rest of the family. That afternoon, we all went over to your Dad's house where just your Dad, Mom, and I sat down in the den. Max wanted to know exactly what happened and your Mom just wanted to know if you suffered. I told her that you died instantly, but the truth is that you probably burned to a horrible death. Later, I went on a long walk with Connie—God, that was sad; she felt her life was over before it even started. Later, after the funeral, she seemed to come around, but no thanks to me; probably the Sergeant Major told her to toughen up! Your Brother and Sister were around, of course, but too young to really grasp the enormity of your death and its effect on your parents.

That night at the wake, many of your friends from high school came up and introduced themselves—they seemed 10 years

younger than you were! I stayed next to Connie to try and shore her up that evening and the next day at the funeral and reception.

I had been doing a fairly good job at keeping a stiff upper lip throughout—until my formal cemetery presentation of the American flag to Connie (“Connie, on behalf of a grateful nation...”). I’m haunted to this day by the look in her eyes as she looked up at me reaching down to present the folded flag to her —“why, Bob, why?” they said. Of course at that point a flood of tears poured from my eyes and hers and several hundred others as “Taps” sounded.

Imagine my shock, never having attended a Catholic wake, at all the frivolity and booze that awaited us in the basement of the church! I was OK after your Mom explained it to me—what a great woman she was! We kept in contact via long Christmas cards until her death, but I always felt she saw her beloved boy Terry and what he would have been, had he lived, in me. Connie and I stayed up most of that night talking, mostly about what she would do next. That was the last I saw her though your Mom said she remarried several years later. She got her guts from her Dad, me thinks! I left the same day after many tearful hugs with your folks and Connie’s.

Of course I was in great shape to see my girlfriend, Jenny after putting you to rest. Remember the picture of her in the leather dress in my hootch? We went to her parent’s home for a weekend that was, as in DC, as uncomfortable to her as it was to me. It was tremendous therapy for me though I’m sure she never knew it—she was normalcy, she was tenderness, she was a damn good reason to live through this all! In hindsight, she was what I was fighting for and what gave me perspective.

It must have been 1982 when I received a call from your Mom that they were coming to DC to visit. Dean and I had them out to our house for dinner and the next day we went to the wall, where I had

been coming at all hours to visit you, on an almost regular basis, since I moved there. I'll never forget them crying and hugging each other and then spontaneously opening up their arms to include me in their grieving hug. It's like it was yesterday! I drove them to National airport and put them on the plane back to Ohio—they had both aged 40 years in 14! Your Dad passed away shortly thereafter and your Mom stayed active until she died—your Sister sent my Christmas card back with a note; I responded but she apparently wanted to not dwell on the pain your Mother suffered which she had probably grown up with.

Well, my friend, it's been good to write to you. Your death affected me like no other—you were special to me--obviously you still are...God, you were so young...I love you, Man.