

INTRODUCTION BY
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Once in a while a book on war comes along that knocks your socks off. This is one of those truly great books, packed with authenticity and truth. Lee Alley and Wade Stevenson not only tell it like it is, but also like it was. It is factual and forthright. *Back From War: Finding Hope & Understanding In Life After Combat* hits you in the gut with realism. Even today, our many veterans who find post-war experiences troubling, might benefit and find solace from this incredible read.

I met Lieutenant Lee Alley in October 1967, my first day at Binh Phuoc, Vietnam. Our first meeting, there in our barracks, was a casual one. Lee was wearing a green towel around his waist and shower clogs on his feet, I in my GI shorts.

In short order our friendship solidified; we came together, brothers-in-arms, sharing combat experiences of the most horrible kind. Brought together in extreme circumstances, we witnessed heartbreaking losses—our fellow soldiers, civilians and our buddies. The times called for sympathy and comfort; we relied on one another for strength, courage and persistence.

An unbreakable bond was formed back then, one that has endured throughout the years. Lee Alley is a true patriot and a bona-fide American hero! He led his troops with honor and distinction and is a living legend in the 5th/60th 9th Infantry Division.

I respect him and stand in awe of his heroism. Lee represents the best of America. It is my honor to call him “Friend,” and to heartily recommend, to all, this outstanding book.

— Tommy Franks

DEDICATION

We dedicate this book to all veterans who have answered their nation's call to duty. Every veteran has paid a price for the freedom we enjoy. That price regrettably often comes in the form of wounds of war. Many of the physical wounds are evident. However, the psychological wounds which others may carry are not as easily identified—yet they hurt just as much. Then there are those who paid the ultimate price with their lives. My heart aches for all families thus affected by war.

With this, special dedications go to the men of the 5th Battalion, 60th Infantry of the 9th Infantry Division. I ate, slept, cried, laughed, bled, and served proudly with these men. It was my special once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be a member of that proud unit, to enjoy such outstanding cohesion, esprit de corps and pride in comradeship.

Little did I know as I trained for war that I would be dropped into the middle of such an outstanding group of individuals. My commanding officers set the standard of leadership I strove to achieve: Captain Steve Siegfried (Sieg), now a retired Major General; Captain Hector Villarreal (Capt 'V'), retired Lieutenant Colonel; Colonel William Steele, retired Major General; Colonel Eric Antilla (retired and now deceased). I owe these men so much!

I still think of them as my commanders. I would follow each and every one of them again, anywhere.

My peers and fellow lieutenants: Tommy Franks, Mike Schlee, John Sweet, Jim Sharp, Bo Whitworth, and Alec Wade—we were as close as a band of brothers in combat could ever be, and remain so today.

The men I was honored to command were the best ever! I don't remember ever trying to command them. I simply strove to live up to the high standards they deserved in a commanding officer. Some 35 years later when asked for a quote to be placed on a placard in the Veterans Park, Casper, Wyoming, I answered as honestly as I could, and from my heart, "Anyone spouting the demise of our American youth's patriotism and devotion to God and country never had the honor of commanding those like I did in combat."

Truly, it was an honor to be associated with the men of the 5th/60th. You hold a special place in my heart. I love you one and all.

This is your book.

PREFACE

Initially when thinking about writing this book, I had no intention of telling another war story. However, the Vietnam section is included for two reasons. First: The events described actually happened as told and are true. They appear simply to provide background information as to what led to some of the problems I've had in readjusting to civilian life after my war experiences. And, secondly: I hope that in relating them in this manner, it will give credibility and a face to the men of the 5th Battalion, 60th Infantry, 9th Infantry Division. They are the world's finest guys. I have been honored and privileged to know them. And they and their organizations produced some of our country's greatest military leaders.

Thus the primary purpose of this book is to provide examples of some of the problems returning veterans, who perhaps like me, may have had to face and struggle with. Hopefully it might yield some aid in helping them to regain a sense of comfort and relief from their troubling war experiences.

As I talk to groups around the country or share my stories with other veterans, a common, recurring question is always present: "Why weren't you sharing this twenty years ago?"

