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A Long Triage
Looking Back at Vietnam
by Francis "Kerry" Sullivan



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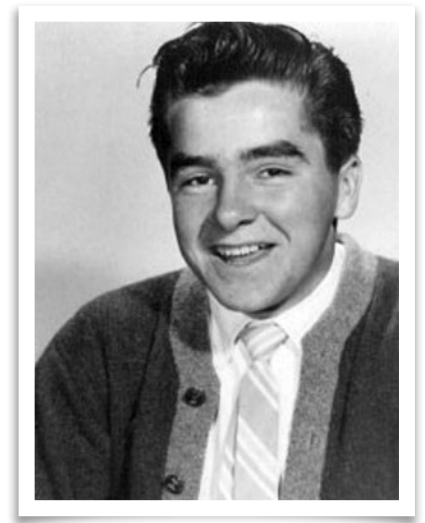
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ABOUT THE COVER PHOTO

Francis Sullivan standing on the helipad behind the Chu Lai evacuation hospital in Vietnam, circa 1968. This helipad is where wounded soldiers were brought to the hospital to be treated.

FOREWORD

Francis J. Sullivan Jr. (aka "Kerry") graduated from Rockport High School in 1966 and was drafted into the Vietnam War on March 11, 1968, serving from September 1968 to October 1969. After returning home to Cape Ann, Francis taught in the Gloucester school system for 16 years, eventually becoming an attorney. You may read more about his post-Vietnam career in the bio at the end of this story, but first, we share his experiences in Vietnam and the "after-effects" of his service.



Francis, Rockport High School, 1966.

The following excerpts were pulled and adapted from both Francis's book *A Long Triage* and his supplemental writings.

Francis began writing about his experiences in Vietnam after a doctor recommended he participate in "Narrative Therapy," which utilizes writing and storytelling as a therapeutic tool.

Some names have been changed to protect the privacy of those involved, and the author is telling the story to the best of his recollection. Some language may be graphic, but the Stories Project allows explicit language in an appropriate context.

POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER & THE VIETNAM WAR

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is defined as having flashbacks, upsetting memories, and anxiety following a traumatic event. It was officially recognized as a mental health condition in 1980, only five years after the end of the Vietnam War. For hundreds of years, these symptoms have been described by soldiers from many wars. However, Vietnam veterans with these symptoms were the first to have the term "PTSD" applied to them. Despite the passage of almost 50 years since the end of the war, for some Vietnam veterans and veterans of other wars, PTSD remains a chronic reality of everyday life.

A Long Triage

Looking Back at Vietnam

BY FRANCIS "KERRY" SULLIVAN

I've worked to put my tour of duty in Vietnam behind me and manage my emotions, but the memories haven't disappeared. They still haunt me. Regularly. And too often, they flood my mind with daydreams, nightmares, and flashbacks of my own close calls with death and impact daily life in very real and very destructive ways.

I survived my tour of duty in Vietnam and came home in one piece. I was lucky, and I'm grateful. But even now, more than fifty years later, unexpected events trigger memories that rekindle my fear of injury or death, stoke the resentment I have for that period in my life, and cause me to have outbursts and out-of-body experiences.

At first, I hear fluttering in my ears. Then I hear whistling followed by flashes of light that blind me. Sometimes I panic and dive to the ground. I'm frightened and wait for the sounds of the explosions I'm sure will follow. My heart pounds rapidly, blood rushes to my head in pulsating, aching throbs, and my mind spins like a child's toy top. I'm back in Vietnam, cramped into the fetal position, my eyes piercing the sky, waiting to die.

Other times, I stay somewhat grounded, but I lose focus. I perceive any little unexpected event as life-threatening. My fight-or-flight response kicks in. I lose control. I can't tell friend from foe. My temper flares up, and I aggressively defend myself from the people around me: my face turns red, my voice becomes crackly and loud, and the people I'm with move away from me to avoid the confrontation.

My doctors have told me that I suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). And they call these episodes "startled reactions triggered by unexpected events." Usually, after a short time, my heart slows down, my mind clears, the pulsating throbs fade away, and life resumes a somewhat normal course. But the following episode has been the worst of them all and seems never-ending.

