

WOUNDED SOLDIER



A REASON TO LIVE



A FAITH THAT HEALS

JOHN STEER

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JOHN STEER

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D E D I C A T I O N

I want to dedicate this book to all those who care — care about their God, care about their country, and especially to those who care about their fellow man.

To Cliff Dudley — without Cliff there would be no book. He and his lovely wife and children will always be an inspiration and encouragement to me. Tim (who I see very rarely) and I have a special bond. Thanks for your help and friendship, Tim.

I want to thank Mom and Dad, who put up with a very rebellious son. But they had faith that somehow I would make it. Thanks to Lynn and Leigh Hampton who have been a true source of help, inspiration, and friendship for many years.

I want to dedicate this book to those three million plus who served in Vietnam, and millions more who served their country stateside or in other countries.

Last but not least, I dedicate this book to my wife and partner, Donna, and our four beautiful children, Monique, John, Sarah, and David, who have sacrificed much over the years to follow me around the world and support my ministry.

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P R E F A C E

As you read my testimony and get an idea of where I've been and some of the things I've done, I hope that you will begin to understand the mercy our Lord had for me — and has for you.

I did not write this book because I am proud of my old life. Neither did I write it to become famous or to make a fast buck. I wrote this book because the Holy Spirit dealt with my heart.

It was very painful for me to go back over all the details of my life and expose myself before you. But the Lord put me together with Cliff Dudley, and without his help this book would never have been written. As we spent many long hours re-living and writing about my past, Cliff gave me love and encouragement.

You may have similar problems to those I had. Your life may be filled with booze or drugs. Or maybe you just hide your feelings and pretend everything is all right.

If it is all right, why do you feel guilty?

Why do you hate yourself?

Why aren't you happy with your wife and kids?

Why do you sometimes get knots of hate in the pit of your stomach?

Why do you say in your heart, "Nobody understands, nobody cares"?

Maybe you think I'm a sissy because I had so many problems and had to turn to Jesus for help. You may claim to have it all

together. I hope you do. But many Vietnam vets are committing suicide, turning to drugs and alcohol, and getting killed in car wrecks. In fact, John P. Wilson, Ph.D., who conducted the “Forgotten Warrior” research project for the DAV (Disabled American Veterans), believes the suicide rate among Vietnam veterans is much higher than the national average. Some stats say as many as 200,000 Vietnam vets have committed suicide or died a violent death such as driving into a bridge while intoxicated.

In addition, many Vietnam veterans also have marriage problems. Of those veterans who were married before going to Vietnam, 38 percent were divorced within six months after returning from Southeast Asia.

Between 40 and 60 percent of the veterans of the Vietnam War have persistent problems with emotional adjustment. The number of Vietnam veterans hospitalized for alcoholism or drinking problems has more than doubled in the past seven years. Today, the problems are getting worse, not better. To you who have problems — and to you who think you don’t have any problems — I have the answer: Give your heart and life to Jesus Christ.

Some may say, “I’ve tried religion.” I’m not talking about religion. I’m talking about a personal experience with Jesus Christ, the author and finisher of our faith.

When I went through jump school at Fort Benning, Georgia, it took every fiber of my being to get through it. The same was probably true of the training you took. If you would put half that much effort into seeking the Lord, He will meet you.

Jesus said, “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find; and to him that knocks it shall be opened” (Matt. 7:7).

Remember also that “all things work together for good to them that love God and are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28).

If God loves me why did He allow me to go to Vietnam and to see and do all the terrible things I saw and did? Because He knew that is what it would take to break me and cause me to repent and serve Him.

“For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom. 8:29).

Jesus knew I would eventually serve Him. I praise Him for not letting me die out there and go to hell, and for not taking His hand of protection off me. I’m beginning to understand how much God loves me.

Vietnam — was it a curse or a blessing? A little of both.



My rebelliousness reminds me a little of an experience I had with my oldest son John. I was rolling out some barbed wire to put up a fence. John, who was nine, asked, “Can I roll it out, Daddy?”

“No,” I said, “you will get scratched up.”

Although he had no gloves on, John continued to persist: “No, I won’t. No, I won’t.”

“Yes, you will,” I said.

Finally, I realized he needed a lesson; otherwise he would never believe me. I let him roll out the wire, and he got his hands all scratched up. Now, maybe the next time I tell him something he will believe me.

I didn’t allow him to get scratched up because I don’t love him — I did it because I do love him. He persisted in having his own way.

And so it is with the Lord. He has a perfect plan for your life. But until you decide to do it His way, you are going to get scratched up.

Listen for that still small voice beckoning you to accept Him and serve Him. Jesus is the **ONLY** answer.

For speaking or concert information, or to receive a catalog on John’s books, tapes, or musical CD’s, please write:

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No Turning Back

Get in line.” I obeyed immediately, knowing this would be the first of many commands. The young men standing rigidly in front of me must have been thinking the same thing. No one talked or moved.

Nervously holding my enlistment papers, I said to myself, *Man, I hope this is the right thing to do.* Then I remembered: I had no choice. This was my only way out.

“John, I don’t want to see you end up in prison,” my dad had said. “Maybe if you join the army, things will be better for you.”

For the first time in our lives Dad and I had come to the same conclusion. “Yeah, maybe it will help me turn my life around,” I agreed.

So far I had screwed up everything. As a high school dropout, I had been to 11 schools just to get through the ninth grade — and the last was reform school. Growing up in the inner city of Minneapolis, I had learned early to steal, smoke, and drink. Dopers, pimps, prostitutes, alcoholics — you name it — these were our neighbors.

As an angry and violent teenager, I was fast with a knife and quick to fight my way out of any confrontation. It didn’t take me long to realize that the law of the “city jungle” meant survival of the fittest. The toughest and the strongest wins; the weakest gets beat up! I read every martial arts book I could get my hands on and taught myself how to break boards with my fists.

