

A Forlorn Hope

by William Yale

I had to write this down because this is what really happened to me in Vietnam. I am not the same man I was then and it is important to me to tell someone about it.

As a soldier, I was placed in a position where my life was threatened each and every day. We were under enemy fire day and night; so much so, that it began to affect my mind. At first it was the fear of death that preoccupied my mind, so I went to the chaplain and told him I couldn't take it anymore; I told him I just wanted to go home. He disagreed with me and told me I was just like the others who came to him; that I was perfect in my service as a soldier. He was an officer, a Lt Colonel, an old man of about forty years and I listened to him; he told me that down through history the American fighting man had to bear the burden of war so that other men could be free and that if I were killed during the war, God would welcome me into his presence. This should have worried me even more, but I was grateful to him for trying to clear up the eternity problem for me.

I was afraid of dying there and maybe going to hell. So I received his absolution and I began to make Vietnam my home. I decided I would fight and die for the earth under my feet. I had a premonition of death and felt I was going to die there; so I put away any hope of returning home. I placed my future in the Lord's hands. The next morning I awoke and my heart was happy and carefree. The fear of dying had completely left me; I was baffled by it and did not understand what had taken place. It took me many years to begin to understand where this encouragement came from.

The Army loved what I was doing, on the outside they thought I was a great soldier and after many missions — they thought my behavior was outstanding and awarded me the Bronze Star Medal. But I thought, "What do I care about it. It won't do me any good because I'm not coming back." But my love of living continued, I awoke each morning and, to my amazement, I was uninjured and still alive! Even the long hot days were now beautiful and the colors of life seemed more vivid and real. I had even begun to believe the food was good (we were eating out of cans at this time). The other guys were complaining about the food all the time, but I was happy about how good it tasted.

I began to be thankful about little things, things that I had taken for granted all my life. I was amazed about just passing stool in the morning because I didn't have holes in my bowels from shrapnel. I know this may shock some of you, but I was just happy to be alive and to be able to walk around on my legs; this was something I would never again take for granted and I was grateful to God for sparing my life. At this time I did not know the Lord, but I suspected someone was helping me along. A lot of very strange things happened that removed me from danger. I did not know the name of my benefactor, as I was not raised in a religious home.

My mother believed in an impersonal God who did not have much power and, because of this, I began to believe He couldn't really help anyone when they really needed it. So at 20, I thought, what do I need a powerless god for? And, began to trust in my own powers to save me. It wasn't until I arrived in Vietnam that I discovered my faith system didn't work. So here I am in the middle of all this shooting and nothing is working. So I gave up hope. It wasn't until many years later I was told that this was commonly called, "The Forlorn Hope" — a term used by British soldiers in the war against Napoleon, when kids were asked to assault the walls of impregnable positions with only single shot rifles and bayonets. They gave up all hope of survival, but did their duty until they were killed.

Does this bother you? It should. Because war is a terrible thing. Many thousands of young men went to their deaths in this manner because they were protecting their country and their families. They did it because they wanted to keep the wolf away from the door. And, my generation was no different. How many hundreds of years have passed since single shot rifles? Think about it. Anyway, what I experienced was the forlorn hope — a deeply personal thing that tips over everything you believe in and replaces it with a firm resolve to die well. I decided that if I were going to die, I would take all of my enemies with me. That was my new religion. An enormous valley filled with the enemy dead. This was my only reason for living. I was wrong.

The love of living was still burning inside of me and began to work for me. My vision of the grim reaper was replaced with gentle things like drinkable water, available food, and the humor of the men around me. They said things like, "It's not so bad — is it?" And, they laughed and smiled hugging my neck. Yeah, it felt good. I thought maybe I had better be more careful so more of them could make it back; maybe I could do something about this (for them, not me) because at this time, I still had no hope for me. But something strange happened and I hadn't even noticed. I was becoming short, which means I was running out of time on my tour in Vietnam and I only had a couple of weeks left before leaving.

I never really accepted this and worked on the war right up until the end. Then one morning, the company clerk said, "Hey Yale!!!! — Get your gear together and get over to the L Z, the chopper will be here shortly, I have your orders, — you're going home." I still could not accept the idea of being a survivor and when I got on board the chopper, I was told to sit in the door gunner position, the M60 was already set up, and the crew chief said, "Use it if we are fired upon." This was how I left Vietnam, and it followed me all the way home.

I will be 62 in January, but even to this day I still feel as though I'm living on borrowed time. But, one thing is certain — every day is beautiful. And, I am grateful to the Lord that I am alive. And, I know that, even when we give up on ourselves, God never does. If I am still here and alive in the morning, that's proof enough for me that he loves me and is watching over me.

Written Nov 24, 2012, with a grateful heart just after Thanksgiving Day
— William Yale