



Here are three of the thirty-three stories contained in **RETURN TO EDEN**, by Tucker Smallwood, a former Army Advisor to Vietnamese Delta Militia and now a well-known actor (seen in TV shows such as *Star Trek: Enterprise*, *The Practice*, and *Malcolm in the Middle* among many other television shows and films). Each account is true. The book, with 55 photographs also exists as an MP3 audio book (read by the author) at www.lulu.com/tuckersmallwood. **RETURN TO EDEN** is available by audio download at www.Audible.com.

issue was never whether we'd get wet (count on it), but whether we'd dry off before we got wet again. Leeches, trenchfoot, jungle rot were all simply a condition of life in the Delta; keeping our weapons, ammo and the PRC-25 radio dry were as essential as breathing, and often required creative solutions to the simplest of movements. Both Sgt. Sparks and Sgt. Brand were taller than I but were rarely with me. One was usually manning the radio at my base camp; the other more often than not was with a separate element of the operation. As I was by now fluent in Vietnamese, I generally left our interpreter with one of them.

Because I was now the tallest man for miles, it usually fell to me to carry across water the radio and occasionally the M 60 machine gun. Imagine crossing water over six feet deep, arms extended overhead, protecting the precious battery and radio from the salt water. (I am 5' 10" on a good day.)

You take a deep breath, focus on the far bank, gauge the current and set off for the other side, hoping to not get stuck in the mud bottom, praying you don't wander off course before your air runs out. One stumble or moment of panic and we've lost our communications – our lifeline to artillery, air strikes and most critically, Medevacs.

Occasionally a soldier was swept away by the water, but we always recovered him and pressed on. In a squad-sized crossing, we'd send two or three men to secure the far side, then I'd cross with the radio, then the remainder would cross over while we covered them.

of an American. And I experienced a momentary rush to judgment, “How careless, that a trooper should have neglected to take along his boot.” (I was still pretty green.)

As I bent over it, I realized that he had left behind not only his boot but also his foot...and the jagged shard of shinbone protruding from the rotting remnant of his misfortune touched me in a way that was new. In a sense, I lost my innocence that cloudy morning. Somehow this sad discovery affected me in a way no corpse ever did.

I took a snapshot of it as I passed – the first and only time I recorded on film the human detritus of combat. To this day, I feel shame that I chose to photograph it...rather than to bury it.

JUNE 1988

RIGHT WING HIPPIE

Several weeks ago, on a whim, I entered an old friend's name into an Internet search engine. It offered a number of possibilities, but I chose the New York selection, remembering Jack having mentioned Cornell. I called, got a machine and left a message. Yesterday his father returned my call, telling me Jack now lives in Belgium and would love to hear from me.

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Last night, I called him, 7 AM his time, and made both our days. He'd never again expected to hear from me, had no idea I'd become an actor, but told me he has a picture of us on his wall. His daughters often asked, "Who is that guy?" His answer to them makes me very proud. I wrote this essay years ago to re-create our visit. He's the first person I've spoken to in 27 years that knew me in Vietnam.

1998

I got a radio call one day from Saigon, someone wishing to speak to the "tasteless and degenerate commander of MAT-36, suspected of preferring the Rolling Stones to the BeeGees". Of course it was Jack Jolis. Sequestered in Saigon for the past ten months, he'd enjoyed air conditioning, cotton sheets, the company of beautiful sophisticated women, flush toilets, hot showers...perks without which the hard-core REMF might find it difficult to wage war.

For all this time, assigned to Intelligence, he'd crunched numbers, briefed commanders, assessed bomb damage, counted bodies...but had yet to see or hear a shot fired in anger – at least at the enemy. And he desperately wanted to. And how could he not? How could the comforts of life in the rear compare to the smell of cordite, of blood, of napalm in the morning? The rush of fear for survival, the crack of an AK round passing directly overhead, the pounding of your heart as you sighted and then squeezed off a round with bad

intentions, meant to terminate the life of another human being? And this was all legal !!!

I invited him to meet me in two days at the Binh Dien Bridge, his M-16 locked and loaded, a case of beer in hand and his legal affairs in order. This last suggestion got his attention but he was not to be deterred. And at noon on Saturday he appeared on the landing beneath the bridge, burbling, bubbling and babbling with anticipation, thirsty for ADVENTURE and the experience of WAR. He was not to be disappointed.

As we cruised west to my base camp, I filled Jolis in on the weekend itinerary – a little watersports, beer of course, and perhaps a close encounter with the enemy. Actually, we lived with the enemy, since the ville we defended was VC-contested. We saw Charlie daily, we just didn't recognize him – unless he was rash enough to bring along his AK. Of course anyone caught slipping in or out at night was lit up on sight, but Charlie quickly learned to avoid our nightly ambush patrols. The majority of our kills resulted from VC raids out of the west, forays originating from Cambodia.

