

# The Vietnam War: A Dream Amidst the Nightmare

By

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Preview

Truth is stranger than fiction. This proverbial saying is attributed to Lord Byron from when he wrote the satirical poem "Don Juan," in 1823.

"Tis strange - but true;

for truth is always strange;

Stranger than fiction;

if it could be told,

How much would novels gain by the exchange!"

Recently, this thought has been paraphrased with, "You can't make this stuff up!" As a truth-seeker and former journalist, I have always preferred non-fiction over fiction because I felt that one can better find oneself in reality, rather than fantasy. "Knowledge is power" has always been my motto, and being informed leads to enlightenment. Over the years I have learned that there is, however, a place for fantasy. Sometimes, reality can be too much to bear and one needs a diversion from it. And sometimes we need a dream to get us through the night. Now, with the coming of age of creative non-fiction, I am excited to be able to present how it was for one 19-year-old soldier in the Vietnam War, in story format to entertain as well as inform the reader. Now, almost 60 years later, I have spent many hours speaking with Bryant Green and taking notes about his experiences in Vietnam, and he agrees that I have been able to replicate his heart in my choice of using the first-person narrative to tell his story. Everything presented actually happened as he explained it. Some of the dialogue is paraphrased, but the meaning and intention of the dialogue is consistent with the original. In this book, *The Vietnam War: A Dream Amidst the Nightmare*, we visit Vietnam, see it from the eyes of a 19-year-old boy-turned-soldier, a gentle, fun-loving soul thrust into an unfamiliar and dangerous world. This book focuses on one man's story of love found amidst terrible hatred, of laughter amidst the backdrop of war, of courage discovered, and the numbing of mind and soul. It was a whirlwind of the unbelievable and the unthinkable; it was a nightmare which held a dream.

The purpose of this memoir is to tell another side of the tragic story of Vietnam. Through Bryant's eyes, we see the beautiful landscape of the country, and we experience

the inviting beach, refreshing water, gorgeous sunsets. We step back in history and meet the natives; dine with them according to the customs of the day. We see the terrible poverty and abuse that some of them endure, in sharp contrast with some of the experiences of the privileged wealthy. We meet the woman Bryant falls in love with and marries, who was born of a Vietnamese mother and French father. We experience their courtship in the midst of war. He introduces us to some good American soldiers and some very bad American soldiers and the heinous tactics of the enemy. We can also find humor in some of his experiences. I have researched the Vietnam War and the climate and customs of Vietnam in the late sixties. I have viewed several movies filmed in Vietnam by Vietnamese artists. This has enabled me to get a better view of what the geography of the country looks like. It has also enabled me to better understand the culture and thought processes of the people. I have discovered a people who think, I believe, in a more deliberate fashion than Americans. Perhaps linear might be a more accurate word. Because of the influence of Confucianism, they have a history of a very rigid society with a caste system, which existed during the war. Often, their view of life proceeded from that rigidity. Tradition ruled, as did the subjugation of those considered to be lesser to those who were considered to be greater. When this rigidity is used as a protection from harm, it can be a good thing, but often it is used as a vehicle to perpetuate self above others which results in the elimination of love and compassion and that, of course, presents a problem. It is amazing to see how this American soldier and a privileged Vietnamese French woman named Snow, get past their cultural differences, and the differences in their very thought processes, to find love and marriage; only to experience tragedy resulting from the politics of the day, derived from that culture. This book seeks to represent and view the facts of the Vietnam War, the culture of the people, the beauty of the country and how a devoted young Baptist boy comes to grips with what he believes to be his responsibility in the 1960s. Since I was a teen growing up during those years, I have experienced the reality of how the war divided our nation. I witnessed the high cost of young lives lost or forever maimed or scarred as a result of our involvement.

Writing this story has been an opportunity for personal growth for me. It has been an adventure to get inside another person's head and temporarily meld with his