Many of the neighborhood guys had been involved in rape, incest, immorality, stealing, booze, and drugs.

The girls were always on the take — trying to get us boys to go to bed with them. The attention made me feel proud because I was looking for security, friendship, and someone to love. I was a candidate for anything.

Ironically, the charge that sent me to jail was for something I hadn't done. My girlfriend accused me of rape. Although she later told the truth, I was still put on probation and charged with "carnal knowledge."

"What about my record?" I had asked my dad.

"Right now with the war in Vietnam, the army needs soldiers," he had said. "We can probably get a judge to give you a waiver."

I'll never forget the day Dad and I went to the courthouse in St. Paul together. It was one of the few times I felt he had supported me. In fact, as a boy, I had been terrified of my dad.

One day in particular stood out in my mind. When I entered the third grade, the teacher soon discovered I couldn't read and wanted to put me back a grade.

When he found out, Dad went into a rage. He sat me down, put a book in front of me, and said, "Read this!"

I couldn't read it.

He hit me and screamed, "Now, read this!"

Again, I couldn't read it.

He hit me again, and screamed at me: "Now, read this!"

I couldn't. I was shaking violently, and the more I shook, the more he hit me and screamed. I didn't think it was ever going to end.

As I stood before the judge in the St. Paul courthouse, pleading my case, the words were determined, "I want to straighten up and make something of myself."

The judge must have believed me because he completely cleared my record. "If you want to join the army," he told me, "you shouldn't have any trouble getting accepted."

Dad and I looked at one another and smiled.

I was on my way.



“You’re next!” The army recruiter shouted at me as he looked up from the papers stacked in front of him. “Name!”

“John Steer.”

As he wrote, I asked, “What’s ‘airborne?’” I had heard the guy ahead of me mention he wanted “airborne.”

“You get paid \$55 more a month,” the sergeant answered, “and you jump out of airplanes.”

I had thought only guys with an education could be paratroopers. “Okay,” I said. “Sign me up for it — airborne.”

“You got it!” the recruiter replied smugly.

“I want electronic maintenance engineering,” I reminded him. My main goal was to receive some kind of training I could use later in life. “Since I’m volunteering, I can get that, right?”

“Right,” the sergeant said with a sarcastic smile.

As soon as I signed up, the recruiters started laughing and joking. “What’s so funny?” I asked.

“I want to tell you something, boys,” he replied. “There’s only two things that come out of the sky — idiots and bird crap. Which are you?”

I knew then that I’d done something wrong! Within a short time, I discovered that being “airborne” waived any additional training. Although the disappointment at not becoming an electronics specialist nearly broke my heart, I was determined not to give up.

I told myself: *I’ve never succeeded at anything in my life, but this time I’m going to do the very best I can.*



“If I have my way, you will go to jail and never get out!” Although I was almost dead drunk, those words quickly sobered me up. In the week since I had signed up for the army, I had gone wild — like an animal who knows he’s going to be caged.

I had learned to smoke and drink at an early age. In fact, my dad taught me. One day when I was about 12 years old, I was in the laundromat with Mother and decided to confide in her. She seemed to be treating me like an adult so I said, “Mom, I’m going to tell you something: I’m smoking.”

“Oh, I know that, John. I’ve been finding tobacco in your shirts, and I could smell it on you,” she replied.

“Mom, all my friends smoke in front of their parents” (that was a lie), “and I think I should be able to smoke in front of you — can I?”

“No, no. We’ll have to talk to your Dad about it.”

“Oh, Mom, please don’t tell Dad,” I begged.

You guessed it — she told him.

“John,” Dad called, “smoking, huh?”

“Yes, sir,” I remarked trying to act big.

“Well, as long as you’re smoking you might as well smoke a man’s smoke.” He gave me a cigar and lit it. I smoked one cigar, then another. Dad was getting upset with me because I was puffing and inhaling those cigars like a man.

Then he said, “Boy, as long as you’re smoking you might as well drink, too.”

“Boy this is great, Dad,” I said feeling high and mighty. That was all I’d ever seen my dad do — smoke and drink. I thought that was the way to become a man.

He got the booze and started pouring us shot glasses of whiskey. He’d drink one, and I would drink one. I was really feeling good. I didn’t realize that he was determined to make me sick; I thought he was trying to be my buddy. Then I started to get sick, but I had such a strong will I wouldn’t let him know.

When he got up to go to the bathroom I ran into my bedroom, found an old bathrobe and vomited in it, wiped off my face, and went back in the living room and sat down. When he came back from the bathroom, Dad never knew that I had left — the cigar was still glowing in my hand.

He looked at me rather startled and said, “Okay, John, that’s enough for now, but we’re going to do this every night when I come home from work.”

The next day at school I told everybody, “Man, my dad lets me smoke and drink. I’m going to do it with him tonight when I get home. Don’t you wish you had a dad like mine?”

I got home from school and eagerly waited for him. Finally, when he came home I said, “Dad, I’m ready.”

When he found out what I was talking about, he knocked me from one end of the house to the other. He was furious! I don't know which hurt more — the beating or the disappointment of realizing Dad had only been putting me on. I didn't quit smoking or even slow down; however, I never did it around my parents again.

Now, the day before I had to report for duty, the police had pulled me over for speeding and running stop signs. The skid marks on the road gave them an open and shut case.

The girls I had with me in the car were not helping the situation. They offered the policemen beer and invited them to come in the car and join the party.

"We're going to take you in," the patrolmen taunted. "If you have an ace in the hole, you'd better play it now, kid."

"I've got one." Reaching up above the visor, I pulled out my enlistment papers that stated I was going into the service the very next day.

"Man, that's the only ace that could keep you out of jail," the cop said, "You better get out of here and not cause any more trouble."

The next day I boarded the train for Fort Leonard Wood. The tough ladies' man from the night before had suddenly been replaced by a scared teenager leaving home heading for uncharted waters.

There was no turning back now.