Simple answer: "I couldn't."

Hence this book. I don't want our young veterans of today to return home and be held hostage to nightmarish war memories. I'm hoping maybe this book will help with that.

If one veteran, regardless of the war or conflict: WWII, Korea, Vietnam, Persian Gulf, Desert Storm, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Iraq, any and all conflicts—even if just one veteran, a veteran's family member, or loved one reads this and says, "Hey, maybe I'm okay after all," or "Maybe my son," or "Maybe so and so's husband is okay,"—then this book is a success.

I thank you.

— Lee

PROLOGUE

I can't see them, but I know they're out there. And they know we are here. Creepy feeling.

I can actually *feel* their close proximity. Now and then, when the breeze is just so, I'm certain I can smell them. It hasn't taken me long to develop a sense of their malodorous fragrance. Apart from their distinct body odors—which are bad enough—they reek of Nuoc Mam, the fermented drippings of rotted fish, which they pour over their rice. The smell would make a buzzard puke. But who knows? Maybe we smell as gross to them.

In the lingering daylight after digging our foxholes we briefly strip, revealing prune-like shriveled skin and waterlogged wrinkled feet, and attempt to dry our clothing. There won't be time for everything to completely dry, but *any* relief is surely welcome. It's warm this Saturday night in mid-November 1967, although muggy with high humidity. Won't be long 'till Thanksgiving—back home. Won't be hot and muggy in Wyoming.

Everything's still damp after our earlier helicopter drop here from Landing Zone Brown where we'd been virtually pinned down in waist-high canal water for over 12 hours. I know my men are tired, worn, and battle-weary. And although now prepared and in a high-defense readiness posture knowing another battle is imminent, it feels good, at least for the moment, to stretch out on dry land and to have left the smell of battle. Here the gentle breeze off the river is pleasant; the air smells sweet and fresh. I'm enjoying this slight, but tenuous feeling of normalcy.

It's around 2300. Full moon—a Hunter's Moon—and few clouds. Privates First Class White and Lopez stationed at Listening Post (LP2) hear movement of someone wading towards them in the canal. White yells, "Camon Ty! Chieu Hoi!" (Halt—Give up!) The enemy ducks and White riddles his body and blows his face away with a short burst from his M-60 automatic.

An eerie and nervous hour and a half of silence follow. From a distance but suddenly getting closer I can hear the singsong chants of the VC encroaching through the bamboo and brush. God, there must be at least a hundred of them—and there are thirty-five of us. They yell with vehemence and a curdling hatred, "*GI you die! We*

get you tonight!” I feel tingling chill bumps on my arms and the hair on the back of my neck rising. I hear the unmistakable “thump” of a mortar round leaving a tube and yell, “*Incoming mortars!*” The night erupts in a cataclysmic explosion of mortars, tracers, claymores, grenades and rifle shots. The air is filled with bullets, smoke, gunpowder, and explosives.

My men are being killed. Goddammit! I can see them being hit! I scream at the top of my lungs, “*Get down, get down!*”

My shouts wake me and I realize my long-time haunt has once again returned. I am chilled, downright cold, but also covered in sweat. And I’m actually trembling. I find I’m gasping for breath; my throat is dry and it’s hard for me to swallow. Finally I’m able to pull some air into my lungs. Still shaking I look at the red digital numbers of the clock showing 01:30 in the morning. This is about the time the full-fledged attack at Fire Support Base Cudgel began *that* November night. Yet another strange coincidence?

Christ, here I’ve been feeling good and thankful for not having dreamt about Vietnam in over a month. But the memories and dreams always return to torment me. I just cannot seem to shake my ’Nam experiences. The recollections are *always* there—sometimes held at a distance by forcing them away with thoughts of other, more pleasant things—but seems like they’re never far away. Standing poised like a silent evil sentinel lurking, *always there*, and especially in the darkness of night.