Jolis was familiar with our local adversaries, noting that we'd pretty much crippled the 55th VC Battalion during my first night of action. He regaled me with tales of debauchery and intrigue, and after three months of life in the bush, I was ready to swap lives with him. Thus far, I'd managed two hot showers, though we did enjoy an occasional steam and cream session in the

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fleshpots of Saigon, whenever a trip in for barter or begging could be arranged.



Jack and I outside my base camp

(He used this photo on the back of his novels but erased my image with the magic of photo editing!)

I usually got my people in every few weeks for an afternoon R & R, it kept tension down and was good for morale. His visit meant someone could get two more hours of sleep tonight, for Jolis would surely pull a radio watch. But I hesitated to take him out on ambush patrol. As much as I liked him, it made no sense to risk being compromised; he was rusty.

We docked and tied up to the cyclone fence that defended our river facade from RPG attacks. I introduced Jolis to the team and took him to the rear patio for some lunch, negotiating with Mammasan to spare no extravagance. No rat or snake today – chicken if we have any or shrimp, if anyone's been out foraging. Jolis and I pigged out on chicken and rice, and over a few beers, caught up on each other's travels since graduation.

I decided we should water-ski while relatively sober and prepared the boat for an afternoon cruise towards Cambodia. Dai manned the M-60, Jolis soon learned to steer and I mounted the skis for the first run. We were off, accompanied by the cheers of the village kids along the bank and then raced west about three clicks, where the foliage along the sides gradually changed from bushes and trees to reeds, the rice paddies receding in the distance.

This was Indian country. It was lovely...serene and private, spiced with the possibility of encountering our nemesis – One-Shot Charlie and his trusty SKS.

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God help us if he ever acquired an AK with a full magazine...

No shots were fired, so I called out to Jolis to switch places with me and try his hand at it. Jack was a natural and we were soon barreling along for home. I swerved the boat from bank to bank to give Jolis a little wake to work with, but he made it all the way without a spill, Dai relaxing on the M-60 long enough to snap a few photos for posterity.



Aboard my Boston Whaler, Jolis steers
and I ride the wake.

We docked, both disappointed and relieved that we had drawn no fire. Jolis and I retired to the rear bunker for a cold beer and reflection. The afternoon passed

quietly. I remember Jolis asking my appraisal of war, of command. Was it all I had expected? Had he missed out on the ultimate life experience – to hunt and be hunted by men? It occurred to me that there were men who would be forever haunted by the irony of having been in a war zone but never in The War.

As I pondered my debatable good fortune that I was in The War, the radio crackled and my call sign came on. I was needed by a sister company to our southwest. They had trapped five VC in the nippapalm and wanted me to call in an airstrike. I looked over at Jolis and asked, “Ready to see The War?” Stunned, he nodded, warily. I told him to grab his M-16 and a few bandoleers – just in case. I tossed him a first aid bandage and canteen and warned him to be ready to move out in five minutes.

I quickly briefed my team and counterpart, grabbed my 16 and PRC-25 radio. We saddled up and moved out through the perimeter wire, just the two of us. As we crossed the rice paddies and moved into hedgerows, I radioed Bien Hoa for a light fire team of Cobra gunships to meet us on station, then switched to the Vietnamese frequency to announce our imminent arrival. After about twenty minutes of brisk walking, we were in sight of the scout sent out to meet us.

As we approached their defensive position set up behind a paddy dike, I could hear the sound of choppers coming up on our rear. I switched back to the Cobra freq, described the targets and identified our

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position by popping smoke on our flanks. I requested an initial rocket assault to be followed by a strafing run with miniguns. Cobra leader identified our smoke and prepared for the first pass.

There's a lot going on and it's all very compelling to watch. It occurs to me to remind Jolis that we are not in Yankee Stadium or the Oakland Coliseum, but in a live fire exercise. This is now in fact, THE WAR he'd been hearing so much about and that he should keep his head down, since those green tracers passing overhead are AK rounds fired by Charlie at us!

The entire setting was reminiscent of the last rock concert I'd seen before departing CONUS, the Jefferson Airplane, in Oakland. I was of course tripping on mescaline that night, but these visuals were similar, comparable in majesty to their accompanying light show, Glenn McKay's HEADLIGHTS.

Picture a brilliant tropical sunset, violet smoke billowing from our flanks, green tracers from Charlie, and the lushness of the nippapalm (soon to be ablaze). Now add to this setting the incomparable pyrotechnics of the Huey Cobra. Their rocket pass is now complete. The jungle is awash with fire and streamers of white phosphorus trailing in the air as the rockets detonate.