Basic Training

You're nothing!" the drill sergeant screamed as we stood in line to get our heads shaved. "In fact, you're lower than nothing! You're not even dogs!" Although basic training was rough, the verbal abuse and the strenuous physical demands became routine as my body — and mind — adjusted. Still, I found it difficult to obey all the rules.

One day I showed up in formation with gum in my mouth. At the end of training that day, the sergeant came to me and said, "Steer, dig a hole six feet deep and bury your gum." It was after-hours, and I should have been polishing my shoes, showering, and getting ready for the next day. Instead, I spent hours digging that hole.

During formation the next morning, the sergeant asked, "Did you bury that gum, private?"

"Yes, Sergeant, I did."

"You look like a liar to me," he shouted. "I don't believe you. Tonight after training, I want you to dig it up and show it to me." I thought I would die, but I never chewed gum in formation again.

About a month later (this was in 1966), I got pneumonia. The winters at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, can be bitterly cold.

"You better report to sick call," my buddies told me.

"No way," I said. I didn't want to be considered a sissy and get harassed by the other guys. Eventually, I became delirious with a high fever and had to be carried out of my bed to the hospital.

After a couple of days, however, I was back to the old routine.

Still sick and exhausted, I was standing at attention in formation when I fell asleep and dropped my rifle. The sergeant caught it right away.

“Steer!” he shouted, “Kiss your rifle and say, ‘I love my rifle. I will not drop my rifle. I love my rifle. I will not drop my rifle.’” *How ridiculous*, I thought. But I did it. During my short stay in reform school a few years earlier, I had learned that it doesn’t pay to buck the system.



By the time I had entered high school, I was so rebellious my parents couldn’t do anything with me. School was a bore, and my grades were falling. I’d sneak out of the window at night, meet my buddies, steal cars, shoplift cigarettes, be picked up by the police, and hide the cigarettes in the back seat of the squad car.

I was almost crazy with rebellion. Dad would come home and scream and holler at me. I know I probably deserved it. Out of fear, I would sometimes go to bed as early as six o’clock, trying to be asleep before he came home.

I was a big shot around town; sex and girls became a way of life. No love — just physical fulfillment. I had sex with one girl all the time. When I quit going with her and started seeing other girls, she got jealous and told her girlfriend she was pregnant. She had hoped the friend would tell me, but, instead, the girl told her mother. When she asked her about it, my ex-girlfriend told her mother that I had raped her. The police came to our house and immediately took me to jail.

In the cell next to mine was a nice kid about eight years old. Unfortunately, he had killed both of his parents with a knife while they slept.

My trial was a farce. I wasn’t even allowed to testify. “We’re going to hold you at the Woodview Detention Center until you are 16,” I was told. “Then we’ll send you to Stillwater, the state penitentiary.”

As I was being transported to the detention center, one of the guards closed the handcuffs too tightly on my hands, and

they turned blue. Fearing I would get gangrene, they took the handcuffs off as soon as we reached the detention center.

“You guys don’t even know how to put on handcuffs,” I said smartly to one of the guards. Before I knew what was happening two of them took me into the men’s bathroom and beat me until I vomited. One held me while the other hit me in the guts. They really worked me over. They shaved my head and gave me army-looking clothes and tennis shoes without laces.

I can’t believe this is happening, I said to myself. Sure, I had sex with the girl several times, but it certainly wasn’t rape by any stretch of the imagination. If it was rape, she had raped me the first time I met her. I thought, *This is America. I’m going to be set loose any day; they can’t do this to me.*

“You guys are going to be sorry because I don’t belong here,” I screamed at the guards as they put me into a cell by myself. “I haven’t done anything!” Of course, I should have already been in jail for a dozen other things anyway.

I had nothing. My cell was a cement slab with a mattress, a stool, and a sink. That was it! No sheets, no pillows or blankets — nothing. They fed me in a room with no silverware. If they had peas, I had peas. If they had soup, I had soup, but I had to eat it with my fingers or lap it up like a dog.

After a few days, I started to submit to the system and was eventually allowed to go out into the room to eat with the rest of the inmates. I stood at attention, walked in, sat down, and ate. Although I only spent three weeks at reform school, I learned about discipline and keeping my mouth shut.

I was given the job of stacking food in the cooler. Soon I got a few privileges. Once a week I could go out and play ping-pong. Since it was a co-ed institution, the girls and boys came together for ping-pong. At one point a colored guy and a white girl were going at it while the guards were hitting them on their backs with sticks. The place was like “animal house.”

During the state inspection everything was run differently — the way they treated us, the food, the entire atmosphere. Normally, the place was a jungle, but during the inspection everything was smooth as a big lie.

As part of my rehabilitation, I was assigned to see a Swedish psychiatrist who spoke with an accent and spent hours asking me about my sex life. It was very weird — like something out of a comic book. I played the guy along for a while, talking to him with an accent and acting as if I were crazy. It took him quite a while to realize that I was making a fool out of him. When it finally dawned on him, he was furious and cussed me with every name in the book. He hollered at the guard, “Come and get this little creep!”

Later on, at the second trial, the psychiatrist testified that I had the sex mind of a 25-year-old man. *That’s pretty cool*, I thought. *And I’m only 15 years old.*

At some point, the judge found out the truth. It wasn’t during the trial, but apparently the girl confessed to someone. The judge still charged me with “carnal knowledge” because I was a year older than the girl. My sentence was reduced to a one year probation. I was so thankful to be free!

When I went back to school, baldheaded and tougher than ever, my shoulders were back. I was ready to take on anybody — because I had been to reform school.



During Army basic training, I reminded myself of the lessons learned at Woodview and quickly submitted to the system. At the same time, my cocky attitude worked to keep me motivated. After a while, I started taking pride in my outfit. We worked hard to become the best in certain areas and earned many banners and trophies.

Those of us who had signed up to become paratroopers enjoyed an elite status and were held up as examples for new recruits. I was now considered one of the “tough guys.”

