

Introduction to the Stories – Transcribed from an audio tape October 2017

On June 22, 1966, I began my active military service. And in May [1969], I was discharged from active service in the military. During that period in time, from October 25th, 1967 until May 3rd, 1969, I was stationed in Vietnam. My primary MOS was 11B, which stood for Light Weapons Infantryman. In July 1986, I had episodes of psychological instability that caused me to make a decision that I was in need of psychological counsel. I talked to my wife, and by 4:00 pm that day I was admitted to a psychiatric unit.

As part of the admissions proceedings, I was given a paperback book on the subject of cognitive therapy and was told that my psychiatrist had recommended that I begin reading the first two chapters. There was nothing scheduled for me to do during the first two days of my admission, and being an avid reader, I began immediately reading. It was the most important book I ever read, in that once I got through the introduction there were chapters covering a wide range of psychological problems. I recognized myself on almost every page of the book and the solutions they recommended. At the end of each chapter there was a test, and by the end of the second day, I had read the whole book and taken all the tests. It was the most important thing I had ever done for myself.

On the morning of the third day I was introduced to a psychologist, who was there to evaluate my current problems. I spent a total of two days and sixteen hours total talking, taking tests, and answering questions. At the end of the second day, she was about to leave and asked me one question. She asked, “Mr. Merrins, has everything you’ve told me in the last two days been the truth?” To which I replied in the affirmative. She then said, “I will tell you something about myself.” She said she had a doctorate from Washington University in St. Louis. She only saw one or two patients a year at the request of a special board at Washington University. Her primary job Monday through Friday was working for the state in the penal system. Every inmate being incarcerated needed a psych evaluation as part of the process of their incarceration. She did this for a living for the past ten years. Her specialty was seeing those patients who might be considered dangerous or in need of further psychiatric therapy.

Before she left she explained that from our interaction over the past two days she considered me one of the most dangerous people she'd ever met.

My next step in the psychiatric progression was my doctor recommended that I see a psychologist who worked for the Veteran's Administration and was beginning a new self-help group for soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. She gave me a sealed copy of my report to give him, and I had an appointment at their outpatient facility on Pine St. in St. Louis. When I got there I met the psychologist. He looked through my records while I sat there. And it didn't take long, and he told me that he'd already talked to my primary psychiatrist, so he knew a lot that was already in there. He then proceeded to say that the most amazing part of my journey since being released from active duty was not becoming involved with the Veteran's Administration at the time of my discharge. He had worked for the VA system for twenty years and had a master's degree from Wash University. His group of veterans that he was meeting with was one of the first in the St. Louis area. He told me that had I gone to the VA for help immediately during a period after active duty that I probably would have wound up in a locked psychiatric unit. In those days they did not know what to do with veterans like me, so they had a tendency to admit them to units and start them on some powerful medications, mainly Stelazine as an antipsychotic and Valium, in order to ease the patient into their new life. For depression in those days, because of the severity many of the veterans showed, their primary method for treating depression was electroshock therapy. He said that even now, sixteen years after I had completed my active duty, he saw patients like me every day. He could tell them because they had been institutionalized for a long period of time. They never saw the sun. They walked stiff-legged because of the effects of the Stelazine. They also drooled almost constantly and spent much of the time either sitting and staring at the wall or standing in a corner facing the wall for long periods of time. He was still treating patients who'd been institutionalized at the time I was discharged. My not becoming involved with the VA probably saved me from this kind of life.

I was not totally shocked by what he had told me, having read about such instances, but still was amazed that there were so many that had been locked up for so long. In addition, he was amazed that I had not become like many combat veterans and that I was not homeless; I

seemed to be able to function in a job; I wasn't alcoholic; I did not have a criminal record—and that was the gist of our conversation. As far as his recommendation, he wanted me to join a newly formed veterans group who were diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. I did attend a meeting with him, and then I never went back.

During the final minutes of our conversation, he mentioned a project that he was working on. They had found that many veterans did better if they kept a daily diary of their thoughts and actions. He also mentioned that some veterans chose to write about their experiences in order to put on paper what they carried around in their mind. Following that decision, I had my four building blocks for a better future: I had a book that explained my thought processes; I had a psychiatric evaluation that vindicated the fact that I was abnormal; I had a history of what might have happened to me had I not chosen the path that I did; and I had an outlet for my thoughts about my service in Vietnam. With these four tools, I was prepared to leave the psychiatric unit against my psychiatrist's advice. I contacted my primary physician who was a cardiologist and had privileges at the hospital where I was. As a cardiologist, he wrote orders based on my continuing cardiac conditions that I be released from the institution to spend time at home in a much less stressful situation. And so ended my journey into what at the time was psychiatric therapy.

I started writing about my experiences, and that lasted for a period of about nine months. After that I quit writing, and I stored all the stories I had written during that time. In the fall of 2016 I started sharing the stories with my brother Jim.