

The Letters

Every place on him was itchy and sweaty, and where his belt and backpack rubbed against him, it burned his raw skin. There was not a dry place on his uniform, his boots rubbed his toes raw and the M16 rifle was his only friend. The heat took the strength out of him, his muscles ached and the moisture from all the foliage made the air hard to breathe, adding to the misery. Three weeks on patrol in the Mekong Delta, the front line in the Vietnam War, had taken a toll not only on his body, but his mind as well.

Ron was a quick learner, but nothing in his short life had prepared him for this incredible hell, not even boot camp. Nothing could have readied him for the death and

the calloused reception he'd received. He always considered himself a bad ass. He came from the streets and never backed down in any fight or situation, because he always felt he had what it took to win, no matter what. But, this war, though they refused to call it a "war," had kicked his butt and showed him that he was not as tough as he thought he was. It was showing him that life was cheap and he was just a number embossed on a small piece of metal.

While his patrol rested and the sergeant sat with dead eyes staring into the near jungle terrain, he sat there, too, but he was evaluating his life, what was important versus what he had always *thought* was important. He had never taken the time to understand what life was all about, until now. Seeing guys die and get blown to pieces, bullets whizzing past his ears and knowing they was meant to kill him made him look deeply at himself. His conclusion was that he was an empty cup. All the things he considered important were nothing to him now. He was alone in a patrol that didn't care if he lived or died. He was shocked to find that he meant so little in this world. It gave him a hollow feeling.

The sergeant stood and called for them to fall in and move out. He dragged his aching body off the ground and followed some others moving through the delta, hoping to make it back to fire base. There were two kinds of soldiers in a patrol: those who have survived, becoming seasoned, and the "greenies." The seasoned vets were a tight knit group that looked out after one another, and the greenies they called FNGs, F'n New Guys, were expendable, meat for the grinder. They didn't know them and didn't want to know them, because they would be dead soon and they didn't matter. Others would replace them and the cycle would continue. Even the greenies did not make friends, because it was too painful to lose someone and see them placed in body bags and flown out. It was a constant reminder that they might be next. So, you reach out and

grasp at life wherever you find it, anything to make your life mean *something*.

The air was split with the sound of automatic weapons fire and the foliage snapped and shook violently as the bullets whizzed through beside him.

"Fu...," the sergeants word was drown out. "Take cover," he shouted, "Take cover!"

Ron scrambled through the bushes looking for a low place and there was a bomb crater just in front of him. The guy near him headed for it just as he did. Bullets whizzed and whined over his head as he leaped. He felt his helmet rock just as he hit the ground in the crater. When he landed he was on the upside of it in the direction he was going. He raised his head and could see level ground. Then his eyes were filled with dirt as bullets raked the ground in front of him. Squinting his eyes tight, he ducked and tried to scramble back down into the hole, but something was holding him back. It tugged at the back of his neck and then more shots whizzed past his head. He jerked hard to loose himself from what held him and came free.

He slid down below ground level, swiping at his eyes with his fingers to clear them. They were burning and stinging, and tears were running out of them, helping him with the chore. Finally, he could see again, his face streaked with mud. More bullets told him he had acted just in the nick of time. He looked up to where he had been and there, caught on the root of a tree, were his dog tags, hanging by the chain he had snapped to free himself. He reached up to retrieve them and more shots made him retract his hand and press himself hard against the bottom of the crater. He clamped his eyes closed and buried his face under his arm.

Slowly he moved his arm down and lay staring at the dead cold eyes of the man next to him. Blood ran down the side of his face and off his nose in a tiny stream. He was about Ron's age and there was a massive hole in his head. He lay there staring at the guy, his eyes searching for

the spark of life, but there was none. The man had dark hair like his and his eyes were hazel, too. That could very well be him lying there. His features were different, but that was all.

There was more shooting, but he knew he was safe in that hole, at least for the time being. All he had to do was wait until the sergeant called for them to move out. He was only a few inches from the dead man. The presence of death can give you a feeling of foreboding. He was feeling it now and tried to ignore the dead man, yet he couldn't help but look. Facing the enemy of death beside him was better than turning away, because he could see where it was coming from.

He noticed something white sticking out of the soldier's fatigue pocket and stared at it. It felt odd, so he reached over and pulled out a folded letter and a picture slid out of it onto the ground. He picked it up and studied the face of a really cute young woman. She was not what would be considered beautiful, but she was nice looking, in her early twenties, he figured.

He looked back at the man and felt sorry for him. He would never see her again. They would never kiss or make love again and that, he realized, was the fabric of life. The one thing in this whole world that meant anything was to love someone, having someone to love you. Somehow up until this point, he had missed that concept altogether.

He looked at the picture again and wondered what her name was. Then his eyes fell on the letter. He wanted to read it. The guy was dead and he wouldn't care, and maybe he could write to this girl and tell her how her fellow died. Maybe he would even lie to her and say how her name was on his lips as he left this world and make the girl know she was loved. Love was so important to him now and he wanted to give her that gift. Slowly, he reached for the letter and his fingers, covered with dirt and grime, took the folded pages and he opened them. A soft fragrance drifted past his nose.

"Darling,"

"I know that we didn't have much time together before you had to go off to war. That seems so long ago. I miss you and your letters. I know you must be very busy fighting and all, but I do wish you would write, even if it's only a few lines.

I fixed a special dinner tonight and set your plate. It is our first wedding anniversary, in case you forgot. I'm not mad if you did, men are like that. You bought me some of my favorite perfume and I unwrapped it before I ate. I put some on the letter so you could smell it.