JANUARY 17, 2014

The last thing I remember before waking up in the hospital surrounded by a team of doctors was eating lunch at a restaurant with a group of my fellow court-appointed attorneys. My cell phone vibrated in my shirt pocket. So, I excused myself from the table, left the restaurant, sat in my car, and answered the call. It was Annie, one of the probation officers I worked with regularly. I was used to the way she always seemed to act with superiority over court-appointed attorneys. But this time, her attitude was unacceptable.

“Attorney Sullivan,” she said. “I wish you hadn’t gone to lunch. It’s Friday, and I have the afternoon off.”

“Annie, I went to lunch at the close of the morning session, like everybody else.”

“Well, I’m going to ask the judge to send your client back to jail before I leave. I’ve got plans for the rest of the day, and I can’t wait for you to get back here. I’ll get someone else to cover the case.”

“I can be there in half an hour.”

“Don’t bother rushing back to court for this case. It will be done before you get here.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. An image of her pale, freckled face with the map of Ireland written all over it, surrounded by her fiery red hair, flashed in front of me. It was the grunts versus the REMFs all over again.¹

“Bullshit,” I screamed into the phone. “You’re violating my client’s constitutional right to counsel!”

“Not really, he’ll have an attorney.”

“But he has a right to his own attorney. And that’s me.”

1 Grunts: Army slang for low ranked infantry soldiers; REMFs—“Rear Echelon Motherfuckers,” a derogatory term used by infantry soldiers for support troops not stationed on the front lines.

“Take it up with the judge when you get here.”

When she said that, I could taste the anger burning my throat. The fluttering and whistling of rockets and mortars punctured my ears; a pain exploded in my head like a bomb and traveled through my blood vessels and nerves to my stomach. I became nauseous, began vomiting profusely, and everything turned black.

I woke up a couple of days later lying in the hospital bed. Bright fluorescent ceiling lights blurred my vision. And the noise in the room was earsplitting. But I could hear the doctors talking to my wife, Patti, and my daughter Kacia.

“Mrs. Sullivan, when he arrived by ambulance, his brain was hemorrhaging,” said the doctor. “So, we performed an emergency craniotomy and evacuated an actively bleeding subdural hematoma. Do you know how he hit his head?”

“As far as I know, he didn’t hit his head. This whole thing came out of nowhere.”

“Why do you say that?”

“When his friends called and told me he was being taken to the hospital, they said he had been eating lunch with them and just stepped outside to answer a phone call. One of his friends went to see why he was taking so long and found him unconscious, sitting behind the wheel of his car. So, his friend called 911.”

“It’s a good thing he did. He saved his life. Spontaneous subdural hematomas can be fatal.”

“Will he recover?”

“We’ll have to wait and see. He had an adverse reaction to the anesthesia. As the anesthesia wore off, he was in a state of delirium, screaming incoherently about REMFs and grunts, incoming rockets and mortars, and ‘gooks’ coming through the wire.”

“Under those conditions, I’m not surprised. He does that when he wakes up from nightmares

about Vietnam.”

“How long has that been going on?”

“As long as I’ve known him. He was diagnosed with PTSD about twenty years ago, went through a psychotic break, and tried to commit suicide. Then, about ten years later, it happened again when he had open-heart surgery.”

A psychiatrist was added to my team of caregivers. My rehabilitation and recovery included physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy for my brain injury and symptoms of stroke. Psychotherapy was added to help me with my PTSD. My goal became threefold. Not only would I need to overcome my physical symptoms, I needed to get the reality of my experiences during the war into focus and purge myself of some deep-seated anger, which the doctors said was most likely not only related to my experiences in the war but related to my life experiences before Vietnam and after coming home from Vietnam.

While I was eating breakfast in bed the next day, someone was knocking on the door to my room.

“Good morning, Mr. Sullivan. I’m Doctor Ransing. We met yesterday. I’m the psychiatrist in charge of your treatment team. May I come in?”

“Your treatment team has developed a partial discharge plan to get you home.”

“That’s great to hear.”

“We are scheduling you for speech therapy, physical therapy, and occupational therapy for your medical conditions on a daily basis in your home for several months. And we are recommending Narrative Therapy for your PTSD.”

“What does Narrative Therapy mean? I’ve been through almost every type of therapy program there is for PTSD.”

“Yes, I know you have. But now you will also be dealing with the symptoms of traumatic brain injury.”

“So, how will this differ from other therapeutic programs?”

