

Chapter 2

Home Boys

As you enter the quiet still of the Burningtown Community and see the rugged mountains that loom all around, you can't help but feel safe as their forested arms reach out and gather you within their protecting slopes. Many years ago, I had the good fortune to work with Mrs. Arcilla Henry, who introduced me to this community on our many home visits, during which she related a good deal of the area's history. It seemed ironic to me that many years later I would be talking with her again, but this time it would be about her POW son, a subject clearly painful and troublesome to this day.

Burningtown, as Mrs. Henry explained to me years ago, received its name when the white soldiers invaded this secluded valley in 1838, under the direction of President Andrew Jackson, and proceeded to drive out the Native Americans who inhabited the surrounding area. The villages were pillaged and plundered by the invaders, while the people were gathered together to be moved west to Oklahoma. As the chief of the village looked for the last time upon his beloved homeland, great fires leapt from the ground consuming his home. With a single tear escaping down his weathered face, he uttered the words, "They're burning the town." The old chief then turned and was marched with the rest of his people for many days away from his home, his life, and the land, which had been so plentiful and

gracious. The name “Burningtown” stuck, and has forever since been used to identify this small piece of paradise located deep within the heart of the Great Smoky Mountains. This quiet community is one of the few places left where native trout still swim lazily in the bubbling creeks, and where a drink from the mountain springs that abound can refresh a body’s soul with one swallow.

On this clear summer day, a light breeze gently ruffles the leaves on the branches of trees that line both sides of this narrow country road I travel. Flickers of bright sunlight stream through the limbs and dance across my face, forcing a smile despite the slightly nervous feeling in my stomach. As I reach my destination, a sprawling, grey country house is nestled within beds of brightly colored flowers and a well-manicured lawn. I had met Nat once before and had established a great respect for him in the short amount of time we had spent together. Today, however, I would come to know more about the man who served almost six years within the torturous hands of the North Vietnamese, and then try to put his experiences into words.

Nathan Barney Henry was born on May 13, 1947, the youngest of three children belonging to Thurman and Arcilla Henry. The home where Nat spent his childhood days is still standing across the road from where he lives now and is the roof under which his now widowed mother still resides. Nat, as he is known by his friends, along with his brothers Pratt, the oldest, and Harry, the middle son, spent countless days in their youth roaming the mountainsides and fording the numerous streams around their homeland. Like other kids growing up, the Henry boys played ‘Cowboys and Indians,’ went camping, and, for the most part, learned the ways of survival for a quiet life in the country. Nat loved to fish more than anything, and when chores were done, he would grab his pole, dig a few worms, and head off to one of the nearby creeks. For years Nat and his brothers romped through the thick rhododendron, climbed the steep faces of the surrounding mountains, and learned the ways of the land. Ironically, the basic skills of survival he learned as a boy would later contribute to Nat’s survival in the jungles of Vietnam.

There is no power on earth greater than a mother’s love, and no force known to man that can break the bond between a mother and her child. A mother bears an incredible load where many fear to

tread, yet the gentle embrace of her arms can calm and bring peace to the most frightened of hearts. She is the rock and strength of her family, sheds tears where no one else can see, and welcomes home even the most wayward child with an incredible depth of love and compassion. Men go off to war fighting to protect their country, while women stay behind praying for the protection of their men. It's never easy to watch a loved one leave home to fight in some godforsaken land, but when a mother sends her son, a piece of her goes with him, leaving a hollow ache that is indescribable.

After talking with Mrs. Henry, I now have a better understanding of what Nat's family endured during the years he was a Prisoner of War in Vietnam. Sergeant Henry was not the only one who suffered extreme torture at the hands of the enemy; Mrs. Henry was surviving her own living hell at home. Through a strong belief in God, support from other POW families, and by depending on sheer determination and will, Mrs. Henry never gave up hope that her son was still alive. A mother's instinct reassured her beliefs that one day he would be delivered once again to her waiting arms on free, American soil.

When asked what Nat enjoyed doing as a little boy, Mrs. Henry replied, "Well, they played all the time, but I would never let them play war games. I thought about that so much. Then all three of them was in service. I couldn't stand it," she continued. "Just all that old running and hollerin.' and Nick Rowland was the worst, and I'd ask him to be quiet. I didn't like all that noise and killin'. I let 'em play anything else though. I let 'em play Indians. They played that a lot, but I didn't want them to play war games!"

