

THE HERO'S JOURNEY

The fighting spirit of Unnacokasimon, a Seventeenth Century Nanticoke Indian chief, meets the fighting spirit of Twentieth Century Ho Chi Minh. And in the breaking waves of colliding spacetimes, a trial testing the steel of personified warrior grit is set into motion.

Such warrior spirit comes by way of a journey of consciousness. One described often as the Hero's Journey. All hero journeys begin alike: A baby's crying response of disorientation in exiting its mother's protective biosphere into the greater biosphere of Mother Earth. Facing the unknown, the baby vocalizes its fear and simultaneous defiance. He or she will "*not go gentle into that good night.*" (Dylan Thomas)

Every collective group of human beings is a tribe of a sort, whether a nuclear family, extended family or nation. These tribes have their hero stories, planted like seeds for imitation in a child's mind and heart. Such stories become trees anchoring a people to the land and sky of their being, tales of bravery and unwavering devotion to the cause of preserving their way of life; an identifying selfhood of who they are passed on to future generations.

It was by such a ripening of child wonder into adult aspiration that I pushed on through childhood rites of passage to the grownup version, and entered the crucible of Vietnam warfare and combat. Along the way from childhood innocence to post combat citizen, I've learned a few things that sustained me through the light and dark of life's adversities and personal demons.

As such, we all are on a hero's journey of our own making, a quest to be the highest expression of the ideal person we want to be – that shiny template of human ascendancy. Every tribe has its lineage of paragons who demonstrated in their time on earth those character traits prized by their people. In my Nanticoke heritage, the contributions of Chief Unnacokasimon to the tribe's survival and continuance in the *Age of Discovery* are noteworthy history.

It was a fateful day in 1608 when the British captain John Smith – while exploring the Chesapeake Bay – sailed onto the *Kuskarawaok* River, the selfsame river known currently as the Nanticoke. Here he made First Contact (the meeting of two distinct cultures unaware of one another) with the ancestors of today's Nanticoke Indian Tribe. This brush with the *Kuskarawaok*, otherwise *Nantaquak* people, would prove to be a harbinger of change and uncertainty.

Nanticoke translated from the original Algonquian *Nantaquak* means People of the Tide Water, referring to the Eastern Shore area between the Delaware and Chesapeake bays. Prior to Smith's transmutative expedition, the Nanticoke maintained a lifestyle based on the rhythms of nature and the web of life.

Drawing sustenance from their riparian habitat, they subsisted on fish, crabs, shrimp, eels, clams, oysters, and the farmed harvest of corn, beans, squash, pumpkins, and sunflowers. As hunters and gatherers, they foraged for nuts, berries, birds, eggs, and edible seasonal plants. During the winter, they hunted in the forests and meadows of the Eastern Shore for squirrels, turkeys, deer, opossums, rabbits, bear, partridges, ducks and geese. It was a predictable pattern of seasons

coming and going. But like Captain Smith's vessel that "ship had sailed," and brought to the Eastern Shore decades of upheaval.

Land grabs and displacement by white settlers disrupted the tribe's seasonal way of life. The de facto invaders whittled down the forests and by consequence the winter game. Their unconfined livestock plundered native farms and crops, precipitating extenuating thievery of their hogs and cattle by area tribes struggling to "bring home the bacon."

Raids and threats of war and open warfare escalated hostilities between area tribes and colonists, boiling over with Maryland governor Thomas Greene ordering militia captain John Pike to attack and destroy the Nanticoke village and gardens in 1642 and 1647, as coercion to leave the area. All of this took its toll over a 70-year span, leaving the Nanticoke and their Choptank branch of relatives as the only native tribes still living on the Eastern Shore. This was the world in which Chief Unnacokasimon fought the good fight for his people.

In 1668, the Nanticoke chief signed the first of five treaties to establish peace between the proprietary government of the Province of Maryland and his people. The treaties, however did not broker harmony, as English emigrants continued their seizing of tribal lands. Being "discovered" had its cost: a tribute payment to lost sovereignty without redeemable freedom.