The Cobras begin their strafing run and I offer a silent prayer of thanks that I am directing this fire and not receiving it. Cobra miniguns pour what seems a solid stream of orange fire into their targets (every fifth round is a tracer), thousands of rounds per minute. It sounds like a humongous Hoover vacuum cleaner at

work. Glorious to watch, hellish and lethal to endure. The pattern of fire so thorough, a target the size of a football field receives one round in each square foot.

It is done. Engagements are rarely this decisive, but understandably there are no more green tracers to be seen – nor will there be. As a squad of my troops move out to sweep the kill zone, I thank the Cobra commander for a job well done and promise to later radio in a body count. I lean over to ask Jolis what he thinks of combat. For the first time in memory, he is speechless.

I leave him with his thoughts and confer with the company commander. We decide to remain on-station, in the event of a follow-up attack later that night and we move out to his base camp. As we walk, I radio my team to carry on, that we'll rejoin them at first light, and apologize for their extended radio watches necessitated by our absence. Jolis is still quiet.

We accepted the hospitality of our hosts – rice and tea, and we provided cigarettes, always a big hit with our allies. By 2300 hrs, Jolis dozed on a nearby cot while I chatted with the RF commander. An outgoing mortar round roused him and he asked what we were talking about. When I told him that the last occupant of his cot now lay dead in a poncho, the victim of an attack the night before, Jolis rolled to the ground before I'd finished speaking, shuddering at the bad karma. He spent the rest of the night in wide-eyed watchfulness.

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I turned in at 0200, knowing Charlie never struck that late. Charlie liked his sleep, too.

The next morning, we returned to my base and I drove Jolis back to the Binh Dien Bridge. He was still rather subdued, his mind processing the events of the past 24 hours, but he thanked me for the visit, swore to stay in touch, and drove off in his jeep.

I never saw him again, but a week later, I received a package from his HQ. It was the most beautiful AK-47 I have ever seen. We found them occasionally after a firefight or while searching a hooch, but this one had been re-blued, the stock sanded and lacquered – a war trophy fit for a general. An enclosed note again thanked me for the experience, his tour was now complete and he would never forget this weekend.

For years afterward, once stateside, I tried in vain to contact him, but he had dropped off the face of the earth. A few years ago, I suddenly remembered something he had told me that night. He planned to DEROS, get an early out and apply to the CIA. Jolis became a spook. I guess he liked the action.

1994



REBIRTHDAY

I'd been semi-conscious for several hours, still in the space of reflection. The morphine had long since worn off but I felt little pain; more discomfort. From the IV...trach...sutures...and the absence of my accustomed alertness. It was a dream-like state, set in an unfamiliar hospital ward. Unending rows of beds...and cold! Bitterly cold! How had I not before noticed how

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absurdly cold it was? I began to shiver, which made me aware of still more sutures...and then I remembered to check my leg. My God! How could I have forgotten about my leg?

I remembered having thought, as I blocked the blood, pulsing from my throat, “If they can’t save my leg, fuck it, I ain’t comin’ back!” How reckless, how insignificant a leg, compared to continued existence. Yet at the time, aware that I was dying, I was quite clear on this point. Life as I knew it involved two legs and I was unwilling to carry on with less. It was a vivid but passing thought; there were far more pressing concerns at the time – the six men around me who lay dead and wounded. On this mission, I alone spoke English... and as always, I carried the radio.

Obviously I’d managed a successful extraction, for I now lay in a hospital bed rather than within the rubber bags we used for those whose day had not gone well. I had a sacred trust with my soldiers: I will move heaven and earth to support your efforts – and dead or alive, I will bring you home.

A nurse approached my bed and I spoke to her. “It’s so cold”, I tried to say but no sound came out. I then remembered I could no longer speak, had been forced to whisper into the radio, trying to raise a rescue force, while we waited for the VC to finish us off. She placed my finger over the opening in the trach and I tried again. It was a stranger’s hoarse whisper that came from my body but she understood me and explained that the ward was intentionally kept cold to cut down

on infection; she said I'd soon become accustomed to it. Bullshit! Then realized how weak I was, exhausted just with the effort of speaking a few words. She smiled, patted my hand and left to attend to the dozens of others around me.

To my left was an unconscious Marine receiving plasma and antibiotics from two IVs. I could see no bandages, which meant nothing. Everybody in this ward was seriously fucked up, not all of us would make it, and some cried out for an end to their misery. Their moans implied, "Life hurts – living is pain – I am weary of the struggle to take one more breath."