Doctor Ransing spent quite a bit of time explaining that the other programs were structured around the person being a problem. But in Narrative Therapy, the patient is not seen as the problem; the events in the patient’s life that trigger the psychotic episodes are seen as the problem.

He recommended that I write a narrative about my memories of serving in Vietnam. He assured me that the experience would be therapeutic because it would let me see the events as separate from me. As a result, he said, I would develop a better understanding of the problems I was having in the past. And he said that with help from my treatment team, I could learn to control my reactions to events that may startle me in the future.

VIETNAM, MARCH 1969: WHITE WITH FRIGHT

Towards the end of March, on my way to the signal center to start my night shift, I was carrying a load of stuff for the night’s entertainment and thinking about calling my family again by the satellite phone at the MARS station (Military Auxiliary Radio System) to wish my twin sisters a happy birthday. But that thought was interrupted by the screech of sirens piercing my ears. That sound always penetrated my eardrums and scared me half to death.

I started running towards the signal bunker. But rocket-propelled grenades and 122-mm rockets began exploding all around me. I ran faster and faster. My only thought was to get to my duty station. Time seemed to slow down as the explosions got closer and closer.

As I ran, I could hear the fluttering propeller of a rocket-propelled grenade in my right ear. It was like the thing was following me. As I approached the opening in the ground that led into the signal bunker, I saw Cheeseman operating the generators on the hill above me. I screamed as loud as I could. “Cheeseman, they’re coming in right behind me.”

He screamed back, "Hit the dirt. I'm coming right on top of you."

As I dove towards the black hole, Cheeseman slammed into me in midair. Together, we flew piggyback style towards the canvas flap covering the entryway. As we landed on the ground with him on top of me, out of the corner of my eye, I saw the brightest flash of light I'd ever seen and heard an explosion that blew out my eardrums.

The stuff I was carrying splattered all over the ground and went every which way: magazines, playing cards, sodas, and sandwiches. I turned my head and spit the dirt out of my mouth. When I did, I couldn't believe my eyes. Cheeseman's hair was standing straight up like the needles on a prickly porcupine, and it was albino white instead of its usual reddish blonde. His eyes were wide open, a hollow, blank stare like a dead man looking out into the great abyss.

The guys in the bunker pulled him off me and told me to get to the patch panel and get the communications back online. They called the medics to come and get Cheeseman. I never saw him again or heard any news about how he made out after he was evacuated.

Living through shitstorms of rockets and mortars falling out of the sky, listening to the rat-tat-tat of small arms fire, and the enemy trying to penetrate the perimeter became so commonplace that when the environment was quiet and peaceful, it seemed strange. During the quiet times, as long as I did my job at the signal center and shared guard duty without complaining, my commanding officer left me alone.

I had been lucky enough to buy a surfboard for twenty-five dollars from an Australian soldier who was going home and couldn't bring it with him. Unless I was on duty at the signal center or pulling guard duty, I could spend my time down at the beach in my own semi-private world. Other guys would show up and borrow my stuff, smoke pot, drink beer, and generally hang out hiding from their superiors. Some of them were grunts in for a stand down or what they called in-country rest and relaxation.



Me and my "hootchmates." I'm on far right with mustache and a short sleeved shirt. There were always 8 guys to a hootch, this was where we lived. "Hootch" was just a name used for buildings in a jungle environment, 1968–1969.



Enjoying a moment of downtime. I'm second from right. Guy in the sunglasses is keeping a journal, interviewing the others about what to put in, 1968–1969.

JUNE 8, 1969: SURFING WITH ROCKETS

For me, Memorial Day marks the beginning of summer. Back home, it usually means the end of cool weather and the beginning of many beach days ahead. My hometown is a coastal village where Memorial Day is second only to the 4th of July in terms of how we celebrate. And summer extends to Labor Day, the first Monday in September.

After Memorial Day weekend, I always looked forward to my birthday on June 10. But now, it comes with a certain trepidation. On June 8, 1969, two days shy of my 21st birthday, when my night shift was over as usual at 0600, I crawled out of the bunker and entered a beautiful, sunny day. It was days like this that I felt blessed to have the night shift so I could enjoy the sunshine. As a lifelong beach lover, this was a salvation of sorts in an otherwise fucked up place. I skipped breakfast at the mess hall and went down to the beach.