"They liked to go camping," Mrs. Henry recalled. "There was an old house over on the head of Rhinehart, and they would take loads of stuff to eat. They borrowed their sleeping bags from the Ag [agriculture] boys and they'd build a big, roaring fire in the fireplace and sit and tell tall tales. They started this camping about the time Nat went into high school. A lot of times I would take him and one [other] boy over there and leave them, and then go back after them the next day or the next afternoon." After a short pause Mrs. Henry continued recalling some of the camping trips. "I usually cooked everything for them to take. I kept thinking they was taking more than they could eat, but I'd bake a big cake of cornbread, and they would take maybe homemade soups. They could cook on the

fireplace a little, but that's kind of hard."

"One time it was turning real cold and we was a-packing their stuff in a pickup truck. I think Chester Sorrells was with them, and he had the truck. I put them in a bunch of kindlin', and then I just went back to the woodshed and got a handful of pine knots, you know, and stuck them in there, too. When the boys came back, Nat said, 'Well, Mother, we would never have made it if it hadn't been for them pine knots!' Pine knots burn quick, you know." We both laughed heartily at the retelling of the story.

In early 1966, Pratt Henry, Nat's oldest brother, joined the National Guard. On June 13, 1966, the second oldest son, Harry, was sent to Fort Benning, Georgia, for Army basic training, then was transferred to Fort Stuart, Georgia. Nat, the youngest, soon followed with his enlistment in the Army in September of the same year. How difficult it must have been for Mr. and Mrs. Henry to see all three of their children in the service while the fighting in Vietnam escalated. How great a price must one family pay in service to their country and fellow Americans? The Henry family, in the end, paid an exorbitant amount.

"Pratt went in first," Mrs. Henry explained. "He was the oldest. Then Harry. But, you see, if Harry hadn't been in a car accident at Fort Stuart, Georgia, Nat wouldn't of had to go. Harry was going to get plane reservations or going to see about something, I don't remember now, but they was in a convertible. They was three of them, and they come around a curve and hit a house. One boy hit the top of the house, and Harry was thrown over the house and into a swamp. The one that was driving was killed instantly. Harry said when he come to that he could see lights everywhere, and he was trying to get to the light. When he came out of the swamp, his clothes was tore off of him, and he was just bleeding something awful! Then someone said, 'Here's the ambulance, we're gonna put you in it.' Then (Harry) said, 'No, I'll just ride up front.' But when he reached for the door he didn't make it 'cause he passed out." Mrs. Henry laughed at her son's stubbornness then continued on. "He was in the hospital for I don't know *how* long, so he didn't get to go to Vietnam then, but he went when he heard Nat was missing. I was proud they was able to go, but I didn't want 'em all to have to go."

In May of 1966, Nathan Henry turned nineteen years old. By

September of the same year, he was drafted into the United States Army with a draft number of "2." Within days, Nat boarded a bus in the nearby town of Franklin headed for Knoxville, Tennessee, to be sworn into the military. Nat and the other new recruits were placed in the local YMCA for their first night away from home and were given their entrance exams and physicals. Around 4:00 p.m., on September 8, 1966, he took his oath, then was placed back on the bus headed for Fort Campbell, Kentucky. Off-loading from the bus, many of the green recruits immediately lit a cigarette and were just as quickly instructed to extinguish their smokes. "I got off the bus, lit a cigarette, then threw it on the ground," Nat stated through his laughter. "And, hell, I was doing pushups and hadn't been there ten minutes!"

After a week of orientation, the new recruits were assigned to their company posts and basic training began. Nat met Paul Davis, who had lived just outside Knoxville, Tennessee, and had been inducted the same day. They ended up in the same barracks during boot camp, where they soon became close friends. It was now November 1, 1966, and after six weeks of basic training, Nat was sent straight to Fort Polk, Louisiana, for AIT (Advanced Infantry Training). Because of the heavy fighting in Vietnam and the urgent need for fresh troops, no leave was given to the men after basic, as was customary. Paul and Nat rode the bus together, and, as they entered the gates to Fort Polk, a small sign posted on the entrance read: "Little Vietnam." They knew instantly what their future held.

