

Surviving to Fight Another Day: A Veteran's Story

July 31, 2010
by Arnie Snyder

Years ago, a Viet Nam veteran told his story about a battle experience, and it has stayed with me. Here it is, as best I can recall. Let's call the two characters Tom and Gene.

Tom's Army platoon was in a firefight with the Viet Cong. He and a buddy were shot, immobilized by their wounds. The rest of their unit fled to safety, leaving them to fend for themselves.

Gene was shot in the gut and legs. He was unable to walk, nor even to get up. But he was conscious and able to talk.

Tom sustained a head wound. The bullet had entered his helmet from the front, then ricocheted. He was still conscious, although stunned. Tom felt certain that within a short time, his injury would take a fatal toll.

The Viet Cong had abandoned the area. For the time being at least, the men were not threatened by more shooting. Unfortunately, their prospects of survival were fading by the minute.

Gradually, at a painfully slow rate, the initial trauma wore off for Tom. As the fog of confusion lifted, he took stock. Tom discovered he was able to make intelligible speech. The men talked about the battle, their injuries, and their likely demise.

It would be only a matter of time. The two were certain they would die, but they would encourage each other to the end.

Twenty minutes passed, then an hour. No one arrived to rescue. Yet no one had died, either.

Suddenly, Tom had a flash of insight. Not only was he still alive, he was able to think clearly. His bleeding had subsided; indeed it had almost stopped. He then realized that the bullet which entered his helmet had not penetrated his skull. The missile had careened around the helmet's interior periphery and exited out the front. His scalp had been bloodied all around, but his wounds were essentially superficial.

Then Tom did something peculiar, perhaps understandable only to battle-hardened vets. He began to laugh. At first tentatively, then heartily. "Gene, we're sitting here for no reason at all. I can think clearly; I can get up and walk; and I can carry you."

Both men made it safely back to their unit, surviving to fight another day.