

February 7

By Robert Marcuson

February 7, 1968 was 19 days before a 24-hour battle in which eleven in my infantry company died. It was also the day I drove with my parents from San Jose to the Oakland Induction Center to catch a bus for Travis AFB to board a DC-something for the flight to Vietnam. With my parents standing beside me, I met my friend Danny MacKechnie, my training buddy in basic training and then Advanced Infantry Training, and we met Danny's mother. Of course you may already guess that Danny dies in this story, else I would not be telling it. He did not die on the 26th of February like the eleven. He was one of 7 in his platoon to walk away, but in November he tripped a hand grenade.

I was luckier. I was wounded early in April and sent home. Eventually, I ended up at Ft Carson, Colorado, then home to the 10th Mountain Division. In November I was summoned to the Commanding Officer. Mrs. Mckechnie had called my father to tell of her son's death, and my father had called the CO. She wanted me to come to California, which I did.

Each day for 3 or 4 days, I drove the hour from my home to Concord, CA to sit and talk with a grieving woman whom I had met once waiting for a bus. We looked through her family photos; we held hands. We talked for hours about Danny -- I had always called him Mac -- talked about things I no longer remember. Concerned family members milled about in the wings, taking in food when the doorbell rang, but not interfering with us. The day of the funeral I stood alone at attention in my dress greens at

the head of the coffin. They closed the lid and presented Mrs. MacKechnie with a folded flag as if in exchange for her son.

I had an insight in Vietnam. I realized - and I believe it was only hours or minutes before I was injured - that a person who easily picks sides in a war, any war, does not truly understand war. Because there are two ways to understand war. One is the war we build up in our collective imagination, the war we hear about from media and movies and in coffee shops, the war with all the justifications and rationalizations. And then there is the real war. These two versions of war do not mesh.

A design flaw in the species of which I am part is our preference for abstraction over what is real. We weigh notions of national honor, courage, and all the rest more heavily than actual human lives. We invent our histories and speak in euphemisms and find reasons not to think of the people we kill. When sociopaths are in charge, often we hang our heads when they accuse us of empathy or compassion.

I think there must be veterans who are caught, perhaps unknowingly, between these two versions of war -- the war that keeps score and is so much like sport, and the other war they have experienced -- and they suffer trying to reconcile what cannot and should not be reconciled. They want to live in the world generally as everybody else seems to. They want to accept and believe the common fantasy -- it is after all practically the definition of being sane -- but they cannot because they must fight with their own experience.

I don't know. This is my speculation.

But I mention Mac's - Danny's - mother because as flawed human beings we often forget that for every mangled soldier there are also damaged parents and siblings, friends and lovers. On both sides. And when I feel the urge to pick sides and root for one or the other, she reminds why I do not.