To remedy this ongoing trespass, the tribe during the continued tenure of Chief Unnacokasimon, petitioned the Maryland government in 1684 to grant them specific tracts of land. This resulted in a jointly defined reservation for the tribe's use, situated between Chicacoan Creek and the

Nanticoke River in Maryland. Nonetheless, non-native people still encroached upon their lands – leading up to the tribe purchasing a 3,000-acre tract of land in 1707 on Broad Creek in Somerset County, Maryland (now Sussex County, Delaware).

The fortunes of change hoped for in songwriter Sam Cooke’s lyrical “It’s been a long / A long time coming / But I know a change gonna come / Oh, yes it will” did not come to fruition.

In 1742, after nearly a century of conflict, Nanticoke leaders secretly met in the Winnasocum swamp near the Pocomoke River and conspired to launch war on the occupying Maryland colony. Wind of the plan got back to the colonists via a Choptank informer. With the element of surprise gone, and the countering threat of the colonists to take all of what Nanticoke land remained, the die was cast.

Beginning in 1744, a gradual exodus of the Nanticoke took place. Traveling north in dugout canoes to the Susquehanna River, some migrated to the Six Nations of the Iroquois into New York, Pennsylvania, and areas of Canada on the promise of land and protection. Others walked westward. A significant number, including my antecedents, moved eastward into Delaware and settled near the Indian River.

This living history courses through my veins. It is imprinted in my DNA as a testament of resolve and resilience in the face of grave challenge. It is a living being within me that lived on in Vietnam and my return home.

As a *baby boomer* swaddled in the Ally victory tantara over World War II oppression and genocide, I wanted to reach the apotheosis of will and courage embodied by the legendary ‘Chesty’ Puller – the most decorated U.S. Marine in history.

My idealism ripened, as I pushed through my childhood rites of passage, to that inevitable act of daring... In November 1967, I joined the United States Marine Corps and headed off to Boot Camp. Five months and two weeks later, I entered the crucible of the Vietnam War. Chesty and I went up against General Vo Nguyen Giap, Commander of the People’s Army of Vietnam.

Battle joined, it was the adrenaline-rushed instincts of combat mind that got me and my brothers-in-arms through each day and month of jousting with enemy forces. Prolonged exposure to serial danger and deathly consequences of repetitive patrols, sweeps and operations had armed us with cognitive recall to anticipate danger, react to it, and live another day outsmarting the randomness of lethal demise. Failing that, we would end up in the future immortalized by name on the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C.

I lived to live another day, all the way to my *rotation* date (end of deployment). After thirteen months in the jungles, rice paddies, and hills of South Vietnam, I was on my way home: three days at Camp Butler (Okinawa), then on to Treasure Island U.S. Naval Station (San Francisco), and onward to home town, Washington, D.C.

Returning, I was a different person and America was a different country from the one I had left. Stateside duty at Camp Lejeune (North Carolina) tasted like a strange brew of familiar and

unfamiliar flavors. The daily regimen of domestic military bases seemed banal compared to their Nam counterparts, where alert and response drills were replaced by literal ground force attacks, ambushes, incoming rockets, RPGs, booby traps and mines.

War is always ultimately personal. The finality of premeditated killing strips away any dispassion from war. It is serious business with serious consequences, the ramifications of which are borne by the individual warrior. I was 22 years old trying to deconflict the arguments between pro-war and anti-war activists to sift out my own truth. Compounding my readjustment challenges was managing combat conditioned reflexes to external noises and movement stimuli.

Decades have past since I crossed the Pacific, leap-frogged over the South China Sea and touched down at Da Nang Air Base... joined my unit, *beat the bush*, and vied lethally with enemy troops. Others, despite crucifixes, rabbit's feet, individual lucky gear and clothing, completed their hero's Journey in one of those unforgiving battlegrounds, where we all lost our innocence.

We had been denied both the "thrill of victory" and the "agony of defeat" per proviso of the **Paris Peace Accords**, designating withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Vietnam (January 1973).

President Nixon's ignominious "Peace with Honor" end to the war was laid squarely at our feet.

