Holding My Hand

A Tribute to the Medics, Nurses and Doctors that served in Vietnam

March 26, 1968, while on patrol during the TET offensive, I was wounded by a booby trap that was command detonated by the VC in the Mekong Delta. Shrapnel blew my M-16 into three pieces and entered my right shoulder and left thigh. I looked over my shoulder and saw the explosion with black dirt filling the blue sky. I immediately, unknowingly, went into shock as I bent over and picked up the center section of my M-16 and wondered what had just happen. It was as if I was in slow motion. Next, I heard the voice of a fellow soldier yell for a medic. I asked him why he did that. He looked at me and said "Don't you know man, you have been wounded." I then realized that the sweat running down my back was my own blood. I yelled for a medic and began to have difficulty breathing, as my right lung collapsed due to my wounds. I struggled to breath to stay alive. I passed out, as the world around me faded from my view. I woke up in a medical tent with medics and doctors working on me. I could hear them more than see them, in my semi conscience state. I heard the doctor yell for the radio operator to call in a dust off for me. I heard the radio operator yell back to the doctor the ETA of the helicopter. The doctor yelled back that, that was too long of a time and I wouldn't make it. The doctor ordered a jeep to take me to a designated spot, down a dirt road, to meet the helicopter to save time. I passed out but woke up as I arrived to meet the dust off. A medic immediately came to my side and held my hand to reassure me I would be ok and said to hang in there. I was loaded onto the helicopter in my stretcher and I passed out. When I arrived at the 1st field hospital in Saigon, nurses immediately began to cut off my blood soaked combat fatigues and clean me up for surgery. There was no time for talking or holding hands as the nurses were fully engaged in prepping me for surgery. The next thing I remember was laying on a hospital gurney, in the hall, with two doctors looking at my X-rays. They talked about who was going to perform the surgery. They decided to flip a coin. The one that lost, performed the surgery. Their humor relaxed me and helped me to feel I would be ok. I was wheeled into the operating room. A nurse came to my side and held my right hand as the doctor explained what he was about to do. He apologized that for the first part of the surgery he would have to insert a chest tube through my right side, but that he had to do it without any anesthetics. He said he needed me awake in case they made a mistake pushing the tube through my rib cage. Another nurse placed a cloth over my eyes as the doctor said its better that you not see what is going on. He said he would put me under as soon as the tube was in place. I felt the nurse's hand, who was holding my right hand, hold it a little tighter as the doctor made an incision on the right side of my chest. It hurt like a bee sting but not as bad as I thought. Then I felt the nurse squeeze my hand a little harder as the chest tube was inserted into my side. I could feel the tube being moved around by the doctor as he inserted it between my ribs. I groaned in pain but tried my best not to cry, but I failed as a tear or two ran down my face. The doctor told me that the tough part was over and they were going to put me under.

I woke up in the recovery room. I was surrounded by about 50 other soldiers laying in hospital beds. Nurses were attending to all of the soldiers in one way or another. The nurses were so busy coming and going. I noticed that I had a chest tube sticking out of my right side. I had not seen it before and noticed how my blood was draining from my body down the tube into some container. I could feel the tube sticking through my ribs. I felt lucky to be a live and noticed I could breath again without much effort. I looked at each of the soldiers, as nurses were tending to them. I felt lucky, as most of these soldiers seemed to be in worst shape then me. Some had large holes in their body that were filled with gauze. As the nurses came to change the gauze, the soldier would cry out in pain. Some would scream out in pain. I saw one soldier's leg being lifted up by a nurse and as she removed the gauze I saw a hole, about 6 inches in diameter, right through his leg. He screamed in pain as the nurse cared for him. I had a hard time dealing with all of the screams of pain and so many soldiers wounded.

I had seen wounds like this before but the wounds were in dead bodies. They felt no pain. I wanted to get out of this room and away from all that I had seen. The nurses had to endure this, and more day after day. I did not know how they could do it.

The doctor that performed my surgery came to visit me. He told me how he took the shrapnel out of my left thigh and right shoulder. He told me he had left some shrapnel in because of it's location to major arteries. He said that he started taking shrapnel out of my right shoulder following the entrance of the wound. He said he followed the path of all of the shrapnel and almost came out of my front right chest. He said that if he had to do it again it might be better to have started by going through my chest first. I thanked him for what he had done as he smiled and walked away, turning my care over to the nurses. Now it was my turn for the gauze to be changed. I could feel the hole in my left thigh as the gauze was removed and the dressing was changed. I could handle the pain until the nurse lifted my back so I could sit up and so she could change the dressing on my right shoulder. She was being as gentle as she could be with every move that she made. I could feel, what felt like, all of the insides of my right shoulder collapse inside of me. I noticed I could not breath as well as I thought and I struggled to breath in pain. The dressing was changed and I was laid back down again and I did not want to move at all. This happened day after day. It was an event I never looked forward to but it had to be done. Then a nurse or therapist came to my bedside with a device I needed to blow into to strengthen my lung capacity. It was a painful therapy that happened each day. As time went on my lungs improved and the chest tube was to be removed. The doctor came to see me and explained that he would grab the tube with one hand and put his other hand on my chest and pull the tube out. He told me it would hurt a bit, but it hurt a lot more as I felt the tube wind it's way around my rib bones and out of my body.

After ten days I was released from the hospital and reassigned to the Cam Rhan Bay rehabilitation hospital in Vietnam. I was seen by a nurse and a doctor almost daily, for about 20 days. The rehabilitation therapy was painful but each session started by a nurse holding my hand and helping me each step of the way. On one special occasion a nurse asked me if I had written my parents or girlfriend to tell them that I was wounded and alright. I said "no." I said "I did not want to worry them about me." She said " Are you able to write with your right hand". I said "I didn't know, I had not tried." She told me to sit down and she would help me write the letter. As we wrote the letter, she told me that my parents found out I was wounded. A newspaper article was written back home about me receiving a Purple Heart and being wounded in Vietnam. She wanted me to know that she was not happy with my decision, to not write a letter to my loved ones. I told her that I had seen hundreds of dead VC bodies and a number of American soldiers in my base camp that were killed, and this was no big deal because I was alive. She ordered me to keep writing. I did. I was glad I listened to her and so were my parents and girlfriend. After another 15 days, I was released from rehabilitation and returned home to Milwaukee Wisconsin, filled with memories I will never forget.

After all that I have seen and experienced, how does anyone thank a medic, a nurse or doctor for their service in Vietnam?
I guess for me, I can't, I can only try.

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