

Five Workers Report on How the Deal Really Went down

Section V

*soldiering ain't easy
after one war another
puts bullets in hearts*

Down here in this section of the line we are lucky because not only are we close to the exit by the yard and picnic table, we are close to the cafeteria. So every morning before the line starts I rush up to the counter and order two egg sandwiches to eat when the line starts up. I've been doing that ever since I've been working for the company, even when my jobs were up the line. Nothing in the world tastes as good as those sandwiches as the line jerks forward. When I'm not at work, I don't eat them. They don't taste the same. But you better believe I've eaten bookoo egg sandwiches right here on this line.

I had just come back from the auditorium after swinging through the cafeteria for my two sandwiches, scrambled eggs on wheat toast and butter, when I got hit with their questions. They hollered out to me from the yard.

Hey, amigo, what's shakin? So you figured out what you goin to do?

There was a group of them sitting at the picnic table, and they began bombarding me with questions about the package we were being offered. Not one of them had bothered to go to the meeting, but now they want to ask me bookoo information about the deal and I'm hungry as all get out and don't feel like talking. Still, these young guys don't know any better, so in between bites of my first sandwich, I told them, *Well, I figured out what I'm not going to do. After retirement, I'm not going to eat any more of these sandwiches.*

So you are going. Congratulations, they said in unison. Then the kid who works directly across from me asked what it felt like to be a short timer.

I need something to look forward to twenty years from now, he said. He's a real nice fellow, helps me out a lot. So I tell him and the others like it is just as I finish up my first sandwich.

You won't believe this, but I can't sleep at nights. I'm happy to go, but it's also a little bit like death if you know it's approaching and you have the opportunity to think about it.

I don't know what got into me to say all that, maybe the retirement thing, but I kept on going in spite of their blank faces.

I suppose you reach a point where you are impatient to cross over to the other side, whatever that is - whether your energy will float and be happy and helpful on the other side, or if it will be trapped and agonized. In a way, I am realizing that I am closer to death, but aren't we all, every day of our lives, closer to death? And who knows when death will come; it could be tomorrow for an one at any age.

Everybody fell silent. Someone said, *Shit man; that thinking is way down the road from where any of us are at.*

That's when I slammed my stick on the table. I've been carrying it with me ever since the plan came out in the newspaper because I knew I was going. So I roll the stick on the table to make a little noise with it. This is what I said to the guys. *You see this? It's my short time stick.* They all looked at me as if I was crazy. *Any of you ever been to Nam?* All of their heads went side to side.

Of course, not, you're all too young. That's when I proceeded to tell them about how we carried short-time sticks in Vietnam when we were getting close to going home. We'd get a branch from a tree and make a stick out of it. Then we would notch it for every day remaining on our tour of duty and walk around the camp as if we were five-star generals. So if one of them sergeants came around wanting us to do something crazy or dangerous, we'd wave that stick at him. As each day passed, bringing us closer to leaving, we'd cut off a notch. By the time we got out of there, we'd get on the plane with a stub. I still have my Nam stub at home. Now I'm working on my retiring stub.

Wow man, that's heavy.

Heavy? You want to know something heavy? I'm going to tell you something really heavy that happened about a month or so before it would have been my turn to make a short-time stick. It was a day just like today, bright and sunny but hot as the dickens. I was on a mission with about four other guys in this field of grass that was taller than any of us. I don't know the real name of it, but it was so tall we called it elephant grass, and the edges of it were sharp like a razor. It was everywhere in Nam where I was.

The day was still as death. Not a bird was flying, not a bug not a blade of elephant grass moved. Not a breeze anywhere. The only way that grass would move is if one of us did and we were being real still. So we must have been sitting there for an hour or so, not moving one bit - believe me if anything prepared me for working in the factory it was Nam because you had to develop the patience of Job in order to survive.

So we were sitting in these clumps of grass being real still when all of a sudden the grass moved right in front of me. Out from behind a really tall and wide clump came this VC. Goddamn, talk about pissin in my pants.

That was the closest I'd ever been to one of them. So there we were the two of us staring at each other with our guns pointed directly at each other's heads. The VC was just a boy like me. I could tell. And he was the exact same brown as me. If it weren't for the eyes, he could have been my cousin. Even so, I got some family down home in Aguascalientes that look like they're half Chinese. What I'm trying to say is that he must have realized as much as I did that we were two humans with no personal hatred of each other but caught up in somebody else's conflict. We must have stood there for half an hour or so - to tell you the truth it felt like a day - with our weapons trained on each other each waiting for the first one to fire. I'll never forget the look in that boy's eyes, the fear, the hope that the moment would evaporate like the sweat was evaporating off our faces. We were both so scared. I realized that boy had a family and wanted to live as much as I did. Just then, the boy backed up against the grass and it began waving so slow and graceful. Believe me, everything happened so fast after that, the panic in his eyes, the grass waving in the sun and the awful noise of the rifle.

My coworkers didn't say a word. It got kind of uncomfortable at the table, like that day, sunny and still until the grass began waving. I understood at that moment when the VC kid moved that one way or the other I was going to cross over to the other side. In a way I was between *la espada y la pared*, ¿tú sabes? Or as they say here, between a rock and a hard place. Then like a light went off or something, the kid who works across from me asks,

So wait a minute, amigo, tell us what happened. What happened to the VC kid?

What did he want to hear? Details? There was no more to say; I had already said too much. These guys here now knew more than my wife of thirty-two years. So I just stared at my coworker's hairline - not his eyes, definitely not his eyes - trying to figure out what next. What must they think of me now? I just stared at that kid. I think I counted all the red spiked strands of hair sticking out from the front of his scalp by the time my hand grabbed my other egg sandwich for lack of anything better to do at that point. But the damn thing was already cold.