



*Finding*  
HOPE

THE JOURNEY  
*from* DARK DESPAIR  
TO LIBERATING LIGHT

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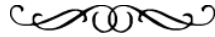
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## A MARINE'S JOURNEY



### *From Remorse to Relief*

*Jim was leaning on the railing at Pearl Harbor looking at the memorial of the USS Arizona when I met him. It was our first and only encounter, but it permanently impacted me. Jim was in his late sixties or early seventies. He was well built, well groomed, and seemed to be the picture of health. The others in our group were browsing through the shops. Because shopping (affectionately referred to by my wife as “retail therapy”) ranks near the bottom of my list of things I like to do, I chose to wander the paths near the harbor.*

*I approached Jim and said “hello” in passing. He seemed eager to talk, so I joined him. He had a military pin on his lapel indicating that he was a former Marine. I asked him about the pin. He asked if I had time to listen to his story. Since my wife and her friends are born shoppers, I knew I had some time to kill before they were ready to move to the Punchbowl Cemetery to view the thousands of war casualties buried and memorialized there. This is Jim’s story:*

I joined the Marines when I was nineteen years old. The draft lottery was in force at that time, and I had a number that ensured that I would be drafted. I chose to enlist in the Marines because I envisioned the glory and the toughness portrayed in their recruiting materials.

Boot camp was brutal. The drill sergeants said they were trying to toughen us up for what we would experience in Nam. At times I thought they were trying to kill us before we were deployed. Many washed out of our program and were reassigned to positions of lesser demand. I knew I was as tough as the toughest and no foul-mouthed, foul-breathed, illiterate drill sergeant could break me.

Finally, boot camp was over. I had to admit they had toughened us up and we were in better physical shape than I had ever been in my life. Then came the deployment. We were ready to conquer the world and end the war. The flight to Nam was long and uncomfortable, but that was nothing to a group of battle-ready, hardened leather necks!

Then the reality hit. Nam was hot and humid. Bugs were crawling on us day and night. Even the nights were swelteringly hot. The food was tolerable unless we were on extended patrols—which seemed to be most of the time. The guys in my platoon were from all backgrounds. Some were crude and unable to speak two words without a curse or profanity mixed in. Others were quiet and didn't say much. A few were what I would classify as "normal."

Over the course of months, we adjusted to the environment. The patrols were the most dangerous part of our duties. The Viet Cong would hide in trees, in the dense foliage, in fox holes—anywhere they could not be detected. On more than one occasion we had been ambushed. It was a sorry, sobering day when my best buddy, who was the patrol leader, took a bullet to the head. It killed him instantly. I was appointed patrol leader in his place. From that point on I seemed to be on a revenge mission. I would kill, with some satisfaction, every enemy soldier who came within my sights.

That was all well and good until the day we were assigned to take a small hamlet. We had heard that the Cong would use human shields as they tried to make their escape. Women, men, children, anyone they could find were held between them and us. I hadn't personally seen that scenario, but others told us how difficult it was to have to kill the hostage to get to the enemy soldier. Others told us how the Cong would strap a grenade or bomb to a little child and send her to greet the American soldiers only to blow her and the soldiers up when she got to them. I guess I didn't believe anyone could drop that low or have that little regard for human life.

Then it happened to us. As I mentioned, I was the patrol leader. The rest of the guys followed closely behind as we closed in on the little hamlet. I saw the little girl running toward us holding out her arms as though waiting for an embrace. I noted the bomb strapped to her waist. What was I to do? If I didn't stop her, the Cong would detonate the bomb when she got near us and destroy her and kill or injure many of my patrol. There wasn't a lot of time to make the decision. With more trembling than I had ever known, I raised my rifle, pointed it at the little girl, and fired. The explosion of the bomb annihilated her. She

literally disappeared before our eyes. Body parts were blown in all directions. My heart died within me that very instant. What had I done? Did I make the right decision? With what I thought was justifiable vengeance, we leveled the whole hamlet.

The rest of the time in Nam was more like a daze. It seemed like every time I closed my eyes I could see the face of that little girl. Every time a bomb or grenade went off my mind recreated the vision of that little girl evaporating before our eyes. Thankfully our tour soon came to an end. We returned home, and I was discharged from the Marines.

