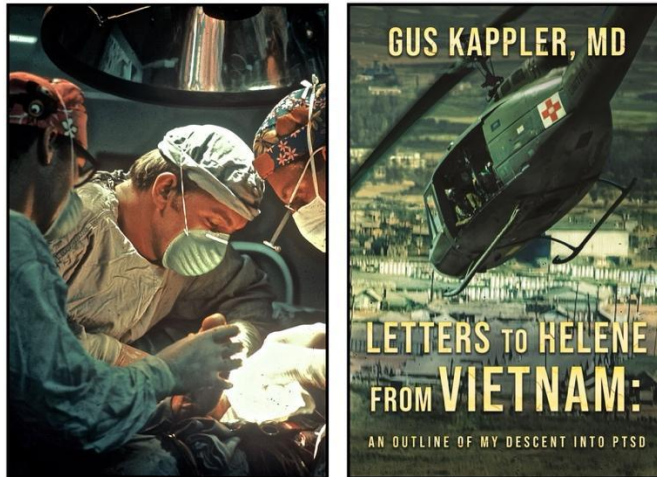




Synopsis

My sister, Helene, recently sent me fourteen letters I wrote to her during my year in Vietnam, '70-'71.

I asked her to forward the letters to me. I was excited to analyze my words to her from half a century ago. She did relate that “You drank and cursed a lot.”

Reading the letters in chronological order reveals my descent incrementally into the morass of PTSD.

As a physician, I felt duty-bound to utilize my story to stress that no one is immune to this disorder. PTSD does not discriminate.

In Letters, my initial correspondence, dated September 12, 1970, from Long Binh, near Saigon, reads as if I were a tourist on vacation. I had no forewarning of the horrors of war, the moral challenges, and the personality distortions I would experience.

Over half a century ago, shortly after returning home from my tour in Vietnam, I publicly uttered a phrase in a drunken stupor that haunts me to this day: “Kill all the fucking Vietnamese.”

Did that reprehensible statement truly come from me? Once home, my PTSD had surfaced, and I existed in a fog of anger and pain. I had no idea that the man who returned from Vietnam was no longer the same person who

had deployed. The Gus who went to war was a surgeon, trained to honor and preserve life. That person only wanted to be the best doctor he could be. He was compassionate, dedicated, and hopeful.

My service in Vietnam as an Army trauma surgeon at the 85th Evacuation Hospital exposed me daily to the devastating effects of war—mutilated bodies, shattered minds, broken souls, and warrior suicides. Witnessing such horrors changed me, but I was unaware of how deeply.

My transformation was insidious. My brain, protecting me from the unbearable sights and sounds, employed mechanisms that I only now understand. I was unconscious of how I was slipping into a darkness of rage and the alcohol dependence to find some semblance of comfort amid my chaos.

The man who returned home was different—scarred, angry, and broken. When drinking, he became someone else—someone scarcely recognizable as Gus.

In reading the letters, the black-and-white pages document my war zone downward spiral, from hope and purpose to anger and despair - PTSD.

That descent reached a crescendo four days before I was to leave Vietnam. At my roommate's goodbye party, when anesthetic from alcohol, I jumped off a bunker and suffered a fracture-dislocation of my right elbow. This accident was potentially career-ending. I was medivaced to Valley Forge Army Hospital.

My wife Robin, my anchor, often asked, "How did you become so angry? When did you start relying on alcohol to find peace?" Her questions, though painful, were a mirror into my hidden suffering.

Through many years of research, I have come to understand that PTSD may result in anyone exposed to traumatic events. No one is immune. It does not discriminate based on strength, character, or background.

It is a natural reaction to extraordinary circumstances.

Thanks to Helene, you and I may follow my distortion and identify the traumas causing my pain. But my story does not end there.

Once I returned home and confronted the contamination of my soul, I sought ways to resurrect the Gus I once was - gentle, hopeful, dedicated to life.

In the book's Epilogue, you will discover that PTSD is not only a predictable consequence of exposure to devastating events but also a challenge that may be managed, overcome, and prevented. I will discuss my brain's protective compartmentalization that allowed me to function in Vietnam but ultimately induced my PTSD through the excessive drinking required to keep the trauma hidden away.

With time at Fort Carson, Colorado, in the company of other physicians recently returned from Vietnam, I accomplished my restoration.

Healing is possible with the proper adjustments and sharing. I will demonstrate that even in our darkest moments, there is hope.