We Shouldn't Be Here

By Kæl "Viktor" Kearlsey

Why am I here?

It was the question I knew most of us were asking, most of all me. Wind whistled through the dark, cloudless night, sending strong and frequent shivers down my spine. I clenched my teeth, gripping my automatic rifle as though my life depended on it.

Although, I suppose it did. It was the only thing that would keep me alive in a dire situation, and though I hated it, I knew what I had to do.

I never wanted to join the army. Guns had terrified me from an early age, and as I lived in the city, I had no need to own one, much less learn how to fire one. I had hoped to go through with my life without ever needing to, but the government had other plans.

The Vietnam war had been, since the very beginning, an unpopular war. The general populous had almost unanimously agreed that we were wasting human lives on a war that honestly did nothing to benefit us. Myself? I agreed with most people.

You’re probably wondering how I ended up a soldier in Vietnam then.

It’s fairly simple, actually. I was 18.

In other words, drafting age.

When I received my letter in the mail, I can remember the feeling of horrible dread that spread through my limbs, weighing me down and making my heart pound with fear. I had been keeping up with the news, but even when they called Sept. 14 (my birthday) first, it hadn’t completely settled in until right after I received my drafting notice.

Less than a year later, I was on the battlefield, the smell of charred flesh and gunpowder becoming quickly familiar to me. I kept mostly to myself, afraid that if I made friends with someone and they died, I wouldn't be able to make it through the war. I closed my heart off to almost all feeling, trying to maintain a stoic, hard attitude, but inside I was a broken man.

At first, I just begged to survive. I wished that I had some sort of disability; something to keep me home, but I wasn't a naturally lucky person. I always lost at poker, my friends in school always teased me because I was always the one that had to clean the board at the end of the day, etc. However, as the people of the United States began to oppose the war more freely, I started to wonder if my luck was shaping up.

It didn't truly matter anyways. I knew that even if I ever returned, I'd never be able to return to my old life. In some ways, I guess I didn't want to return, but that didn't stop me from trying.

By the end of the war, I was determined to live. I didn't have anyone at home, but as I closed myself off to emotion, I started to become more self-centred and followed orders almost exclusively, realising early that the more I listened to my superiors, the more likely I'd be to survive. However, at the same time, I knew that this hoarding of emotions would only get me so far in the real world. If I returned, I'd probably have about the same reaction to others as I did in Vietnam.

I suppose that was my incentive to open myself up to people more.

I also believe that was my downfall.

In early December of 1974 I was stationed in Saigon Vietnam, near the southern tip of the country. The Northern Vietnamese were pushing south, and my regiment and I had been stationed just outside of Phuoc Long Province. I had been ordered by my captain to kill on sight, and was determined to follow the order, but I guess things never turn out as they appear, right?

Gunshots screamed through the air, my pounding headache getting worse as the hours pressed on. We had been fighting for nearly five hours at this point, and I truly just wanted to collapse onto the ground. The fatigue that tore at my limbs was burning and my overactive brain was starting to make crucial mistakes. I ended up near the western edge of the battle, my rifle pounding against my shoulder as I fired round after round into the Northern Vietnamese soldiers swarming the area. With every shot I fired, with every soldier I killed, I felt my soul tear a little farther, soon falling apart and leaving me a hollow shell.

Then I saw the girl.

She couldn't have been more than fifteen, her eyes wide in anger. She was obviously not a soldier; her long, shredded dress and streaming hair told me that much. I told myself I would ignore her, but something about her terrified me more than any of the other soldiers I'd seen before.

The young girl hefted a large semi-automatic hunting rifle up to her shoulder, aiming the nozzle directly at my face as we locked eyes, and I froze.

The look in the girl's eyes was terrifying. Her gaze was animalistic; predatory. At first, I wasn't entirely sure why she would be aiming for me, as I was trying to protect her from the Northern Vietnamese who were invading her homeland. However, just before she pulled the trigger, it clicked.

She didn't care whose side I was on. It didn't matter to her; she just wanted everyone to be gone. She did not want there to be fighting around her people, and therefore saw everyone as an invading force…

…including us.

My last thought before everything went black was a realisation:

We shouldn't be here.

So why in Hell were we?