After spending about seven weeks at Fort Polk in intensive training for jungle conditions, the two men were given fifteen days leave at Christmas. Another five weeks would finish out their training at Polk, and then it would be a flight to Oakland in California to await shipment to Vietnam. Nat and Paul decided to rent a hotel room on their first night in Oakland and enjoy some of the local establishments. Nat was still under the legal age limit, but they wanted to down a few beers on one of their last nights in the States. After asking Nat how hungover he was the next morning, his only reply was a soft laugh and these words: "Hell, I got kicked out before I got through the door!" So much for a planned evening on the town.

Two days later, the new recruits left Oakland for the short trip to

Travis Air Force Base, where they boarded a C-141 headed for Saigon, which had stops in Hawaii and Wake Island, then eighteen hours later arrived at Ben Wa. I asked Nat what his first thoughts were of Vietnam, and he replied, "I thought, 'Damn, what a country!'" It was now February 18, 1967. The men were placed in a holding camp at Ben Wa as the Replacement Company for the 191st. They stayed at this location for about a week before being sent to the 4th Infantry base camp at Pleiku. During the first few days there, the troops received in-country orientation, practiced search and destroy missions, and general familiarization with the country and enemy movements. "Pretty soon they put us on a chopper and sent us off to our Companies," Nat reflected. "Well, hell, we never been on a chopper, you know, and they pick up and start to turn sideways... You can't fall out, but everybody was holding on for dear life! Course I was put on the outer edge on one side, and it didn't have no doors, and when he lifted up...and they...hell!"

After spending a week at Ben Wa, the new recruits were sent to their firebases, where they were assigned to specific platoon and squad units. Nat and his friend Paul were separated at this point, with Nat assigned to the 4th Infantry Division while Paul was sent to the 1st Cavalry. One morning everyone was moved, being told they were now in Combat Assault, where they were loaded on Chinooks and placed in different firebases close to the 4th Infantry base camp. The first firebase, Lay LZ, in which Nat landed, was "hot." This was the second day in the field, and already they were in the thick of fighting the North Vietnamese. "You had to be in-country for thirty days and/or see action the first time out to get the CIB (Combat Infantry Badge), so, hell, I got mine in the first two days," Nat grinned as he spoke and shook his head in disbelief.

In his own words, Nat recalled his first impression of his field assignment. "The firebase, itself, was an old firebase and had already been cleared. They had used napalm and everything else on it, and [it] was just out in the middle of nowhere. The vegetation was all dead, but the perimeter way out around it was still green. The camp consisted of nothing but foxholes. We built bunkers, and that was it. We stayed a week in the firebase, and there was three companies of us. B Company would stay in the firebase for a week, then A Company would come in, and we'd go back out in the field with

C Company. There was always one company at the firebase, with the other two on search and destroy missions. I remember my first CO in the field was Captain Sherrill, and my platoon leader was Lieutenant Hasket.”

Back at home, Mr. and Mrs. Henry kept in touch with their son as best as they could. “He wrote home every week, I guess,” Mrs. Henry recalled, “Course I wrote him every other day and sent box after box of stuff to him. I would put candies and raisins and stuff that you knew would keep over there....and cigarettes,” she laughed. “He would say, ‘Well, I can get cigarettes over here, Mother,’ but I would put ‘em in anyway. Then when I knew he was in combat, we would send Kool-Aid and stuff like that so he could carry that with him. I got lots of letters from him before he got captured, and then after he was captured, we sent him stuff, too. The Army Department in Washington sent us a list, and we could send just so much stuff and so many pounds. Every three months I think it was.”

Going from the lush, green mountains of Western North Carolina to the triple canopy jungles of Vietnam was a drastic change for Nat Henry. A world of strange sights, unusual smells, and frightening sounds lay in waiting, as would a monster with jaws opened wide that is luring its unsuspecting prey closer to death. A world where the morning mist quietly inhabited a serene landscape would later be lifted, only to reveal and invoke fear and terror into the hearts of men in combat. A world away from the quiet charm of his country home, the jungles and rice paddies of Vietnam were about to claim the innocent life of yet another victim and forever change the path of his destiny.