I want you to know that I forgive you for the hurtful words and for the times you made me cry. I realize now that it was not as easy for you to adjust to married life as it was me. Things will be different when you come home. I will try harder to understand.

I love you! Hugs and kisses!

Alie

Now he looked at the man and wondered how he could not appreciate this woman. Who was this guy? He pulled his dog tags out from under his uniform and looked at them. They were taped together with masking tape, a requirement here, and he could not read the name on them. He sighed and looked back at the letter. There were two more pages so he looked at the second page and it started, *Alicia*, not dear or darling or sweetheart. It was just plain *Alicia*. The letter was not finished and contained only a few cold lines. The girl did not deserve this. He crumbled the paper in his fist and put it in his pocket. Her grief will be bad enough without this letter.

He decided he would keep the letter and the picture and mail them back to her. He needed to know the man's name, so he took the tags from the man's neck, pulling it over his head getting blood on the chain from his head wound. He took his service knife and cut the masking tape and removed it. He saw that his name was Granger, Gary W.

He laid there for a while and thought about it. Then he noticed there was still a bulge in that pocket where the letter was and so he felt in there and drew out a short pencil and a small packet of letters held together with a rubber band, some had been opened and some had not. That was quite puzzling to him. Why didn't he read the other letters?

Then he heard the sergeant call over the sporadic gunfire. "Everyone sit tight and hunker down. They have us pinned. I'm calling in some napalm." He didn't have to tell him they were pinned down. He was right where they were shooting.

He tried to ignore the dead man, but his eyes kept drifting over to him and he kept thinking of how close he came to joining him. He then realized how much his feelings in life had changed since he came here. Yes, he was a different man than the cocky one that left Washington State. He looked at the third page and it was blank. He had the pencil and writing a letter would give him something to do besides look at a dead man. He laid the dog tags on the ground and pulled the dead guy's canteen out of its holder to use as a hard surface to put the paper on.

*My dearest darling,
I'm so sorry I've been slow to write and
that I've not written lately. I have been on
patrol for three weeks now. We should be
back at the fire base tomorrow and I will get
this in the mail. A lot has been happening to
me. Things I never expected to happen. I*

hope this letter will not upset you, but I have to tell you my heart.

I'm lying in a bomb crater pinned down by the Viet Cong. I nearly got my head shot off just a minute ago. It gave me pause to think, to think about you, my love, and how very much I miss you right now.

Lying next to me is a man about my same age with a big hole in his head. His dead cold eyes are staring at me and I realized that it could very well be me. He has a wife, but their marriage is not very good. I know I shouldn't have done so, but I found a letter from her in his pocket and read it. She sent him a picture too. It made me want to write this letter.

I know I have not exactly been a model husband and I have failed in many ways to hold you when it was important to you for me to do that. I have not been there a lot of times when you needed me, and I would forget about the things you felt were important. Looking back now, I can see my failures and I hope to make it up to you when I get back, God willing. No, I didn't get religion, I just got some smarts.

Darling, this experience has changed me. I'm not the same man you married. I hope you like this one better. All the things I thought were important mean nothing now. I realize life is not things, good times or sports, but people and you are, my love, the most important person in my life. If I get out of here alive, I promise I will never again forget that.

I'm sorry I wasn't able to send you anything for the anniversary, but I will next

time I get to Saigon. We should get a few days R and R when we get back to base camp. I hope this letter is not too depressing. Don't worry about me. The sergeant has called in a napalm drop on the Cong and then we will boogie on out of here.

I love you very much and I will be holding you in my arms tonight until you go to sleep.

Here it comes! Got to go, finish this later.

The sound of a low flying aircraft was the clue that the drop was imminent. Then there was tremendous heat, fire and the screams of those caught in it. That is one sound he would never forget.

Just as he folded the letter and stuck it and the pencil into his shirt pocket, a pair of boots came skidding into the crater. "Get the hell up and out of here, soldier," the sergeant's voice barked at him as he was grabbed by the shoulder strap on his backpack and jerked to his feet.

"What the hell is this?" The sergeant picked up the dog tags and shook them in his face. "Put these on your FNG neck and under your fu'n shirt." The sergeant snatched his helmet off, slammed it hard into his stomach where he caught it and hung the tags around his neck. "I don't ever want to see them again." He looked at the tag, "Corporal, uh, Granger. Get them tied down, too."

"Yes sir, but th..."

"I don't have time to nursemaid a greenie," the sergeant yelled, grabbing his shirt in a tight fist and yanking his grimy face upward. "Got that!"

"Yes, sir!"

Stooping, the sergeant picked up the bundle of letters, the picture and his rifle, shoving them into his

hands, nearly dislodging his helmet and pushed him out of the crater. "Move it! Move it!"

He put the helmet on and the sergeant shoved him ahead. They ran like hell with sporadic fire behind them. When they stopped to rest, the sergeant came over to him, yanked on the dog tags still dangling on his shirt.

"Put them this away, Corporal," he gritted, "like I told you." Then he stabbed him in the chest with his finger. "You're on point, FNG."

Point was where most greenies get wise or get dead. It was the most dangerous position in a patrol. He had earned it, he supposed, because the sergeant saw the dog tags again. He slid Granger's dog tags under his shirt and wondered what to do. His tags were back in the bomb crater hanging on a root. He couldn't go back to get them. He was in a real fix. He would have to go to the Command Post when he got back to the fire base and explain this, which would not be easy.

The scariest thing was night patrol. Not only were the Cong good at camouflage during the day, but at night you were virtually at their mercy. Few, including veterans, were very good at night patrol. That was why eighty percent of night patrols were made up of greenies.

It was well past dark when the sergeant sent up a colored flair to let the forward command know they were coming in.