I don't know much about PTSD, except I know it is real and I had a huge case of it. I went from anger to depression and back again so many times I can't begin to count. The more I thought about the killing, the little girl, and the whole senselessness of the war, the more despondent I became. It seemed like a dark cloud was hanging over my head. I couldn't sleep, I had no appetite, no activities held any interest for me, and I couldn't bring myself to try to establish any meaningful relationships. I felt like I was being engulfed in a dark prison with no means of escape.

I hadn't grown up in a religious family, so I didn't think much about God or life having a special purpose. It seemed that everything I had experienced to that point confirmed that life was just a meaningless venture that all people endured until they died, and then that was the end of it. I read accounts of other servicemen who experienced similar feelings and ended up taking their own lives. Somehow, I felt that suicide wasn't a good solution for my problems. Surely there must be a way to break out of that suffocating prison. Life used to be so carefree and happy. Now it was an almost impossible chore to just get up in the morning and put one foot in front of the other. Something had to give. There was no way I could continue like that.

One Sunday I was driving down the street near my home and passed a church house. The services had just concluded, and throngs of people were exiting the building. I noted that they were all smiling, happy, talking, and seemingly enjoying each other's company. What did they know that I didn't? For the first time in my life I decided to try to find out if there really is a God and what my relationship was to Him.

I didn't know how to pray since I don't remember praying before. I am sure my first attempts to pray must have caused God to bust a gut laughing. Although it wasn't smooth and grammatically correct, it certainly was heartfelt as I reached

out to whatever is called God and asked for help rescuing me from my prison. I didn't see a vision or hear a voice, but I experienced a feeling that penetrated my very soul. It was like someone had given me an injection of hope. I was so thrilled I didn't know how to act. I wanted to jump and laugh and sing (and I ain't no singer!). When my feet finally hit the ground, I didn't know where to go from there.

Because I knew that church-going people read the Bible, I went to the local bookstore and purchased a Bible. I started reading in Genesis. It was a cool story, but I didn't see how it applied to me. Soon I decided to leaf through the rest of the Bible. I came to Matthew in the New Testament. As I read about Jesus and His teachings, something inside happened. That same euphoria I had experienced when I first prayed came again. I couldn't get enough. I read the four gospels and then the rest of the New Testament. Some of it was hard to understand, but a lot of it gave powerful directions that I could apply to my life.

Almost without realizing it, I came to know that this wasn't just some fable that some ancient people had written. It was really true. Jesus portrayed God as a real person who knew and was interested in people on earth. He actually referred to God as "Our Father." Jesus taught that God is so personal and involved in each person's life that even the very hairs of his head are numbered. That thought blew me away. He talked about how God knew even when a sparrow fell to the ground and then said that each person was of more worth than many sparrows and received more divine attention.

When I grasped the thought of a personal God who knew me, knew my challenges, and invited me to "come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden" (Matthew 11:28) with the promise that He would give me rest, I decided to give it a try. It didn't happen all at once, but over time I realized that my enjoyment of life was increasing, I regained my appetite, and my whole countenance brightened. I had a new enthusiasm for life, and that horrible prison that had nearly annihilated me was destroyed. I found that I could develop meaningful relationships with others. I now have a wife, four kids, and eight grandkids, all of whom I dearly love.

I still think occasionally of the little girl in Nam, but now I am actually thankful for what happened. I am not sure where I would be if that hadn't occurred. I have found when I think about that experience, although I don't understand it all, I know that God knows that little girl as well as He knows me and will make everything okay for both of us.

Do I still have challenges in my life? You'd better believe it. But with what has transpired in my life, I am enjoying the sunsets more than the storms. I have lost my fear of the challenges of life. I know if I keep facing God and trying to follow His outlined course that everything will turn out all right."

*I almost hated to see our group come looking for me. I thanked Jim for sharing his story with me and wished him the best. We shook hands and he resumed his posture of leaning on the rail looking out toward the USS Arizona. I have never seen him again, but the vision he created in my mind of his journey from his darkened prison to the light has never left me.*

## **POINTS TO PONDER**

- ✦ What would you do if faced with a situation that put two or more of your foundational beliefs in direct opposition?
- ✦ Have you ever second-guessed a decision or action you have taken?
- ✦ How have you resolved that inner conflict and achieved a peaceful resolution?
- ✦ Are there things you could do that would result in even greater peace and contentment?
- ✦ Have you experienced that infusion of hope in your own life or witnessed it in the lives of others?

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