We were given a silent homecoming. There were no celebrations, no parades, no parties, and certainly, none of the gallant marching bands we had heard would greet returning veterans. My father and his buddies were celebrated and spoiled and pampered when they came back from Europe, but for us, it was different. Maybe it was because we had all served different one-year terms in the armed forces, and had returned home in small groups, if not alone. Maybe it was because there was nothing to be proud of. But, still, why the contempt? Why the same silent, hating look they gave all of us, why the spitting image or the let's-forget-about-them-and-move-on talk? We, too, were part of the greatest generation and were at our prime during the sixties; ten years of fighting and turmoil, and we were wasting away in the rehabilitation centers. Now, we were just P.T.S.D. victim #1567, or the fifth suicide case in the newspaper. It's like we didn't exist anymore, didn't have a name or place in this country.

So where had McNamara, Johnson, Kissinger and all the other big politicians who had sent us there and kept us fighting gone? That administration which had spilt our blood in a land ten thousand miles away had now forgotten to recognize our service to this country. Maybe *we* were supposed to forget as well—put those memories aside, and start our lives anew. But how could we? How could we forget? How could we pretend? Pretend that those searing flames etched behind our eyes were lies? That those flaming napalm bombs never fell, that those peaceful hamlets weren't torn asunder by our bullets. No, we could not do that. And they could not ask us to do that—ask us to forget, to fade away into obscurity, to pretend, to purge, to live a lie. They could not ask us to forget Vietnam.

May 12, 1976

It's been more than three years since our last troops came home. The news is filled with speculation about the economy, the inflation and the widening debt, and the public is looking anxiously toward an uncertain future. There's a presidential election in six months, oil prices are skyrocketing, and taxes are higher than ever before. On top of that, there are plenty of things in our personal lives to keep us occupied. Weddings, our children's education, the struggle to keep a job. For everyday Americans, this is how life is. Vietnam is now truly part of the past.

I guess life goes on, as it always has, for those who haven't learned to value it. Why is it different for us? Why has that miserable one year we spent in Vietnam frozen time and trapped us there forever. I want to

worry about stupid things again. I want my wife's words to comfort me, as they always did, and my children's happiness to enliven my soul. I want this damned wall that has cut me off from the world to fall, to get out from under the shadow of that horrid place. No moment I have spent here has been truly free of that shadow. The visions remain with me, as clear as they were when I actually lived them. While I try to fall asleep on a warm spring evening, here, thousands of miles away from the horrors of my past, its night shift again, and I've been transported. My senses are alert, as I watch for movement in the bushes, or any signs of hidden Vietcong snipers. I peer through dark trees looking for an enemy that never shows its face, soaked in mud, utterly miserable, but afraid, for the lives of my buddies depends on my watch. Darkness falls. The air is humid as ever, and I find myself fighting the urge to doze off. I tell myself five minutes of rest will not harm anyone, and drift off to sleep, but when I wake up, I'm covered in a cold sweat—how *foolish* I am! Five minutes, and our camp could have be completely ambushed. I curse my carelessness, but then realize that there's no one with me, no one to protect.

In our last Vietnam Veterans of America meeting, I got the chance to talk to a few of the guys who had been in my regiment. Of the three I spoke with, two were struggling to get financial assistance from the government to pay for their therapy and medical relief costs. They told me, flat out, that they were depressed and had been diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. I was shocked. I didn't know PTSD happened to real people. It had always been faceless names in the newspaper, all the stories of veterans being hospitalized and treated for extreme trauma, committing suicide behind the backs of their doctors. Stories are always just that—stories—until they come knocking on your own front door. I knew my friends were normal, real people. But the issues they faced today were not normal at all. And, to think, there was no one to support them. The public had turned their backs. Society had forsaken them, after pointing out the way to the insane asylums and hospitals. Families did not understand their situations. They didn't realize what a year of jungle warfare, of dodging shrapnel and chasing elusive enemies, of seeing your friends die for no reason, of taking endless, meaningless body counts can do.

But what was to be done? Who would help us? And what did we want? I posed these questions to my fellow veterans, assembled at the meeting.

Almost everyone agreed that we had to speak out.

Almost everyone agreed that we weren't looking for banners or celebration for our sacrifices.

Everyone agreed that we did want respect.

Some said we had to share our pain and our bitterness with the world.

Some said no one would listen.

Others suggested that our memories had to be filed away, forgotten.

Yet others admitted that they had tried, and it was killing them.

A few believed we were looking for a place in this country, and that we had not found it yet.

A few others said that we were looking for ourselves.

But how would we find those things?

A man, who I knew only by sight, who had been stationed just outside of Saigon during the war suggested that we write poems.

Poems? People looked at each other. There was not one nod of ascent.

But the idea grew on me as time went on. That man had the courage to suggest that our experiences and our opinions mattered, that they could be set in stone for us, for others, for posterity. We could publish a journal, on the behalf our VVA chapter, with poems and articles detailing our views and our stories from the war, everything from antiwar anthems to somber reflections. A permanent medium. A bridge between us and society. Between us and ourselves.

I tried my hand at verse for the first time—I had always been a poor writer—and was shocked at how easily the words came out. Within a week, I had written several compositions. I felt the greatest joy, however, when I heard the poems of my buddies, and felt the similar ideas that tied all our poetry together. That hot summer day, we christened ourselves the "Poet Warriors." Our next few meetings were spent presenting favorite works, critiquing and discussing, and finalizing our first anthology for publication. The spirit of comradeship we felt as we poured out our hearts in our writing, that feeling I will never forget.

To this day, my favorite poem remains the simple, non-rhyming piece I scrawled on the margins of a book the first day I began writing. I entitled it "Fugitive from Self."

September 7, 1976

Only last night I had the horrific nightmare that I had been deployed for a second term as a colonel in Vietnam, and had been given the responsibility to lead one more of those hated search-and-destroy missions into the hilly country just south of the 17th parallel. Last night, I dreamt of all the bloodshed and suffering all over again, and thought of what it would have felt like to be spat in the face and blamed for losing the war. And how did that compare to silent neglect, the treatment we received every day?

But we had to look past all that. Past the piles of enemy dead, the hills taken at brutal costs and forgotten the next day, the cruelty of it all. We had to look once more into that nightmare, but not for the death, but for the camaraderie. We had to realize that in spite of the deep divides running through this nation, Vietnam Veterans were there for each other. We believed there would be a time when all the hard feelings and painful wounds inflicted during the war would heal, and America would be able to confront its past. And there would be a time when we veterans, marred physically and emotionally in the longest war in our history, would be able to stand together in peace—*as we had in war*.

This piece was inspired by an interview with Vietnam Veteran Nicholas James Weber, who served as a Chinook helicopter crew chief in Vietnam and became an ardent antiwar activist - a "Poet Warrior" - upon his return.