It’s taking me a long time trying to readjust and return to a “normal” life. But optimistically, even with the dreams and nightmare memories, I tell myself, *I think I’m doing better*. And I have learned to live with the humor some of my friends seem to find whenever I still jump at a loud, close noise, a sonic boom, Fourth of July fireworks, or if I brace when there’s a sudden unexpected movement either toward me or near me. They just don’t understand. But, thank God, my wife seems to understand.

By now I am wide-awake and turn to look at my life-long soul mate. I’m glad I didn’t wake her this time—disturb her sleep again as I have so many times in the past.

I touch her skin and smell her hair, and a calmness seems to return and quietly settle over me.

I leave my sweat-dampened pillow and sheets and get out of

bed. I roll the logs in the fireplace that warm the night's chill and provide a soft, comforting glow in our bedroom. I look again at my wife. My heart's love, my wife of five years who also loves me. She cares for me, and I know it. She seems to understand things difficult for me to discuss when others would not. We met at the University of Wyoming in Laramie through a mutual friend, Jim Cundall. Jim's also a Vietnam vet. I sometimes talk to him and feel comfortable doing so.

I once more poke the logs in the fireplace and think *life is now good*. I've graduated from the university, taught school, and settled into a life I love as a partner with my father-in-law on a cattle ranch near Laramie.

Some days I truly believe I am solid. Yeah, solid. Very few know I was in Vietnam—and I like that. The few who know of my war history are also vets. Makes me feel good that some come to me, confide in me, and ask for my advice.

My message to them is always the same, firm and simple—*quit living in the past!* Shake it loose! Vietnam is a world away. Dammit, that was then. This is now! I resolutely swore to separate myself from all of that the moment the plane I flew back to the USA on went wheels-up, leaving the tarmac runway at Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base in July of 1968.

Damn right. Easily said—not easily done. Even with my staunch resolve to put it all behind me, there are nights I can't sleep. Yeah. Always, the nighttime is the worst.

I again see vivid pictures of my troops being shot, mortar rounds landing in our trenches, heads blown off, bodies exploded and shredded to pieces. My nostrils clog with the stench of war and the coppery smell of blood. In these recurring dreams I can feel myself tremble and seem completely helpless. It's as if I'm standing someplace far off seeing the battles—replay after replay. And I can't stop them! Sometimes it seems as if I am back there again but in a drugged, hazy, slow-motion and otherworldly dimension. I can see myself as clearly as if it were happening this instant. I'm struggling and dragging my wounded comrades through the mud and water, enemy shots are plunking all around us. I'm angry and frustrated, but even with adrenaline running high I begin to feel tired and then suddenly beyond exhaustion. Now in pain I realize I have been

wounded. Swearing and shouting I continue to drag and pull the wounded to safety. These images, sights, sounds and sharp pungent smells of war come to me with a stinging freshness, a brilliant clarity and dread. The scenes now flash through my head as if someone has put a camera in fast-forward motion.

I get a drink of water and watch the red, yellow and orange flames dance on the logs that I've stirred to new life. The red numerals show 02:30 on the clock. I can't go back to bed.

Sitting in my recliner, I extend the footrest and stare at the fire.

Nine years since I left Vietnam. Nine years of mostly keeping all this inside and refusing to talk. Doubt anyone would understand anyhow. And, I always think: *Why should I burden others with my problems?*

But sometimes I wonder how I can appear so strong on the outside, while having to hold myself to stop from trembling? Seems I just can't talk about these things—*I can't share them with anyone.*

Back home Wyoming newspapers hail me as a returning hero: "Recommended for the Congressional Medal of Honor, Lieutenant Alley is one of the most decorated soldiers ever to come out of the state of Wyoming. Twice wounded by enemy action, he was awarded two Purple Hearts (the extremely proud and respected medal established by General George Washington in 1782). For his extraordinary heroism and valorous actions Lieutenant Alley received the Distinguished Service Cross, two Silver Stars, one Bronze Star, two Air Medals and numerous other high military honors, medals and awards."

Flames from the fireplace seem to hypnotize me as I sit here in a state of quandary.

What possesses me? Why can't I forget these things? What has led me to this personal and troubled dichotomy, and why can't I shake it? Perhaps even more importantly—*what am I going to do about it—Jesus, what can I do about it?*