We were the flashpoint of America's divisive culture war, which tossed us away as collateral damage left to our own devices.

In the quiet of my private reminiscences, I questioned the good I had done myself and my country. In deeper flights of introspection, I pondered how well I had acquitted myself in the eyes of Chesty Puller. Following in Chesty's footsteps was enshrined in Marine culture. For all Marines in Nam, Chesty would be the final adjudicator of personal valor and the right stuff of hero stories spoken around the winter fires – as guiding posts for future generations.

To *slay the dragon* that stands between every person and their quest, they must slay the dragon within: their fears, their doubts, their feelings of inadequacy. They must rise beyond their past and stare down the beast of uncertainty, and claim their power to evolve into the person they wish to be. The hero's journey on the surface may seem to be singular. But it is the journey of the *one in the many* that becomes the *many in the one* of future generations. The hero's story acts as a force multiplier of reaching our potential.

A willingness to sacrifice for the common good is the mark of the hero. But heroes don't grow in a vacuum. Warriors from all walks of life abound. They are everywhere doing acts of sacrifice, generosity, support, encouragement, truth telling, and speaking to power.

The arc of history circling back sixteen generations or so to Chief Unnacokasimon followed me into Nam, hovering in the background unseen but felt in my resolve, fortitude, perseverance, and unrelenting survivability. I would "*not go gentle into that good night*" any easier than did the Nanticokes, when pushed almost to extinction. As the Morpheus character in the Matrix movie series proclaimed when the Machines were advancing on Zion, the last bastion of the human race, "*We are still here!*"

Still, by comparison to my ancient forebears, my fighting an unpopular war that never came to our shores seems inconsequential. Yet Nam's long shadow on American culture and politics is an order of magnitude equal to that of an event horizon from which we seemingly cannot escape. Like the dinosaurs, our unmistakable traces turn up in any discussion on foreign or domestic policy that has geopolitical significance.

Our ranks grow thinner in the passing of each year, but we are still here as a reminder of the cost of war and the elusiveness of peace. And in that perennial struggle to coexist, perhaps we have earned a place of distinction in the pursuit of the American Dream. Perhaps somewhere in the ugliness of the death and carnage we gave and received is the path forward to a peaceful humanity.

Throughout the ages, humankind has been desperately divided by competing identity interests: tribal, racial, ethnic, religious, national. Conflicts over land, resources, fortune, and influence have damned peaceable cohabitation throughout history. It is because of our disability to recognize our oneness that we are divided between enemy and ally. When the need to control circumstances mutates into irreconcilable differences, war can foist itself into the breach as the *"final solution."*

It is at this point that "Older men declare war. But it is youth that must fight and die. And it is youth who must inherit the tribulation, the sorrow and the triumphs that are the aftermath of war." [Herbert Hoover, June, 1944]

And therein lies the Catch-22 that pervaded the anti-war movement. The presumptive outcry to conclude the war to save our precious lives was rebutted by the movement's condemnation of us as soulless *baby killers* and mindless robots of American imperialism. "War hath no fury like a non-combatant." [C. E. Montague]

This contrasted with war hawks who just couldn't stomach a stalemated draw. Peace accord or not, we were failures in their eyes. What both sides missed was our reality: "It doesn't make a damned bit of difference who wins the war to someone who's dead." [Joseph Heller, author]

Where does that leave us Marine Vietnam vets, when all is said and done? I think we can let Chesty Puller speak for us from another military stalemate. When the 1st Marine Division was surrounded and outnumbered eight-to-one (the equivalent of 8 divisions) by Chinese and North Korean forces during the Korean War, Lieutenant general Lewis B. Puller – Commander of the division's 1st Marine Regiment – declared the following:

"All right, they're on our left, they're on our right, they're in front of us, they're behind us... They can't get away this time. We're surrounded. That simplifies the problem!"

That's nothing new for the Nanticoke Indian Tribe.

AND WE ARE STILL HERE!

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¹ Carl Hitchens: Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division: Vietnam 1968/1969