

Introduction

“What are you gonna call it?” he asked, his hands fidgeting nervously, looking for something to do, searching his mind for the next thing to say. “To Hell and Beyond,” I replied with a bit of cautious skepticism in my voice. Waiting with nervous anticipation, I wondered what thoughts were filling his mind during those few tense seconds that hung between us. Slowly his head turned in my direction. Those tired brown eyes staring deep into mine. No expression. No life. The lines of his weathered face were chiseled deep into the flesh, revealing a history that only he would ever really know. He had not only been to hell, but had lived it, breathed it, then finally escaped its clutches after almost six years. A POW in Vietnam, Staff Sergeant Nathan B. Henry, US Army (Ret.), had not only stared hell in the face; he had beaten it and lived to tell me his story twenty-four years later.

He stared at me for only a few brief seconds, then turned away as a slow grin spread across his face. A soft chuckle escaped his lips, then in a slow country drawl he said, “Yeah...I reckon that just about describes it.” I was relieved, to say the least, and a bit more comfortable after winning his approval. The title would stay...I would listen and write...He would talk and remember. Eventually, we would both laugh, both shed tears, share the anxieties and pains of dredging up those memories once again. In the end, however, we both would gain knowledge...peace of mind...a sense of closure and a reason for being. Either way, a friendship and a bond would be established. A level of trust escalated for him, while an indescribable respect for the human spirit came from depths within me that I never knew existed. Together we relived the horrendous days and nights of a POW in Vietnam. This is a man who wanted only to serve his country then return home to the slow pace of his southern roots and live a quiet life nestled in the safety of these rugged mountains they call the Smokies. A man who suffered more from the torturous cavities recessed deep within our minds that we call a memory. A man who has been To Hell and Beyond.