After boot camp, I went on to airborne infantry advanced training, where we received specialized training for paratroopers. Unlike regular infantry, we were qualified in many areas. We learned how to kill people in over 100 different ways, using a knife, piano wire, or our hands.

Also, I specialized in two separate modes of training: light weapons infantry and heavy weapons infantry. We were trained to be proficient with the army's arsenal, such as M14 and M16 rifles, M79 grenade launcher, XM148, 45 cal., M60 machine gun, 50 cal. machine gun, 60 and 81 MM mortar, rocket launchers, flame thrower, and M126 grenades.

The violence and hate I felt increased with such intensity that at times even I was frightened by it. This new attitude became evident after basic training when I was back home for a short leave. Some other soldiers and I were driving around with a case of Canadian whiskey in the car. We picked up three girls at a drive-in who told us, "We're having a party at our house, let's go there." Naturally we said, "That sounds great. Sure, let's go."

The girls really wanted our case of whiskey — not us. As it turned out, it wasn't their house but a house rented by a bunch of college guys. About 15 guys and a couple of girls were partying and getting drunk.

One of our guys got rowdy and threw a whiskey bottle through the apartment window. Then things got ugly. The college guys got rough with us and cussed us out.

I went bananas and screamed, "Come on outside and fight!" They had us outnumbered, but we didn't care. We were soldiers and all psyched up. I pulled a knife on a guy, and as I did, he stuck a .38 in my stomach.

"Hey, man," I said, realizing this was no joke, "take it easy. You don't want to kill somebody." These guys were really mad now. As I put the knife slowly in my pocket, I apologized. "Hey, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. You guys, tell them you are sorry. We just want to go. We don't want any trouble."

Just then another guy walked out of the house with a shotgun and leveled it right on my head. By this time, I was almost sweating blood. I had a .38 in my gut and a 12-gauge pointed at my head.

"Let's go, guys, they can have the whiskey. It's not worth getting wasted over." We left, and I trembled all the way home. *Will I never learn?* I thought.



1966 — Ft. Gordan, Georgia

Airborne infantry was as close to hell as I ever want to experience. The intense training was laced with competition that turned everybody against everybody. We soon became and were treated like animals.

It was so bizarre, crazy, and yet real. I'd run around the streets screaming, "Kill, kill, kill! Kill VC! I want to be an airborne ranger, living on blood and guts and danger!"

We got perhaps four hours of sleep, and the rest of the day centered around brainwashing, calisthenics, hand-to-hand, and different types of training, including plastic explosives. Blind-folded, we were trained to break down a dozen different kinds of weapons and learn the parts and how to put them together. We'd had a taste of that in basic training, but it hadn't been with the same intensity and spirit. In basic, everyone was just trying to get through it and get to their AIT (Advanced Individual Training), which might be electronics, airplane maintenance, type clerk, signal corp, or some kind of education.

The sergeants who trained us lived to make us miserable. They called us the filthiest names imaginable and kicked us square in the rump for no reason. Out of the blue, they would shout, "You men, drop! Do a hundred!" We would dive to the ground and do pushups until our arms almost gave way. To make it harder, they would put a foot on our back and push us to make us give some more.

In the barracks, the constant demand for perfection continued. Every day we cleaned the floor and buffed it with a sheepskin. In order not to damage the shine, we hopped from bed to bed instead of walking on the floor. Our shoes and uniforms had to be impeccable. Every evening I cleaned my belt buckle inside and out using "brasso" and a Q-tip.

In formation one day, the sergeant took my belt buckle and looked on the inside of it. "Is this a cotton fiber, Steer?"

I stood breathless with my heart pounding, knowing I was in trouble. You'd have thought I shot the president. When he got

done cursing and dressing me down, he made me run a mile and a half screaming at the top of my lungs, “I am a jackass. I am a jackass. I am a jackass.”

The army’s strategy was to eliminate the guys who couldn’t take the verbal, psychological — and sometimes physical — abuse. In Vietnam, they wanted people who could stick it out no matter what happened. They needed soldiers who would take orders blindly without thinking or considering the outcome. They wanted us to react to whatever was said — and now!

One of the recruits in our outfit was a golden glove champion boxer. A sergeant found out about this and said to him, “You don’t like me, do you, Sid?”

“It’s not my job to like you, sergeant,” Sid replied. “You’re my teacher, and I will do what you tell me.”

The sergeant pushed Sid and said, “But really, you don’t like me do you? You hate my guts, don’t you?”

Finally Sid said, “Yes sergeant, I hate your guts.”

“You’d like to kick my ass, wouldn’t you?”

“No, sergeant. I don’t want any trouble. I just want to get through this training. I don’t want any trouble.”

The sergeant kept pushing him.

“Well, I would like a crack at it sometime, but I’m not going to get in trouble over it,” Sid admitted.

The sergeant, who was an expert in karate, said, “You follow me,” and took Sid off into the woods. A short time later, he brought Sid back, carrying him over his shoulder and dropped him in front of us. The sergeant made his point, and we all took notice.



For hand-to-hand combat training, we had to form a circle and were called out to fight each other with sticks which were padded on both ends. If the sergeant didn’t like a guy, he would call him out into the middle over and over. They were always picking on somebody — if you had red hair, if you had an airborne ring, if you had a tattoo — anything to make an example of one person.

Two minutes of this kind of fighting was enough to wear anybody out. The sergeants were proficient at it. They would hit their “victim” in the groin or in the head a couple of times and then punch him down to the ground so hard the wind was knocked out of him.

“Get up, you sissy!” they would laugh as they kicked sawdust in the guy’s face until he’d get up. As soon as the guy would attempt to get up, they would knock him back down. If he was someone they didn’t like, they would get him in the circle and work him over. In order not to get in trouble for beating him up, they would team one guy off with his buddy and then everyone would holler: “Kill him! Kill him!” The spirit of competition would take over, and the guy would want to kill his own buddy.