thoughts and feelings to present his story. It has also been an adventure to write from a standpoint of creative non-fiction, rather than the journalistic style which I have used for over forty years. The process actually began with my reading many books of and about creative non-fiction, so that my writing could evolve to this genre. My coursework at National University's online program for my MFA in Creative writing presented many opportunities to learn the new style of writing; and reading examples of other creative non-fiction writers in our texts proved to be very helpful. I learned by "osmosis" from writers like Stephen King, Michael Paterniti, David Sedaris and Mary Carr. Also, because of my subject matter of the Vietnam War, I read several of Tim O'Brien's books and some of the academic reviews written about them. At first, I was disappointed to learn that the experiences that O'Brien portrays in his books are not necessarily true experiences. He takes the essence of an event and fictionalizes it by using fictitious characters and dialogue. I thought I would be reading a first-hand, factual account of the war from his perspective; but I learned that I had to dig deeper to find the meaning of what he was attempting to communicate. Some of the events actually happened, but they seemed to be entwined with those that only happened in essence. Yes, *The Things They Carried*, for instance, is a semi-autobiographical book, but it is written as fiction. I believe that what he wrote, and the style in which he chose to write it, was therapeutic for him and informative to the reader. It gave him the opportunity to tell his story and the story of most of the soldiers there, but when it became too difficult for him, he could step back and distance himself by presenting it as having happened to someone else. That said, my goal in my book was to keep the events factual and present them as a memoir and a story, by using dialogue. The dialogue, is in most cases, obviously not directly quoted from the speaker, since no one could remember all that was spoken by many, so long ago; though some of the more dramatic statements, such as the dialogue between Bryant and those other American GI's who were attempting to rape a Vietnamese teenage girl, were directly quoted from Bryant's memory. Bryant's courtship of Snow is where I have chosen to provide the essence of what happened and the likely dialogue between the characters in their particular situations and during different events that occurred. I wanted as much dialogue as possible between the characters to be the vehicle used to tell the story. I also read *The Sympathizer*, by Viet Thanh Nguyen. He uses mostly narrative with very little dialogue between the characters, in his Pulitzer

Prize winning account of his escape from South Vietnam when it fell. In the few instances that he does use dialogue, he does not frame it in quotes. I found that interesting, but not something that I wanted to replicate. I think he did a wonderful job of revealing what it was like for those who were on the side of the South and what they had to endure to save their lives

The subjugation and exploitation of one nation over another may have far-reaching and disastrous consequences, not only for both nations but for the unlikeliest of people; people who were neither the colonials nor the colonized. During the Sixties and early Seventies, the baby boomer generation felt the piercing anguish of the Vietnam War. The pain may fade but it always remains. It is a permanent part of the souls of many. This book focuses one man's story of love found amidst terrible hatred, of laughter amid the backdrop of war, of courage discovered and the numbing of mind and soul. It was a whirlwind of the unbelievable and the unthinkable; it was a nightmare which held a dream.

## Chapter One: Number One Doctor

Bananas and coconuts hung from huge, tall trees tempting the looker, and palm trees tried but failed to keep us cool in the 120-degree temperature. It would have been a tropical paradise, had we not been fighting a war. It was sunny and hot in March of 1968, and I was stationed in Vietnam as part of the engineering squad. There were 200 of us soldiers, with tents pitched in a chalk-white sand, in the middle of nowhere, on the island of Phu Quoc. Our job was to stay alive by dodging rockets and mortar long enough to build bridges and roads. We worked 12 hours a day, 6 days a week, but Sundays, we had off. I and couple of buddies had just come out from a swim and decided that we would do some target practice.

"Hey, how about we shoot those bananas down from the trees. They look pretty good," I said.

Grove and Mitchell just looked at me. Grove had blond curly hair and blue eyes. He was 5'8, about the same size as me. He was from California and had worked for Disney creating cartoons, before he was drafted. Mitchell, from Michigan, was about an inch taller and had dark hair. He was kind of a pain in the ass. He was always the voice of reason when maybe we just didn't care. He was more scared than the rest of us. Like, we would have to throw a grenade in the water to go swimming. It would clear it of all the poisonous stingrays and sharks and everything else too for that matter. He'd say, "I'm still not going in there, maybe you missed one." I mean, everything in the water within a wide circumference had exploded. BOOM! Villagers, dark, and slight-of-build, scurried to gather up the dead sea life to eat. The one thing Mitchell wasn't afraid of, though, was leaning on us for support. I tried to encourage him. When we heard the rockets coming, we had to take cover. I told him he would be fine; but when he heard their unwelcome whining sound, he would cry. We all knew that if a rocket hit, we would all be dead. The bunkers could protect you from mortar, but not an actual rocket hit. When the loud blast of the explosion filled our ears and heads and we felt the earth tremble, it was somewhat comforting because you knew, as long as you heard it and felt it, they hadn't hit you and you were safe for the moment.

"Come on, come on, I'm hungry," I said.

I was sick of rations and those bananas looked great hanging in huge bunches just beneath the green fringe-type leaves that reminded me of an officer's epaulet, the tassels worn on the shoulder. Without a word, Grove raised his M16 and began firing. Bananas were shot to smithereens and bits and pieces of them rained down on us. We all laughed, and then Mitchell and I began firing. I shot one down, and I ran over to get it. It was intact, and I sat down and began to peel it. Amid the chatter of hundreds of monkeys, Grove and Mitchell congratulated me on my being able to feast on my target. The monkeys were jumping from tree-to-tree and were yelling loudly. We had disturbed their homes and taken their food. They were cute monkeys, small with long tufts of fuzzy hair on the tops of their heads. They had dark round eyes and human-like lips. One daredevil came down from the tree and began jumping around reaching for my banana.

