

Four Years Without Sleep

By Juan Ochoa

What their mother said: *Yo por eso me regresaba a México para tener a mis hijos. Yo sabía que los americanos se los iban a llevar a la guerra. Mis hijos no eran ciudadanos americanos cuando los hicieron pelear. Eran residentes. Pero se los llevaron como sea. Cuando regresaron metieron los papeles y se hicieron ciudadanos. No sé porque hicieron eso. Los gringos ya los habían hecho pelear.*

That's why I always went back to Mexico to have my sons. I knew the Americans would take them to war. My sons weren't American citizens when they made them fight. They were residents. But they took them anyway. When they came back, they put in the papers and became citizens. I don't know why they did that. The gringos had already made them fight.

What their father said: *Les cayeron unas cartas. Eran del gobierno. Y se los llevaron. Primero a Mel. Luego a Rafita. Creo que Rafita tuvo que matar más gente que Mel. Pero no hablamos de esos detalles. Nunca debes de hablar de las vidas que debes.*

They got some letters. They were from the government. And they took them. First Mel. And then Rafita. I think Rafita had to kill more people than Mel. But we don't go into those details. You should never talk about the lives you owe.

What their big brother Julio said: *Lo tenía todo arreglado. Fui a Tijuana y arreglé para que apareciera como si Mel y Rafa habían atropellado a alguien en México y tenían que estar bajo juicio y presentes firmando cada semana para mantener la fianza. Pero no. Mel, que la vieja tenía miedo que perdiera los papeles si no iba. Y Rafa nomás se me quedó viendo y me dijo, "Se me hace que la voy a hacer, carnal." Los dos fueron y vinieron. Ya no eran iguales cuando regresaron. Rafa se hizo mariguano. Cuando llegó Mel, su vieja se fue con su sobrino. Imagínate eso. Tu vieja se fue con el hijo de tu hermano. Ni puedes matar a nadie en esas circunstancias.*

I had everything fixed. I went to Tijuana and put the bribes in so it would look like Mel and Rafa had ran over someone in Mexico and were on trial and had to be present to sign their names every week to maintain the conditions for bail. But no. Mel, said that his wife was afraid that he would lose his papers if he didn't go. And Rafa just stared at me and said, "I think I'll make it, carnal." They were never the same after they came back. Rafa became a pothead. When Mel got back, his woman left him for his nephew. Imagine that. Your woman leaves you for your brother's son. You can't even kill anyone under those circumstances.

Tío Mel's story: It was four years without sleep because first they took me from '65 to '68. And then they took my brother Ralph from '68 to '71. Last two years for each of us was spent in combat. So Mom and Dad didn't sleep for four years worrying over us.

You had to report to the induction center and they give you a physical and swear you in, and that's where the yelling starts. Move here. Move there. Hurry, grunt. But it's all show. They can't do shit to you unless you commit a crime just like on the outside. Then we went to boot camp. And more yelling. They run your ass off. You have to wear a heavy pack. They make you

walk through a room with tear gas. At first you get a mask. Then they make you take the mask off, and you have to make it out the other side. You feel like you're choking. Snot flies all over the place. You're eyes water, and you feel like you're going to suffocate. But it passes and it's all more of the show. That goes on for a while. That time don't even really count.

Then we went to Vietnam. Things were different right from the go. We were all American G. I's. There was no white, black, Mexican. We were all Yankees. We were on a base at first. Fuckin' kids over there come up to guys and ask to shine their shoes. You put your foot up and they go to work. Then you don't feel the kid cleaning your shoes. And bam! A grenade goes off in the shine box, and a soldier is lying on the ground with a leg blown off. Crazy shit like that. They got whores and bars, and you can play pool on base. But there's always that shit of not knowing who's going to kill you.

We went in country then. They teach you a few things in Vietnamese like *Dan-gly*, which means stop or something. We never used any of that shit. The closest we came to speaking Vietnamese was saying cocky-sucky mother-fucky. It wasn't like we were there to have conversations. We'd go walking through the jungle, and the next thing you know, Charlie's right in front of you shooting those fucking AK 47's like there's no tomorrow. We had M-16's. A good rifle, but delicate. It would jam up with any little piece of dust. And you're in the jungle with mud up to your ears. I always kept mine clean.

We were crossing a field and came under fire. We all go down and take firing position. In front of me, twenty yards, probably less, I see a helmet, which is rare. Most of the time, it's kids or just villagers shooting at you. They didn't have a real army like us with uniforms and everything. It was just guys and women and kids most of the time. But this guy had a helmet, so he was V.C. regular. He shot at me, and I shot back. I waited for him to shoot back, but he didn't. Then the Sergeant ordered us to advance, and I was able to reach the guy's fox hole. There he was with a little black dot on his forehead. I had got him square. He was a kid, fifteen maybe sixteen. I wasn't much older. I pulled off his helmet and the back of his head spilled out. I only got a second to look down on him and see the big hole where his brain should have been. There's a saying that says, "Either they cry in his house or they cry in mine." And I didn't want anyone back home crying over me. After all, they're sayings *por algo*.