When the sarge wanted to be particularly sadistic, he would give the stick to another guy, then another guy, and still another guy. I’ll never forget the day I had to fight six different guys. I was so tired and battered that I could hardly move. It was terrible.

Our training became progressively more strenuous. At times I thought I would lose my sanity. My hatred and bitterness became more complex the longer I trained.

One incident stands out most vividly in my mind. The drill involved taking a man’s weapon away and disarming him. In this instance, it was his rifle which had a fixed bayonet. We were taken to a sawdust pit about 200 feet long, paired off and facing each other. A sergeant watched every two pairs. We had no more than hit the sawdust when my partner came at me like a madman screaming at the top of his voice, “Ke-yaa!”

Instantly I wanted to kill him and gave him a karate chop to his head. He yelled. Then I grabbed his hands and flipped him to the ground. I heard him scream again, but this time it was pain causing the wail. Blood was all over his face. My heart raced with excitement at the same time that fear gripped me. *I must have really hurt him*, I thought.

Suddenly, I was hit on the back. I jerked to attention as the sergeant yelled, “That’s the way to do it, kill ‘em. That’s how you do it, boy!” Looking down at the guy in the sawdust, he bent over, cursed him, jerked him up, and said, “Get your ass over to

the infirmary. Get your head sewed up and get back here fast. Do you understand me, soldier?"

"Clear, Sergeant Airborne!" was the faint reply.

My emotions were fast becoming seared. The sergeant saying, "That's the way," overshadowed any feeling of remorse or pity. Pride and arrogance swelled within me as I pondered: *Yes, airborne isn't for the weak. It's for a real macho man like me.*



The apex of the airborne infantry training came when we had to go through an escape and evasion course in the swamp at Ft. Gordan. This simulated Vietnamese war zone included Vietnam villages, artillery fire, wire, and booby traps. The sergeants and other officers were the "Vietnamese."

After dark, each man was given a map. We weren't fighting as an outfit. This was one against the Cong. Every man was out for himself. We weren't fighting together.

We'd heard a lot about what went on in the dark. Guys were getting their arms broken and even being tortured. "If you are captured," I was told, "they take you to a Vietnamese village and chain logs around your legs. Then they make you march with the logs attached." The object was to not get caught. Although we were given blank bullets and weren't supposed to really hurt anybody, it was almost impossible not to inflict some harm or injury. Although I was scared, I was determined to get through the death-defying ten-mile course without getting caught. The first guys through got a pat on the back. There were 300 of us, and all were determined to be number one.

I set my face like flint and faded into the midnight darkness. Within minutes I could hear men yelling as they were taken prisoner and herded into the waiting trucks. The "prisoners" were first taken to a camp where the "enemy" tried to get them to give more information than their name, rank, and serial number. They worked their "captives" over trying to break them.

I was about halfway through the course when suddenly from out of nowhere a lieutenant jumped up, put his rifle on my head, and said, "I've got you, soldier. You're caught."

Terror overcame me as I kicked him in the groin and hit him on the side of the face with the butt of my weapon. It was dark so I knew he couldn't identify me. I took off running like a deer. *No one will ever take me and live*, I thought. To me it was no longer a game. It was real war!

Finally I saw the lights of the lodge. I made it! I had made it! My reward was a cup of hot chocolate and a pat on the back. I was 31st to arrive out of the 300. As many as 200 were caught and taken prisoner. I felt proud of my accomplishment.

The next day at formations, most of the men looked as if they had just returned from the front lines. They had broken hands, fingers, black eyes, and bad bruises everywhere.

The lieutenant stood at attention like a statue. He never said one word about his black eye — but I sure knew how he got it!

By the time I graduated from AIT, I thought I was the toughest alive. I was ready to take on anything and anybody.

I knew I had what it takes to be a paratrooper.

Jump School

Get up, you so and so. If you can't take it, get out!" I had blacked out during an intensive run, and somebody was kicking me and screaming in my ear.

Although I had Osgood-Slatters disease in my knees and wasn't supposed to be running, I was determined to master this flaw in my physical ability. I got up and kept on running.

"I want to be an airborne ranger, living on blood and guts and danger!" All the way, every day, we screamed the same chant while running five miles before breakfast around the streets of Fort Benning, Georgia. This was in mid-1966.

By this time, I was operating on sheer grit, pure hate, and fierce competition. If it killed me, I was going to get through jump school. Many recruits, who couldn't stand the strain, had already been screened out. Those of us who had made it felt tougher and more elite.

I had thought that AIT (Advanced Individual Training) was rough until I got to jump school. AIT was a breeze compared to three weeks I was now enduring. Unlike AIT, in jump school all the trainees, including the officers who trained along with us, were treated the same — like dogs.

One day as we were running around the track, I noticed that a man was having trouble making the run. By this time, I was in pretty good shape, so I dropped back a little bit and grabbed him by the hand. When I did, I noticed he was the

priest I had heard about. For some reason, he was trying to become a paratrooper. Such a feat at age 28 was quite ambitious considering the rigorous training required.

While I was in the military, I don't believe I ever met a Christian. I probably did, but no one ever told me they loved Jesus. In fact, the few preachers going through paratrooper training could tell dirty jokes as well as rest of us.

I said, "Come on, Father, we can make it." We were half-running, and I was half-dragging him.

A sergeant stopped me and called me over on the side: "Are you religious?"

"No, Sergeant, I'm not religious." That was the truth. My folks had always sent us kids to Sunday school and church, but they never went with us. Dad would give us each a dime or 15 cents to put in the church offering. To prove that we went we had to show him the church bulletin.

I would drop off the younger kids at Sunday school, take all the offering money, and go to my friend's house. It was like my place of refuge.

If I were drunk or if the police were after me, I couldn't go home so I'd run to my friend's house. His mother would hide me in the basement. When the police came knocking on the door, she would pretend not to know me.