There was a slight offshore breeze, and the waves were about as good as they got during the summer in Chu Lai. I picked up my surfboard from my tent and ran down to the water's edge, jumped in, and paddled out. I was the only one at the beach.

I caught a nice wave and almost forgot where I was. In my mind, I had entered that mystical world where surfers feel like they're in God's hands, where the beautiful hue of the sea becomes one with the greenish glow and frothing white of breaking waves. Suddenly, a loud swooshing noise passed by me. The sea erupted all around me in a fountain of ocean spray and knocked me off my board.

When I surfaced and caught my breath, I could hear the screeching sounds of alarms and the explosions of rockets and mortars. I looked up and could see the shitstorm covering the entire beach and working its way towards the hospital on the cliff above me. The next round exploded on the medevac helipad right next to the hospital. Then, the hospital was hit. I was scared out of my mind.

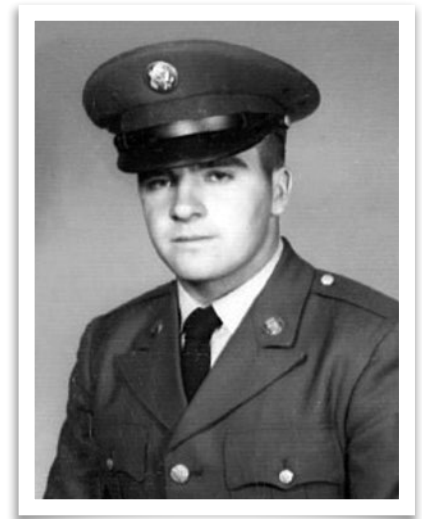
Even now, when I think back on that day, I find it hard to believe that I took the time to grab my board, put it back in my tent, low crawl through the exploding rockets and mortars, and make it to the signal center. When I got there, I jumped in and helped the guys on duty until the

shitstorm ended. I was told to go back to my bunk, get some sleep, and come back at 1800 for my regular night shift.

The next morning when the day crew came to relieve me, they told me that a rocket hit the hospital, and when it exploded, some of the shrapnel flew through the air, hit one of the Army nurses, slit her throat, and killed her instantly. I was horrified when I heard that news. I knew I had seen the explosion that killed her, and I had survived through the same shitstorm while I was surfing and crawling across the beach to get to the signal center.

The guilt was overwhelming. But what could I have done? I had performed my duties under enemy fire as I had been trained to do. She was going to be killed no matter what I did. As it turns out, she was the only American woman killed in Vietnam by hostile enemy fire. It may have hit me extra hard because my mother served in Europe during WWII as an Army nurse, and she had served under enemy fire.

The next day was my birthday. I stayed at the beach by myself and didn't celebrate. I kept thinking about the shitstorm and the death of the nurse while I surfed. Nobody bothered me. My friends knew I wanted to be left alone. And the captain gave me the night off for my birthday, and I had no daytime duties. Even now, I can't help but think of her when I go to the beach. Survivor's guilt is a strange thing to feel. It's powerful and relentless. I wonder if it ever goes away.



My discharge photo, 1969.

APRIL 1, 2019: BACK TO VIETNAM

My therapeutic writing program came to completion. But I still felt a need to search for some sense of closure. Doctor Ransing told me that several of his Vietnam veteran patients had found closure by returning to Vietnam and burying their ghosts where their lives seemed to have been disrupted. So, once again, I followed the doctor's advice and scheduled my trip to include all the places I had been to during my tour of duty.

I boarded a commercial airliner to Vietnam on April 1, 2019. This time, I paid for the trip myself. And included among the passengers, I'm happy to say, were family members: my wife Patti,

my daughter Kacia, and my fourteen-year-old grandson, Raymond. They had come with me to support my efforts to reconcile with my past.

We flew into Ho Chi Minh City, which had been Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, before the end of the war. When I arrived in September of 1968, the air base was named Ben Hoi and just outside the city's main proper. Ben Hoi was one of the main distribution points for replacement troops, motor vehicles, weapons, ammunition, and the toxic chemical Agent Orange during the war. When I visited what used to be the military base during the war, it was surrounded by a ten-foot concrete wall with barbed wire laced along the top of the wall. Communist soldiers guarded it twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week.

We stayed in Ho Chi Minh City for a week. The people were friendly and seemed respectful of Americans, especially veterans who had served in-country during the war.