"Hey, Green!" Mitchell yelled. "He wants your banana!"

"Let him get his own banana," I yelled.

I swear, that little bastard understood what I said. The next thing I knew, he jumped on me and took a bite of flesh out of my thumb. I dropped the banana and he pounced on it, scooped it up and jumped onto a tree branch.

"OUUWWW, you little son of a bitch," I yelled as I grabbed my M16 and fired.

As he dropped to the ground, I noticed the crimson stream of my blood pouring from my thumb all over the sand. I instinctively poured my beer over it.

"Hey Green, there's your banana, want it?" Grove chuckled.

Then, after he glanced down and my thumb he added, "Shit, man, you better get to the medic. Your thumb is a bloody mess."

I noticed that many of the Vietnamese came running over to me. One of them picked up the monkey. "You shot monkey, " he said. "That not easy. I cook monkey is best meal. I serve. You guest of honor!"

"Well-uh I don't know..." I said.

"Yes, Yes! GI Joe, I cook monkey for you. You let me and my family have some too? Okay? Okay?"

"Okay," I said as I walked toward the medic's tent leaving a trail of blood behind me.

Not long after the medic had cleaned and bandaged my wound, one of the children came running up to me at camp and told me to come because the monkey was almost done cooking. Down by the beach, I saw the little thumb biter pierced by a rotisserie skewer, being turned slowly above the fire by the anxious chef.

"Come, Come," he said. "Sit down, here, guest of honor," he said.

Grove and Mitchell came and sat down next to me. I knew by the expressions on their faces and their lightly muffled snickers that they really didn't want to eat the monkey, but they were there for the entertainment value. Their snickers became loud guffaws when my chef put a large plate of what looked like mangled worms in front of me.

"Uh, what part of the monkey is this?" I asked.

"Monkey brain! Best part, real delicacy. Guest of honor eat best part."

"Oh! well uh, I couldn't, really."

"Yes, yes, you shot it; you get best part. Cost big money in restaurant."

I stifled a gag reflex as I looked at the mess before me. "I really want to share," I stammered as I began cutting it up in slices.

"Please come and get this and give to the others."

"Ok, ok, but you must eat some and take first bite," was the response.

So, I took a bite. As I recall, the taste was actually sweet but, to me it was indescribably awful. Just the thought of eating the brains of a monkey was so reprehensible to me, that it was enough to make me gag. I nodded, smiled and everyone else began to eat. Grove and Mitchell had the option of declining by saying that they were waiting for the monkey leg.

"Yeah, I'm a leg man," Grove said and then he and Mitchell laughed like hyenas. It was the break I needed. I pretended to cough and into my handkerchief went the mix of monkey brain and saliva. We were soon served the meat of the monkey, which actually tasted good. It was sort of sweet and almost fruity. It seemed like justice to me to be

dining on the creature that had just taken a bite out of me. I felt empowered. I felt pretty good, that is until I woke up the next morning. My thumb was throbbing with severe pain and had swollen to twice its size. The medic said there was nothing that he could do and I was immediately sent back to the base Vung Tau, which was where the US had set up a military hospital.

"It's going to have to come off," the military doctor said, bluntly. "You'll have to go to Japan for the operation. and then, of course, you're out of the military. You can't shoot a rifle with no right thumb when you are right-handed. You'll go stateside and stay in a military hospital until it heals, of course."

"Home!" I thought. "I could actually go home. So many guys here would be more than willing to give up a thumb to be able to go home, but I had my reasons for not wanting to go home, and I really didn't want to lose my thumb."

"Doc, how about if I check it out with a French doctor? Maybe they have something else..."

"Ok, but don't wait too long," he replied.

Since I was now on sick leave, I decided to go up the mountain to see my friend. Jacques was a Frenchman that I had met one day when I was swimming. He was a civil engineer working on some building project and wound up marrying a beautiful Vietnamese girl, whom he called Maria. She was about four foot ten, thin, long black hair, whose eyes looked like a green-eyed cat. She was wearing a gold print satin dress which flowed to her ankles. It had slits on the sides revealing her legs when she walked. Thick gold bracelets clasped her wrists. On her fingers were a huge diamond ring and an even bigger black onyx on the other hand. They were considered to be wealthy and lived in luxury. Keep in mind, the average, middle-class Vietnamese person made \$5 a week, so if you made \$200 a month, you were wealthy. Their home was a French colonial style villa set against a backdrop of a luscious green forest on the side of a mountain. Patches of various yellow and purple flowers were meticulously planted and there was a great view of the city below. When he saw my thumb, Jacques looked like he was going to vomit.