My friend's mother lived with a big guy who had scars all over his body from knife fights. On Sunday mornings while I gambled with the church offering, he would tell us wild stories about honky-tonks and the wicked things he had done. One Sunday I won almost five dollars from him. He flew into a rage, pulled a knife on me, and threw me out of the house. My answer to the sergeant was accurate. I certainly was not religious.



"What are you doing helping that blankety-blank priest?" the sergeant now wanted to know.

"Well, I didn't stop running. I just reached back and helped him a little bit."

He cursed me and said, "I'm going to get you out of the airborne. We don't need people in the airborne like you. I'm going to see that you don't make it through."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing! My intuition told me I was in for some trouble!

The next day we were to begin our training on the swing-line trainer. After being harnessed into a big steel ring, we were to be dropped every which way, continually, from about four or five feet. Pulleys hooked in every possible direction simulated how we would land in a parachute. If the wind blew a little wrong at the last minute, the trainee could end up landing on his head. The instructors were to tip us in every direction, and we were supposed to do a PLF (parachute landing fall).

When it was my turn in the swing-line ring, my sergeant hollered, "Hey, captain, come here. See this kid here? He's religious. He's helping the priest. Let's show him what we do to religious people." They were always looking for somebody to use as an example. I never wanted to be that person. All of a sudden, I was "the target."

At first, they usually drop the trainee a couple of times and let him go. To me, however, they just kept doing it, and taunting and teasing, "What's the matter, don't you know how to land? You'll never be a paratrooper." They dropped me on my head and put me in a position where I'd hit the steel rim with my chin. They worked me over, but I had determined beforehand to keep my cool. I endured it and kept my mouth shut. Finally, they let me down.



I never thought I would hear the words, "Tomorrow you jump." My heart pounded with excitement at the anticipation of the first jump. What would it be like to feel the wind rush by my cheeks and to see the ground looming at a death pace below me? Tomorrow I would know.

Breakfast was endless as the time of the jump approached.

"All right, men," the sergeant bellowed, "climb on the platform and jump."

“What’s this all about?” I asked the guy standing next to me as we climbed out onto a three-foot high platform to jump. For a week we jumped off the mini platform — hundreds and hundreds of times.

Anyone who dared to say one word jumped a hundred more times. Everything must be done in mute obedience — so I jumped and jumped and jumped — no rushing wind, no free fall — no nothing! They were teaching us how to land — from the frightening height of three feet.

The next phase was more intriguing — jumping off a 30-foot trainer. When I put my harness on wrong the first time and it shifted in my crotch, I knew then this was a serious life-and-death situation.

We climbed the tower, harnessed up, and jumped. After a free fall of 12 feet, the cable that was attached to the harness grabbed and jerked as though the chute had just opened. We then rode the cable at 20 miles an hour to the ground.

The sergeants were there constantly with their bullhorns cursing each person jumping. “Get back up there. Do it again. Do it again. Watch your landing. You will break your back, you idiot.” We continually went through this process until we could jump off the platform blindfolded and do it without thinking. It’s like karate or anything else; after you train over and over and over, you repeat a certain act automatically — without consciously thinking about what you are doing. It becomes instinct.

The next tower was 250 feet high. This time we were in a parachute and hoisted to the top and dropped. By then I was a little more cautious and aware of the danger involved. The sergeants refrained from too much harassment because some of the men were getting hurt.

If a wind came up and blew the jumper back into the tower, and he didn’t slip right or steer that parachute properly, he would get wrapped around the steel tower. I knew I could be hurt or perhaps even killed.

In spite of the danger, it was fun because we were really parachute jumping. Again and again we jumped; over and

over and over. By this time we were so brainwashed, we truly thought, *Man, we're the best.*

"We're the best, and everybody else is dogs!" we bragged to one another. If we encountered a "leg" — somebody who wasn't a paratrooper — we looked down on him as if he were the scum of the earth. This kind of bravado appealed to my low self-worth. Finally, I was somebody.



Growing up, I had always been jealous of my younger brother Jerry. He was my dad's favorite — the smart one. I was the dumb one. Jerry was the one who got to take piano lessons for four years. I wanted guitar lessons, but Dad thought that was stupid. I wanted drum lessons, but that was stupid, too. Everything I wanted to do was "stupid."

Using my baby-sitting money, I bought a set of bongo drums and taught myself how to play them.

When we had house guests, Dad would have Jerry play the piano for them. I was starved for that kind of attention, but I never got it. One day when Dad had company over, I said, "Dad, I can play my bongo drums, too."

Usually he would always shut me up, but this time I was so persistent and kept interrupting: "Dad, I can play my bongo drums, too."

Finally he said, "Go get them." Since I was trying to play the drums with no accompaniment, the people were laughing at how silly this sounded. Then Dad made a complete fool out of me in front of everybody, and I thought it was on purpose. He made me feel like the lowest creature on earth — I wanted to crawl under the rug.

Although I was starved for love, Dad's rejection only intensified my hate and rebellion. And my arrogance and bad attitude drove Dad and I further apart.

I craved love from my mother, but she was too busy taking care of all six children and trying to cope with Dad and his drinking problem. She had little time to meet her own needs much less give me the emotional attention I required.

In some ways, I took out my frustration and envy on my younger brother. One day Jerry took a kitchen knife and pretended he was going to cut me. Thinking he was serious, I grabbed a knife, too. I had already been in a knife fight or two on the streets. Before I knew what happened, I had laid his lip wide open.

Fear gripped me. "Look, I'll give you money, candy, my toys, whatever I have," I promised, "but please don't tell Mom and Dad what happened." I knew they wouldn't believe me, and I'd get a terrible beating.

Jerry agreed and never told them that I had cut him.

When we were a little older, Jerry and I were ice skating on the Mississippi River along with some other kids. We had a couple of six-packs of beer and some girls with us.

