



Across the Fence

By Howard Sherpe

Reborn On the 4th of July

The 4th of July is more than just a holiday and fireworks to me. It's a very special day. It's the day I arrived home safely from Vietnam... or as I tell people, "I was reborn on the 4th of July, 1967!"

My journey to rebirth began at Pleiku in the Central Highlands of Vietnam on the morning of July 4th, when our Freedom Bird, a C-141 fitted with passenger seats, lifted off the runway. Our next stop was an emergency landing in the Philippines because of a gas line leak! We waited at the airstrip while a new plane was flown in and seats from the old one installed in the new one. We didn't mind the wait, we were out of Vietnam.

After a seven-hour delay we were airborne again. A brief stop in Japan and we were on our way to Oakland, California. We hardly slept on the long flight because water condensing on the exposed overhead pipes, kept dripping on us. We didn't mind, we were out of Vietnam.

When the plane finally touched down at 5:00 in the morning of July 4th, a cheer erupted from everyone on-board. We had left Vietnam on the morning of July 4th, traveled back in time for almost 24 hours, and landed in the U.S. on the morning of July 4th.

We spent the morning processing in at Oakland, got new uniforms, made travel arrangements, and finally called home. "Hello Ma, this is Howard... I'm home!" I told Ma I'd arrive in Minneapolis too late to get a connecting flight, so I'd catch a plane to La Crosse in the morning. She said someone would drive to Minneapolis and meet me.

Five of us took a cab from Oakland to the San Francisco airport. The woman driving the taxi was roaring in

and out of traffic at over seventy miles an hour. We were scared to death. We'd been traveling in jeeps and trucks for a year and weren't used to high-speed traffic. I thought to myself... it'd be hell to be killed in traffic after making it through a year in Vietnam.

After we'd made our flight arrangements, seven or eight of us who were still together headed to the bar. We sat down at a table and a mini-skirted waitress came over to take our order. She asked if we were all twenty-one, the legal drinking age in California. Only three of us were. She asked to see our ID's. She wouldn't serve the guys. They were old enough to die for their country but not old enough to drink! After an ugly scene, we left before they threw us out or called the MP's.

I finally boarded my flight to Minneapolis. Not many people were flying on the 4th and there were empty seats. Before our flight took off, the woman seated beside me, found out I'd just arrived from Vietnam that morning. She got up, talked to the stewardess, and was given a new seat. I didn't care, I was out of Vietnam.

In her defense, the way I looked may have frightened her! I'd hardly slept for 48 hours. I felt like a walking zombie. I was 135 pounds, haggard looking, and hollow-eyed. I'd lost 50 pounds since my family had last seen me. At least I was still five feet, nine inches tall. Too many people returned much shorter... minus their legs!

As we landed, I wondered if anyone had made it to Minneapolis to meet me. When I entered the airport, there stood my father, my sister Janet, my brother Arden, and a family friend, Lincoln Stafslie. My father didn't like driving in cities and had recruited Lincoln to drive. I will always be

grateful to him for dropping his family holiday plans and being there to pick me up!!

The ride to Westby is a blur in my mind. I wasn't functioning on all cylinders at the time, and only a week earlier had been sitting out in the boonies on an ambush patrol waiting to kill people!

I remember seeing fireworks as we drove past towns on the way to Westby. I wasn't interested. My friend Larry Skolos, from Viroqua, and I spent a memorable night together one time at a firebase. We were running short on ammo and a chopper trying to resupply us, crashed by our bunkers and caught fire. The ammunition began to explode. We were all pinned down in our bunkers as the ammo exploded all around us. As Larry said later, "That's the best display of fireworks we'll ever see in our lives!" Yes it was... and to this day Larry and I don't like fireworks.

Meanwhile, back at the farm, Ma, my fiancé Linda, and her folks, were waiting for us to arrive. Linda said that every time a car came down the highway they wondered if it was us.

We finally arrived around 11:00 that evening. The first to greet me was our old dog, Duke. As soon as he heard my voice he came running and jumped up on me.

When I walked into the kitchen, I couldn't get over how bright it was. I had spent a year living with no lights or a minimal amount of light at night.

As we sat around the kitchen table talking, nothing much had seemed to change while I was gone, and yet... everything had changed for me. The old Howard who had left a year earlier was gone, and I was reborn on the 4th of July!

Have a great 4th of July!