

**JUMPING
FROM
HELICOPTERS**



**JOHN STILLMAN
WITH
LORI STILLMAN**



Copyright © 2018 by John Stillman and Lori Stillman

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, digital scanning, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, please address Turtle Creek Publishing.

Published 2018
Turtle Creek Publishing
St. Clair, MO

ISBN: 978-1-7327361-0-8 pbk
ISBN: 978-1-7327361-1-5 ebk

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018910347

Editing and book design by Stacey Aaronson

Printed in the United States of America

*To the 58,000 plus names on the Vietnam Memorial Wall,
they are the true heroes of the war. They gave all.*

INTRODUCTION

I remember the first time I saw the tattoo. I was just shy of five years old, and my dad was sitting at the dinner table telling Mom about his workday. Like every other day, he had gone to work wearing a long-sleeve shirt, but on that steamy hot day, he had changed into a cool white tee when he got home. The look was so foreign to me that it was the equivalent of seeing Mister Rogers without a sweater.

As he reached to scratch an itch, the already short sleeve slid upward and a flash of color on his bicep caught my eye. Wanting to see more, I inched closer and carefully lifted his sleeve to peek under it. Possibly hoping I'd be satisfied just by seeing it, he continued chatting with my mom. But my curious mind wasn't satisfied in the least. At the first break in their conversation, I exploded with questions.

"Daddy, how did you get that color on your skin? Will it wash off? What are those pictures of?"

Patently, he explained the tattoo process—adding that it was extremely painful as an extra deterrent—pointing to each image: boots with wings, a parachute, his name. He said it showed that he jumped from planes and helicopters but that he didn't think much about it anymore.

I was left with the thought that he must have been forced to get it, because why else would he hide it? But that was the end of our conversation about it.

It wasn't until high school that I read a paragraph on the

Vietnam conflict in my history class. It wasn't much, but it was more than my father had told me. With my curiosity piqued, I remembered being around twelve when my parents had invited friends over to view some slides, and that no kids were allowed in the room. Wondering if the slides were of the war, I came home and dug out the off-limits box from under the stairs. Holding up slide after slide to the light, I finally found what I was looking for: evidence that my father had fought in the war. It was then that I realized he had done more than jump from choppers; he had killed people too. Images of dead people, lying in tall grasses, brought tears to my eyes. I didn't dare ask Dad more, though. Something told me he wouldn't want to talk about it.

In my thirties, I fell hard in love with a military man. He gave me his dog tags and a deployment coin to hold on to as he left for yet another stint overseas. But though he physically came home afterward, the man I loved didn't. He ended our wild love affair with a few sentences about how he had changed, and how he was sorry he didn't feel the same, but that he just didn't feel anything.

I knew as much about his war as I did about my father's. In my heartbroken state, I made a decision to find out more—how the military are trained to kill, what happens to them after they've been immersed in this level of violence, and how I could help someone diagnosed with PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder. With my lost love on my mind, my focus was on the currently deployed military. What I didn't realize was that they weren't the only ones struggling to cope with having been in a battle zone. My own father had been struggling privately for years.

Shortly after my breakup in 2012, my father was invited to a Veteran's Day celebration at his high school. He thought he would attend and merely be acknowledged, but once there, the men were asked if they would talk to students in classrooms and share some of their experience in Vietnam. Caught off guard, my father wanted to slip out quietly, but he was sitting in the back of the room where he couldn't leave without being obvious. So, not wanting to embarrass himself, he reluctantly agreed.

The next day, we got together and he told me that after speaking to the first class, they asked him to address another . . . and another. By the third, it became a little easier for him, and when the bell rang, no one wanted to leave.

Feeling as if a door had been opened, I gingerly asked him, "So what was it like for you to fight in the war?"

He looked away for a moment, seeming torn about how much to say to me. Finally, he merely said, "I was home a long time before I was actually home."

I don't know if it was my broken heart he was trying to help heal, but those words were enough to shift my focus toward a bigger project.

A week or so later, I sat down again with my father. Taking his hand, I said, "You know I want to write a book, right?"

I was pretty sure I'd never actually mentioned that to him, but he answered yes all the same.

"Would you like to tell your story?" I asked.

Emotionless, and without so much as a facial gesture, he replied, "Sure."

Looking back, it was odd that I would ask him to embark on such a deep excavation of memories he had barely begun to

acknowledge openly. Just a few years before, we had stumbled across the traveling Vietnam memorial wall and I wanted to stop and see it. As we walked along it, observing the thousands of names, I asked him if he knew anyone.

“Nope, no one,” was his response.

In my naïveté, I said, “Wow, how lucky are you to not know anyone listed here.”

I now know he had lied.

In January of 2013, my father and I sat down to begin talking about his time in Vietnam. I expected all he would have were his memories, which might have been spotty after all these years, but there was more. Dad had not only kept a journal while in Vietnam, but he had written letters from overseas to my mom—who at that time was his girlfriend—and she had kept all of them. We were also able to obtain the daily report from the department of defense that charted his whereabouts and activity during the months he was there.

With all of these documents at my disposal—most of which hadn’t been read for decades—I imagined I would be able to piece together my father’s time in Vietnam and paint a decent picture in words of that chapter of his life. What I didn’t realize was that while the journal, the letters, and the reports would play significant roles in our journey together, all of it would be nothing compared to his memory . . .

Continue reading
Jumping from Helicopters

Available from:

[Author Website](#)

Barnes and Noble

IndieBound

Amazon

The authors are extremely grateful for your interest in John's memoir that recounts his riveting and life-changing time in Vietnam.