After a couple of beers, Jerry started acting crazy and began to curse me. I was the tough guy in the neighborhood, and I couldn't let my little brother get away with putting me down. Twice I skated up to Jerry, grabbed him, and said, "If you don't shut up, I'm going to punch you out."

"I'm sorry, I won't do it again, John," he replied.

Then he did it again! I skated over and belted him so hard he didn't know what hit him. He fell and his head hit the ice and was knocked out for about half an hour. I wasn't scared so much about him dying as I was about what was going to happen to me if he did.

When he came to, he ran off into the woods and fell asleep on a snow bank for about an hour. I stayed there with him and tried to wake him up, but to no avail. Finally when he came to, I talked him out of telling Mom and Dad. I don't remember what it cost me, but it was probably a lot.

I was so jealous of Jerry that I was possessed with envy. It didn't seem fair that he could play the piano and know how to make pretty music. I hated him for that and desperately wanted to get Jerry in trouble.

In my twisted mind, I decided to kill myself and somehow put the guilt and blame on him. I was so lonely and so desperate for love. One day I stood on the bridge for hours

wanting to jump. The only thing stopping me was my fear of going to hell.

I'm always wrong, I thought. I'm so bad. That's why nobody likes me — I'm bad. I'm no good. Everybody tells me I'm no good, so I must not be any good, I thought.

I didn't jump that day — not from lack of desire — but because of fear. Day after day, I was in a constant state of depression. Suicide was always on my mind.

One day I rigged up a rope on the bathroom pipes and put it around my neck. Then I tried to trick Jerry into kicking the stool out from under me. If I can get him to kick the stool, I figured, I'll have killed two birds with one stone. I will be out of the picture, and I didn't do it. I could say, "See, God, I didn't kill myself — my brother did it." Then I wouldn't go to hell. At the same time, my brother would be blamed and get into trouble with Mom and Dad.

I also liked to think that my parents would feel great remorse and mourn my passing with deep regret. "We should have been nicer to John," I imagined them saying. "Now he's gone, and it's all Jerry's fault." My main motive for self-destruction was rejection. All I wanted was love and acceptance even if I had to die to get it.



"If you get on the plane, the only way you will get down is jumping out the door in flight — by parachute," the sarge told us. It was jump week and the day we had all been training for the past three weeks in jump school and five months in the army. Psyched up and afraid at the same time, we were ready. We had to make five jumps in one week.

Before we had boarded the airplanes, our sarge had gathered about 60 of us together and said, "Look, men, this is the day you have been waiting for. If you want to chicken out, this is the time to do it. I won't say a word. No one has to get on the plane."

I wondered how many would bail out. There were none. We were always looking for quitters and trying to force them out. In a combat situation, we certainly didn't want that kind

of guy next to us. Of course, if we found somebody weaker, that made us feel more macho.

After boarding the plane, each of us tried to prepare ourselves to make the first jump. All hooked up and scared witless, I kept thinking about all the stories I had heard — like the one about the guy who landed in the tree or the one whose parachute didn't open. *In a few moments, I'll be the one standing at the open door*, I thought.

The red light started blinking, and the doors opened on both sides of the plane. A 30-man stick (line) formed nervously on each side. A jump master stood at each door to make sure whoever got to that doorway went out!

I mentally reviewed the procedure we'd learned in training. The green light comes on, and you stand in the door. You slap your hands on the door, and you're ready to go. The first jump is at five-second intervals. You go in five seconds, the next guy goes, the next guy goes, etc.

Suddenly I realized the doors had opened. We were actually going to jump. I was tenth in the stick.

"Be prepared for the prop wash," the jump master shouted above the engine's roar. "Remember, it will pick you up and throw you up and behind the plane."

Suddenly, the line started moving. I was on my way. All of the training on how to jump out of the plane proved useless because as soon as I reached the door, the sergeant gave me a shove — and I was on my way!

With a swish I was thrown up and back. The static line followed as I did a circle and started falling. The static line then ripped the chute open, and I felt the terrible jerk. I looked up and checked my canopy. It was beautiful. All my training had paid off, and suddenly I was in heaven flying by myself. At 1,250 feet, I seemed to lose my natural consciousness. *This is God's country*, I thought. Paratroopers floated all around me — the buddies I was going to fight with and die with. It was an inspirational moment.

Then I started to remember the things I was taught. Oh yeah, I can steer this thing. I reached up and pulled my

shroud lines down into me. It spilled the air out of the back of the chute, and I went shooo . . . floating to the left. It was breathtaking. “Wow!” I said out loud, as I grabbed the line another way and went in that direction. “This is out of sight.” It was an incredible feeling of freedom and peace.

It's taking forever to get to the ground, I thought. Then, all of a sudden, I was a hundred feet from the dirt, and the ground was jumping up at me. I screamed, “What do I do? What do I do?” My mind went blank. I forgot everything!

Instinct kicked in, and I hit the ground and did what I was supposed to do. I had made it — my first jump!

The landing was harder than I had anticipated. I hadn't expected my knees to smash into my chin when I hit the ground. *This is really serious*, I thought. But who cares? I made it. Quickly I ran and grabbed the apex of my chute and brought it around into the wind so it wouldn't drag me. I was not a paratrooper yet because I hadn't made five jumps, but man, I could do it! I could really do it. I was safe on the ground, and I'd made it.

In an hour or so as we were picked up, I found out that quite a few had been hurt. “Hey, John,” my buddy yelled, “did you hear that Jason Hill broke his ankle?”

“That's nothing, you should have seen them carry Rick away. His back was broken,” another remarked. Because of those comments and others, I started to get a little more apprehensive about jumping. Now in reality, not theory, I knew I could actually be severely hurt or even killed jumping. Regardless of these facts, I told myself, *I am going to become a paratrooper and finish my five jumps*.

The second jump was rather uneventful even though I was scared witless. The first jump had been the easiest because I hadn't known what to expect. As the time approached for my third jump, the apprehension in me mounted. For some unknown reason my fear grew more anguished. When I approached the door of the airplane, I knew I had to jump even though everything in me said, “Don't!”