"I'm calling my doctor, now," he declared, and his doctor obliged by coming right over.

"I'm afraid, I have to agree with your military doctor." the doctor stated. "That thumb needs to come off."

Maria, who had been quiet until now spoke up and startled us all, "You go to Vietnamese doctor. He best in land and can cure you."

Jacques looked embarrassed. "Now Maria, he doesn't want to go to a..." He cleared his throat as he thought better of what he was about to say. I could fill in the blanks: "witch doctor."

"Well, that is, there are two doctors already who are in agreement," Jacques protested.

"My doctor best. He cure. This happens all the time, monkey bites." Maria persisted.

"Surely you don't think that your doctor is better than a medical doctor from France or America," the doctor was indignant.

"No, no, but he is more experienced. He lives here," Maria said, not wanting to offend.

"Well, Green, it's your call," Jacques said.

I thought a minute and decided that I had nothing to lose, so we all jumped in the jeep and drove back down the mountain. We drove from the rich, new section of the village, where fancy villas dotted the countryside, to an older, poorer section. Groups of scantily clad people huddled together in small groups in doorways or other areas of the street. Many others were milling about the street. The building where the doctor lived looked dirty. It really wasn't dirty; it just needed a good paint job. His office had wood floors in need of varnish, and many rows of shelves which contained jars of herbs. The jars looked dirty too, but I think it was just the residue of the herbs. It seemed like there were herbs everywhere. Some were chopped, in jars, and some were freshly cut stems lying on a side counter, waiting to be chopped and jarred. I took a deep breath and sat down. The smell of the herbs was pungent and unfamiliar to me. This doctor didn't speak English, so Maria translated. When he looked at my thumb he spoke a universal language, which we all understood.

"Hmmm, um ummmm."

Then he looked up at me and smiled and nodded his head. Maria spoke up.

"Don't worry, he know what to do," she said as he went over to the shelves and got two jars of herbs.

He took out an acupuncture needle which was very thin but about 12 inches long. He hummed a little while he took both herbs and mixed them together and then dipped the needle in the concoction.

"What do you think, Green? Do you want to leave now?" Jacques asked.

"You mean he's gonna put that needle in my thumb," I thought. " Maybe I'm crazy, but I'm gonna give it a try," I said.

Jacque looked pale. I gave the doctor my hand and looked away.

"Oh my god, Green look at that," Jacque said.

"I don't want to look at that," I said, thinking he was about to start inserting the needle.

"He's got that whole thing in your thumb! Damn!" then he excitedly started speaking in French.

"It's in?" I asked.

"OUI!"

I was shocked. I didn't feel a thing.

"It's in alright?" Jacques asked. "You don't feel it?"

"No, not a thing. Actually, it feels better. No pain."

"He best doctor," Maria interjected with a smile.

"Okay, it's out now," Jacques said as I could feel the doctor bandage my thumb.

The doctor said something in Vietnamese and Maria told me that I was to keep the bandage on for 10 days. I wasn't supposed to even look at my thumb until then.

"Okay," I said.

So as the days passed, my thumb felt better and better. The medic back at the camp and some of the other guys kept taunting me about going to Japan.

"You better take care of that thumb, Green. You don't want to lose a hand. Infection can spread, you know."

I didn't know what to expect. It was a gamble. Waiting 10 days was a damn long time. Anything could be going on under that bandage. But somehow, somewhere, deep in my heart, I felt that it was ok. My thumb hadn't hurt since the Vietnamese Doctor put that needle with herbs in. Maybe Maria was right. When the tenth day came, I wanted Jacques and Maria with me in the hospital when the military doctor took off the bandage.

"If this is infected, Green you are going straight to Japan for surgery, no arguments. It will be an order. You understand?" the doctor said.

I nodded. "Yes, sir."

Slowly and carefully, he began removing the bandage. Then, there it was, my right thumb revealed to the light of day and looking remarkably just like the left one.

"I don't believe it," Jacques said as the doctor just stared at my thumb turning it first to the left and then to the right.

"I told you Vietnamese number one doctor," Maria smiled.

"Well, Green, you know what this means. Back to work," the doctor ordered.

Once outside the office, I had a lot to say. I didn't want to offend the doctor, but Maria was right.

"Don't ever call him a witch doctor, Jacques, I said. "He healed with natural herbs; all the others want to do was butcher me. Who do you think is the real witch doctor here?"

"Wait a minute, Green, are you implying that.."

" I'm not implying anything, I'm saying that I have a new respect for doctors who use real medicine, natural herbs. They have knowledge that others don't and they should be respected."

"Okay, Green, I hear you," I'll take it under advisement. He smiled as we parted ways. As I reached the camp, I heard a familiar sound. Everyone took cover in the bunker.

Preview