We did that for a year and a half till I was almost ready to rotate out. We had a village to clear out because the V.C. were coming. But like I said, it's hard because they all look alike, so you don't know if you should shoot one or help one. We had the choppers set down in the L.Z. right on the edge of the village. One of the choppers breaks down and can't take off, but the villagers won't get off. We're pushing and pulling on arms to get these people off the chopper because the V.C. were coming, and we had to get out of there. One of the guys yells for us to get back and then lobs a grenade into the chopper. Most of the people were able to get off when they saw the grenade, but a lot didn't. It made me mad, especially when the guy said, "So? They're just a bunch of gooks." Not little kids and old men and women. Just a bunch of gooks, he said. They busted me down to private from corporal for that fight. It was only \$42 difference in pay, but still. Since the bullet only grazed the guy, and because of it getting written up as an accidental discharge, they sent me to Hawaii for R and R. instead of the brig. A lot of guys got to visit Hawaii. Your aunt came out and we stayed for two weeks, swimming, lying on the beach. But it was all over for me by then. The war, me and your aunt; it was all over by then. I got a divorce and remarried. I worked at the P.D., the water company, joined a band. I did everything and nothing. I can't sleep.

It's hard to concentrate. My head hurts all the time. Every time somebody would offer me drugs over there, I always told them, "No thanks. I have balls." And I do. I still do, but there's something messing with my head and I can't get it to stop. I've gone everywhere and tried everything, doctors, *curanderos*, priests, but nothing works. I fixed my papers, and even then I couldn't get any help from the V.A.

Tio Ralph's story: They took me right after Mel came home. I did really good on the written part of the test, so they asked me if I wanted to join the Rangers. I figured that if I was going to fight, I had better get the best training I could, so I said yes. They took us down to Louisiana and dropped us into the swamp. There were alligators and snakes all over the place. Then they started shooting. Live rounds. The only order was to survive. I thought, hell, if the training doesn't kill me, nothing will.

As soon as we landed, we were in the shit. I mean right off the plane. They lined us up and told us to grab K-rations and ammo, all you can carry. See, they'll give you all you want of anything you want. You can grab all the food you want or all the bullets you want. At first, a bunch of us grabbed food. Wrong. Get bullets. All you can carry. I used to load up. The bullets probably outweighed me. What do you want food for anyway? You never get hungry over there. All the time I was there, I can't remember feeling hungry. You eat because they tell you to eat and you know you have to, but you're never in a mood to eat.

It's not like in the movies where they all march in all badass. Everyone is scared. Some guys wouldn't even leave the trail to take a shit or a piss. They'd just drop their pants and go right there. And if you're coming behind, you step in that shit. Nobody liked those guys. The ones that didn't give a fuck were those white boys from Tennessee. Oh, and, Kentucky, where your cousin Johnny goes to sell weed. Shit, those white boys got balls. They'll keep shooting no matter what. *Les vale madre*. I saw one guy get shot in the right arm and all he did was switch his rifle to his left and kept firing. Never missed a beat. See, that's what you have to do, keep shooting. They train us to never retreat and never leave a man in the field. So we dropped fire till our barrels got bent. But the V.C. can't do that. They didn't have supplies like us. The V.C. would hit you then run away. They'd pop up, aim and shoot. They never wasted a shot. They aimed, dropped the safety, and then took their shot. And then they pop the safety back up after they shoot, so they never waste a shot. We would pick guns off of guys after a firefight and they would all be on safety. I swear to God, you could hear the safety's click even in the middle of the shit. Maybe that's how close we were, but I swear you could hear them clicking their guns on and off safety. If one of their guys fell, they left him and came back later. So we started cutting off our insignias and wrapping them around our knives and shoving them up the dead V.C.'s ass so when they picked him up they'd know it was 1st infantry that wasted him.

I got 16 confirmed but I know the number was over forty. The first guy I got was when we came to a river. There were men wading across when I came over the bank. I throw down on one and yell the word for raise your hands, but he would only raise one. I shout two, three times, then start squeezing. He flies back and the other hand comes up with an AK in it. *Me iba chingar*. It pissed me off to know that he was going to fuck me. I kept firing. I pumped 41 bullets into him. The LT came up to me and asked me to explain why I had shot this man 41 times. I told him that I ran out of clips. He said, 'Good man.' And handed me a full clip and then we crossed the river.