We left Ho Chi Minh City by train to Nha Trang, an experience that was out of the past. This was before Covid-19 hit the United States of America. The local people carried cages with various animals; mothers were breastfeeding babies, and we were the only people not wearing masks.



FRANK HARRIS COLLECTION (COLL./3731), MARINE CORPS HISTORY DIVISION

Helicopter landing pads at Chu Lai as they looked in 1965.

We spent time in Nha Trang, enjoying the coastline of sheltered coves, white sand, and crystal-clear water. We spent most of our time at the beach—sunbathing, swimming, and enjoying the local cuisine. The sunrises and sunsets were breathtaking. Our next stop was Cam Ranh Bay. We stayed there to catch a flight to Chu Lai, where I was stationed for the bulk of my tour of duty. I struggled to hold back tears as we were told we had to stay in Hoa Ann just north of Chu Lai because the Chu Lai area had been dominated by commercial and industrial businesses and tourist accommodations were shut down.

When we arrived at the Chu Lai International Airport, I could see the remains of an old helicopter pad and an abandoned airplane hangar. The facilities at the airport were minimal and reflected the commercial and industrial atmosphere, which, as it turned out, is now the primary use of the Chu Lai area. We hired a taxicab, and I gave directions to the driver based on what I could remember about the landscape. We found the beach I had frequented during my tour of duty. I was surprised by how familiar it all appeared to me.

We strolled around for quite some time, and I envisioned the hootches, bunkers, and airstrips of the past. Then, I directed the driver to the main gate. On the way, I asked him to stop several times as I recognized geographical features I thought looked familiar.

Patti, Kacia, and Raymond became nervous when the taxi driver cautioned me because live explosives were still around the area. As we came within sight of the main gate, the heavily armed communist soldiers approached our vehicle. They told the driver to turn around and return the way we came.

I explained to the driver that I wanted to go out through the main gate to Highway One as I did fifty years ago when I left the area to return home to America. The taxi driver exited the cab, spoke to



My grandson Raymond McKnight, wife Patti Sullivan, daughter Kacia Sullivan, and me at the Po Nagar Temple in Nha Trang Vietnam in April of 2019 during my 50th anniversary trip back to Vietnam.

the guards, and pointed to me, explaining the situation.

Again, I struggled to hold back tears because the guards turned, saluted, and opened the gate for us to leave. As we drove away, the cab driver explained that they wanted to show respect to veterans who had served during the war. Experiencing this gesture by communist soldiers continues to be one of the most restorative moments of my trip.

The experience of this trip has helped me resolve my anger issues about being drafted as a young man and sent to Vietnam more than fifty years ago and allowed me to enjoy my life as a mature adult more than I could have anticipated.

AUTHOR'S BIO

Francis was born in Cambridge, MA in 1948. A visitor to Cape Ann since the age of five, he attended 2nd and 4th grade in Rockport and Gloucester. In the 7th grade, he moved to Rockport full-time, graduating from Rockport High School in 1966. His friends from Cape Ann know him as "Kerry." In Vietnam, Francis served with the 523rd Signal Battalion of the U.S. Army. After returning home to Cape Ann, he taught in the Gloucester school system for 16 years. While teaching, he served as the Museum School's boat-building instructor for the Project Adventure program, a social studies teacher at Gloucester High School, and a 7th-grade teacher at O'Maley Middle School. Francis attended the New England School of Law and then began to practice law as a court-appointed attorney for the Committee for Public Counsel Services, frequently working at the Gloucester District Court as a juvenile court attorney. Additionally, Francis worked as the Rockport Veterans' Service Agent and was instrumental in the merging of the Rockport and Gloucester Veterans Services Offices.

Francis currently resides in New Mexico and continues to write about his life and experiences as a Vietnam veteran. He has worked with the Cape Ann Museum in the past on a surfboarding exhibit and hopes to bring the California Surf Museum China Beach Exhibit to the North Shore so that more people can learn about the role that surfing played in the lives of Vietnam soldiers.

TO READ MORE

A Long Triage by Francis J. Sullivan is available online at Amazon and locally at Dogtown Books. His writing also appears in *The Inner Voice and the Outer World, Writings by Veterans and Their Families*, a publication of the Gloucester Writers Center and the Cape Ann Veterans Writing Workshop.

AUTHOR'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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