It was curious that I hadn't noticed it at first, but there was a continuous low-level...ummmmm...of human suffering; we were one collective open wound, oozing the essence of life and its fellow traveler – anguish. Oddly, I welcomed the sensations of my pain. It proved to me that I still lived. As long as I hurt, I'm alive – a simple equation.

I thought back a few hours to my first return to consciousness. It was unlike awakening from a dream, however bad the dream had been. Clarity generally comes quickly to me, I had trained myself to awaken suddenly, with full awareness but this was very different. There was a sudden rush of images and memories, then a realization:

I AM ALIVE

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How could that be? Without warning, my eyes quickly filled and the tears spilled over. “Ears full of tears,” something playwright Bill Gunn so eloquently defended: “Tears are the excrement of life and need no cause.” I slowly accepted what must be so; somehow I had been brought back, given a second chance.

I remembered that moment of acceptance in the jungle. My right carotid was severed, blood spurting ten feet in front of me. “Do not lose consciousness!” I tied my sweatband tight as I could around my throat and began to key my radio handset. Calling to my team, to anyone, whispering, “Mayday, Mayday...” It took more than thirty minutes to raise a response. And then we waited...

When help finally arrived, I noticed that I was now floating high overhead, a neutral observer. I had left my body, this the second time since my first night in combat. My dispassionate doppelganger watched as scalpels ripped away my tiger fatigues with efficient dispatch. I lay below, naked as the day I was born while they counted and assessed my wounds. When my body was lifted onto a litter, I watched my beret fell back into the mud...then just as suddenly, I returned to that body.

In the Medivac chopper, I remember the blood and the morphine they gave me. In triage, I remember the skeptical looks of those caring for me – not insensitive, just realistic, it was a busy Sunday afternoon in the war. And sometime later, on the table, my job done, I finally let it go. My doctors confirmed it. I died.

They'd turned away and said, "Next". All but one, Dr. Cardenas, who persisted and made my heart beat once again. (All this I learned later.) I'd never witnessed a miracle, I'm not even sure that I believed in miracles, but something profoundly miraculous had just occurred in my life and I was filled with...**LIGHT**. That light which becomes the temporary companion of all who have faced and accepted their death – and had it postponed. The light always fades eventually; being human, we forget how ephemeral, how conditional is our existence.

My tears continued, seemingly inexhaustible, and I was struck with the realization that it had been a long time since I had been moved to tears. Not since college, years before, when I felt shame for having struck and bloodied a man in a fistfight. In all the months of my command, amidst the pain and death and dismemberment I had witnessed and had caused, I had never once wept or experienced grief. Anger, yes – and bitterness and disappointment and disgust, but not once, grief. So I wept...and perhaps these tears were the real evidence of my rebirth, for they reflected a humanity that had somehow been lacking in the months before. They were tears of joy and they continued, unabated, as I drifted off to sleep.

When I awoke again, it was day. I knew this only because the ward was now fully lit, and I was once again aware of the bitter cold of the room. I longed for a blanket, only a thin nightshirt and cotton top sheet between me and the brutal air conditioning. I was not getting used to it. Acclimated to the three-digit

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temperatures of the Mekong Delta, cool for me was 90 degrees, this was Arctic! Then I felt the raw, dull ache of my body and knew with certainty that I would go quite mad if the narcotics they had obviously given me ever wore off.

To distract myself, I took in my immediate surroundings. To my right was the ward wall and window...beyond it, a hallway...across from me, an endless row of beds filled with all manner of broken bodies...and to my left, a young Marine just beginning to awaken. I watched with growing interest, as I intuited that he was returning from a journey we had shared. Not just war, but afterlife.

I watched my own discovery of rebirth play across his features and felt almost like a voyeur, witnessing this most private of moments, but I knew we had something unique in common, and anticipated trading my insights for his. I watched and waited to catch his eye, unwilling to break the silence with a hoarse whisper of greeting, as he took stock of his wounds.

My eyes never left his face and I saw his groggy ecstasy dissolve to disbelief...then remembering...then despair, as his mind took in the implications of the sheets below his waist. I looked down to see the two columns beneath the sheets, one ending abruptly, just above where his right knee should have been. His head fell back onto the pillow and I was finally able to tear my eyes away.

As I stared at the fluorescent lights above, I felt sadness for his loss, disappointment knowing we would

probably not be comparing notes anytime soon, if ever. And a small insidious feeling of...glee. How unworthy, how uncharitable, but it remained for some moments. A guilty yet undeniable sense of joy that it was his leg rather than mine that was lost.

SEPTEMBER 1988

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Dr. Cardenas, the surgeon who brought me back to life.