Suddenly I felt the jerks of the lines, but it was different. My parachute did a cigarette roll and did not fully open. I was

slowed somewhat, but still plunging to my doom. I suddenly knew why I had been so apprehensive.

I had a reserve chute I could open, but if I did, it could wrap around my main one. I knew that opening up a reserve, especially falling at 100 mph, could be tricky.

Since the reserve chute is carried in front, the lines open up in the parachutist's face. Unlike the chute in the back, the reserve is not as large. *I don't want to pull my reserve unless I absolutely have to*, I said to myself.

Suddenly, I was sitting on the canopy of another man's chute. As I grabbed his apex, I realized that both of us could be dead in a matter of minutes. Panic almost overcame me.

He began to curse, calling me every name in the book. Since I had his parachute about half dipped in the middle, I couldn't blame him. He kept hollering, "Get off my chute!"

"Man, I ain't about to get off of here," I screamed. I frantically shook my shroud lines trying to get the chute to open. Finally, it popped free. Suddenly, I was lifted off the parachute over to the side.

Before I knew what was happening, I drifted into the top of his parachute, and it collapsed around my waist. He was really cursing me now because I was all tied up in his shroud lines. At that point, however, I was his only salvation because he was going down with my parachute.

"Shut up, man" I yelled. "I'm doing all I can. Just shut up. Don't you know I'm trying? You think I like this?"

I got untangled from him about 50 feet or so above the ground when his chute fully opened. Prior to that it was about half-opened. When he got loose, he drifted right under me — which took the air out of my parachute. When that happened, I dropped like a rock.

I didn't get hurt very badly when I fell. In fact, it was a miracle that I didn't break every bone in my body. My knees hit my chin, and it felt like I had broken my jaw. "Man, you can get killed doing this stuff," I mumbled to myself.

I had two more jumps left. By this time every jump was getting worse. Then I was thinking: *To remain on jump status*

I have to make at least a jump a month all the time that I'm a paratrooper. I don't know whether this is really worth it or not.

The atmosphere was so intense, and I was so psyched up about going through it, that I didn't seriously consider not jumping again.

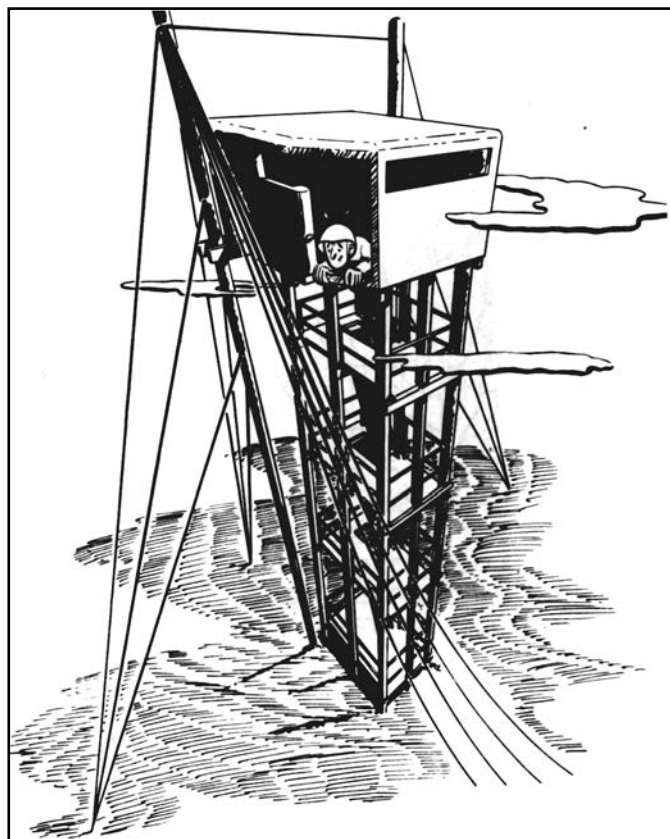
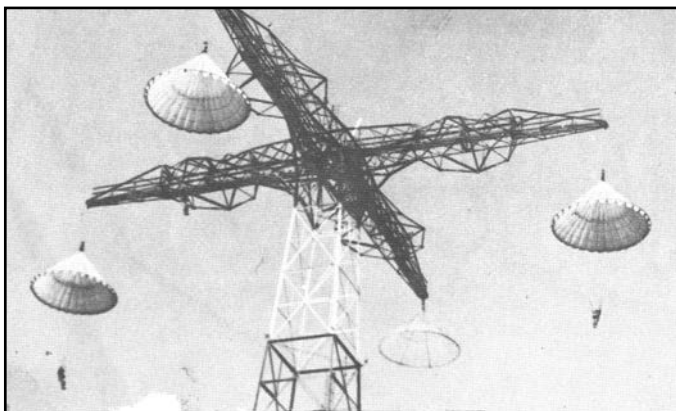
Whoever packs a chute puts his name and identification on that chute. Any paratrooper has the right at any time to say, "I'm not jumping with this chute." Then the guy who packs it jumps it and if there's something wrong with it, he's the one who suffers the consequences.

The joke during training was, "If your chute doesn't open, you can always come back and get another one!"

The last jump I made was an equipment jump that drove me into the ground and hammered me hard. The side of my head hit first, then the rest of me plowed into the dirt — along with all the equipment strapped on my body. I was badly bruised and sore for about a week.

With that jump I was a paratrooper — and with no broken bones. I'll never forget the thrill of standing at attention while the general pinned my wings on my uniform. I was now qualified to go into special forces or into the ranger school. But that would mean more of the same kind of training.

I was ready to go to Vietnam. I wanted to go. I was going to end the war.



"GEE, THIS MOCK TOWER IS CUTE.
ONLY 34 FEET. . .
OR DID THEY SAY YARDS!"