We had to hold our ground. We couldn't take a step back and we couldn't leave until we picked up everybody, even if it was just pieces. I had to bag up a leg, a shoulder, and a head one time. I could never get the eyes closed. We'd make the new recruits carry that shit because half the time it was their fault one of us got wasted. You know what you call a twelve year old in Vietnam? V.C. regular. Charlie didn't have to bother with any of that shit. They'd just spring up from the jungle and start firing. You couldn't even tell they were there until the shooting started. That's how good they hid. So we'd drop Agent Orange and burn all the foliage. Two hundred gallon barrels we'd move around in just our T-shirts. They wouldn't even give us a mask. That's why my lungs are all fucked up. When your Tio Checo was crying because he thought he was going to jail over that coke we were moving, he said he wanted to kill himself. I was in the hospital getting a lung removed. I told him, "Go to my house and tell Francis to give you my gun from the nightstand. Use it on yourself, but first leave a letter donating me your lung, pendejo." Anyway, after we got the leaves all burned off, we could go back in and search for Charlie. But they tunnel in; they build whole cities underground. You got to go in there and get them out. We'd set up ambushes of our own. It was in Laos, or maybe Cambodia, probably both; we laid Claymores along a trail then hit Charlie while they were humping through with supplies. I saw a V.C. get ripped in half. His head and shoulders fell with the sack of rice he was carrying, but his legs kept running for about five paces. That sack of rice would have fed a whole platoon. *Eran cabrones los* Vietnamese. You had to keep on Charlie all the time. I did all that shit, tunnel rat, explosives, point. Oh, man, point. I did nine and a half months on point. I've never met or heard of anyone doing more. Life expectancy is two weeks on point. I lasted nine and a half months. I should have gotten a Hollywood contract. No one does that. Nine and a half months; I'd like to meet someone else who can say that. But I knew I wasn't going to get it. I don't know how, but I just knew; even when I was getting close to coming back to the world.

You see, the closer you come to the end of your tour, the more you worry about getting wasted. A lot of guys got wasted waiting for the Huey that was going to take them back to the world. So when I'm getting close to the end of my tour, I try not to think about it. Then my Sergeant tells me that we're going out and he wants me on point. When you go out, it's five guys in a line, and you head out in one direction. Ten or twenty kilometers away, another group like yours heads out from the opposite direction. You hump it through till you meet up in the middle or the shit starts, whatever comes first.

I tell Sarge he should put some fresh meat on point; I was about to be reborn. He said that he knew but that he was pretty sure we were going to meet Charlie that day and he wanted someone with experience on point. I thought about it and knew he was right. The new guys will walk you right in to an ambush. So, we start to hump it, and a few clicks in, I hear chatter and it sounds friendly. I turn to the Sergeant, and I'm pointing my gun at him now because everywhere you look, you have your rifle drawn and ready to fire. So I got my sling tight and the M-16 waist high when I turn and tell the Sergeant I hear chatter and it sounds friendly. "How far did you say the other group was? Because I hear friendly." Can't be, he says. Friendly was still five clicks out at least, so he sends me back up to check. I take a few more steps and the grass parts and a V.C. with a R.P.G. strapped across his back steps forward rattling off in Vietnamese. Hell, I only weighed 98 pounds, we hadn't showered in weeks. I guess I did look a lot like them.

We both figured it out at the same time. He must've read my face when I realized he thought I was V.C. because he pulled the R.P.G. just as I squeezed the M-16 and sidestepped. The

rocket shot by me and blew off the Sergeant's right arm. I got the Silver Star with Oak Leaf Clusters for that one, "For gallantry in action." Leaving my position of cover under fire to aid a wounded comrade. They don't pin medals to your chest like in the movies. They give you a certificate. I asked them what I was supposed to do with it, and the guy told me to take it down to Denny's with a dollar and maybe I could get a cup of coffee.

He wasn't kidding either. When I came back to the world, I landed in San Francisco. The hippies were there at the airport. They spat on me and called me a baby killer. I took off my uniform in the bathroom and left it there on the floor. I walked out of that airport telling myself over and over that that's why we fight, for people to have that freedom. But I didn't believe it then any more than I believe it now.

When I was over there, they would put me to guard whole fields of weed and poppy. I could have helped myself, or scored any number of ways. Over half the guys in my unit were hooked on smack before we even left. I never touched shit while I was over there. I never even smoked a cigarette, much less a joint. When I left the airport in San Francisco, I went and bought my '63 Falcon and a pound of weed with my combat pay. I didn't even know how to roll. Hell, I still don't; I have to use a rolling machine. All the time I was over there, I thought I had to be in my five senses to survive, but I got it backwards. Yeah, man. I had it all wrong.