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More than Conquerors — When Warriors Come Home

By CH(COL) Scott McChrystal, USA (Ret)

Only days removed, but thousands of miles from the fighting, he was finally home. As his plane touched down at the San Francisco Airport, his mind wandered to the dark places war had taken him.

For months on end he had endured seemingly endless days battling scorching heat, humidity, thirsty mosquitoes, monsoon rains and an enemy he would never fully understand.

At only 23 years of age he had seen things no person should ever see. Friends had died and been severely injured before his eyes. Bullets had whizzed past his head. Close calls with booby traps had almost cost him limbs. And his hands had been used to take lives.

Now that he was home he didn't know what to expect.

The thought that his khaki uniform was the kind of calling card that might draw the ire of civilians angered him. After what he'd been through he certainly didn't want to deal with anyone with an opinion on what he'd done in Vietnam.

For a moment he considered changing out of his khaki uniform into his street clothes. That way there would be no chance of anyone calling him a "baby killer." But then he thought better of it. He was a lieutenant in the U.S. Army. He was proud to be a soldier, and he had volunteered to serve his country. Popular or unpopular, America was at war by orders of civilian leaders, not military.

Even so he maintained a steady clip as he cut through the terminal. In the baggage area he would grab his duffle bag then dart to the bus stop where he would catch a bus to Capitola. If all went well he would step onto the bus without incident.

I'm not ashamed of who I am or what I have done, he told himself. I'm an American soldier. If someone wants to heckle me they'll quickly discover they've picked on the wrong guy.

An hour later he sank into his seat on the bus. No one had badgered or taunted him. He couldn't recall any sideways glances or snarky remarks. His pride was intact and, most importantly, he hadn't hurt anyone.

Nearly four decades later many things have changed — including the soldier who came home from Vietnam still looking for a fight. **I know because I am that soldier.**

I was not a Christian when I walked through that airport in 1972. But a year later during premarital counseling with Ralph Holt, a minister at Fort Bragg in North Carolina, he led me in the sinner's prayer. I accepted Jesus as my Sav-



CAPT Brian and Anne Perkins with Vic Primeaux following Brian's change of command ceremony aboard CGC CHASE, a 378-foot WHEC homeported in San Diego. Brian wrapped up a highly successful command tour with counter-drug deployments, fisheries/LE and SAR operations in the Eastern Pacific and Bering Sea — having seized \$400 million in cocaine and marijuana, including a self-propelled semi-submersible still afloat and laden with drugs. Brian will be the new chief of the Office of Cutter Forces.

ior, and where I would spend eternity was finally settled.

That decision changed my life, and I came to the realization that God had a plan and purpose for me that would include a loving family and a career as a chaplain in the Army.

Admittedly, some things haven't changed since I came home from Vietnam.

Conflict still exists. War is still part of life. Since 9/11, thousands of men and women have deployed into harm's way as part of our nation's war on terrorism.

Our military continue to deploy to places of conflict. Some die. Others get wounded. Fortunately, most survive and return home.

But coming home from war is a mixed bag.

Reentry back into one's regular life can be like entering a battlefield. The kind that is mostly friendly, but still laced with landmines.

From one veteran to another, I express heartfelt gratitude for your service and sacrifice. On the whole, the citizens of our great land appreciate your efforts. Your sacrifices are what keep our nation free. Your blood, sweat and tears have contributed significantly toward keeping America such an amazing country in which to live and raise children.

As one who has experienced both deployment into hostile territory and the subsequent challenges of returning to friendly territory, I offer the following 10 observations for your consideration.

1. Accept accountability and responsibility. It's your job to accept responsibility for doing your part in the transition from combat zone back to normal life.

2. Avoid the victim mentality. You are not a victim, and though you can't always control what happens, you can control your response to whatever

you face.

3. Recognize that deployment has changed you. One of your main tasks is to discover how you have changed and adjust accordingly.

4. No person is an island. Sure, you may feel alone and distant from others, but in reality there are plenty of people to whom you can turn — family, friends, neighbors, church, the VA, and numerous other helping agencies.

5. Make an effort to connect. Take the initiative and reach out to others. People can't help you if they don't know you need help.

6. Try to be understanding of those who have not fought. Most Americans need your help to understand what you have experienced because they haven't been there.

7. Realize that life at home is different from life at war. Compared to the demands of life in a combat zone, many issues and activities of normal life may seem insignificant or trivial. These feelings will diminish as you adjust. Just be patient with others and yourself.

8. Warriors need a genuine welcome home. Yes, you need to feel welcomed back home and appreciated for your service. As a human being, you should not deny this need. But realize that others may not always know the best way or most appropriate way to express their gratefulness.

9. Tell your story. You are not a robot. You've just returned from a war zone. Process your experience by telling other people your story.

10. Warriors need peace with God. God has created you with a purpose. Have peace with God and others. Help, grace, wisdom and peace will come from reading your Bible, time in prayer, and meeting with a pastor, Christian counselor, or some other person who knows God in a personal way.

Welcome home! Thanks for your service to our nation. Remember that attitude and perspective are crucial to the process of adjusting to life back at home.

"In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:37-39, NIV).

Note: Please pass along this article to Coast Guard or other military friends and family members, especially those who have been involved in OIF/OEF — Ed.

Masthead photo shows CGC CHASE (WHEC 718) in full dress while moored at NAVSTA San Diego homeport for the 11 June change of command. CAPT Brian Perkins was relieved by CAPT Greg Sanial with then-PACAREA Commander, VADM David Pekoske, as the presiding officer.

Used with permission of The Pentecostal Evangel at www.tpe.ag.org and Chaplain Colonel (Ret.) SCOTT McCHRISTAL. Chaplain McChrystal is a veteran of 21 years of active duty Army service and currently serves as the Military/VA representative for the Chaplaincy Department of the Assemblies of God.