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Robert Mitchell

". . . Mistakes Were Made": Scenes from a War

(Excerpted from *John Christian: Warrior-Shaman, Book 1: Redeeming the Warrior Spirit*)

In the Vietnam War, serious strategic and political mistakes were made.

—General David Petraeus

Editor's Introduction

In 1966, the eponymous hero of *John Christian: Warrior-Shaman* received a draft notice and decided to enlist in the Warrant Officer Rotary Wing Aviation Cadet program of the U.S. Army, to learn to fly helicopters in the intensifying war in Vietnam, where he was sent in January 1968, just before the Tet Offensive.

The training program evoked in John the archetypal warrior spirit whose dictates are to "know the enemy," and know that the military operations in which the warrior is engaged are guided by the moral and ethical dictates of the warrior spirit.

However, for the young soldier that spirit was betrayed in Vietnam.

Note: The opening passage takes place shortly after the end of the Tet Offensive of 1968. during which the Viet Cong took the city of Hué, among other important strategic targets. The offensive was one of the most significant turning points, and arguably (for both the United States and Vietnam) the most tragic, of the war.

Search and Destroy

Around the first of March, American forces retook Hué. The 3rd Brigade became heavily engaged in mopping up operations in the surrounding countryside. I was flying copilot on a command-and-control mission for a battalion sweep of villages upstream, along the Song Bo river. There were two villages that stood across a broad tributary from each other – one under the control of the communists and the other loyal to the South Vietnamese government. Since the beginning of the guerrilla war, a decade earlier, they had coexisted in a state of mutual tolerance. I did not know if the Tet Offensive had changed that delicate balance, but I did know that the battalion commander we were working for that day had orders to sweep through the communist village on a search-and-destroy mission.

By the time the battalion moved in, however, all the men of the village had fled with their families. Our troops swept through looking for arms caches and chasing communists through the brush. On the orders of the lieutenant colonel who commanded the battalion and whose TOC was in the rear of our aircraft, we landed in the village. Then my command pilot accompanied the battalion commander while he consulted with his ground troops. The crew chief and door gunner took care of the aircraft, and I was left with nothing to do.

Nearby was a farmer's hut. Actually, I reminded myself, he was a communist – a "gook" like the rest of the villagers: the enemy. With a casual, but nonetheless instinctive, concern for booby traps, like the ones we had learned about at Camp Radcliff, I wandered down a narrow path to the small clearing where the farmer's hut and work shed stood surrounded by a tall stand of bamboo. The stream gurgled quietly nearby. Somewhere up in the bamboo trees, a bird chirped, and, in the distance, I heard the muffled shouts and gunfire of men at war.

I looked at the hut for a moment and, thinking that I might find a souvenir there, I carefully lifted the cloth that covered the doorway. I entered the man's home but instead of

acquiring a souvenir, I discovered intimate details of my enemy's life.

The hut was a single rectangular room with bamboo walls, a dirt floor, and a thatched roof. A double bed stood in one corner partitioned by a curtain that had been strung across the room. In the main part of the room there was another, smaller bed, perhaps for a child, and several other pieces of furniture. Above a bureau that stood against the far wall was a faded picture of an old woman: a matriarchal figure that I amusingly decided must have been the "gook's" mother-in-law. On top of the bureau a gently smoothed silk scarf, a half-burnt candle, and several family relics formed a kind of informal altar. I was touched by this indication of some form of ancestor worship, though I did not understand the man's motives or the significance of the objects that lay so delicately upon the scarf. I left the altar untouched and stole nothing.

At the other end of the room, a stick fire still smoldered on a simple stone hearth. A few boxes and cans on a shelf above the hearth made a kitchen. That hearth conveyed the simplicity of the man's life. It was a well-worn, flat, round stone with a depression in the middle where the fire was built. The stone was elevated above the dirt floor and leveled on several bricks, and there was a small stool in front of it for the one who tended the fire and cooked the meals. There was no chimney, and a sooty patch on the underside of the thatched roof indicated where the smoke seeped through.

Though I had started this venture looking for a souvenir to steal, I looked around without touching anything. I had been warned that there might also be booby traps in the house, but in my heart I had a genuine respect for the property of this man, this "gook" who had suddenly acquired flesh and blood and a living personality. I suppose I stood there for about five minutes inspecting the empty silence of the man's home. I wanted to feel his presence, but he had escaped with his phantoms, leaving me only some household relics with which to speculate on his identity. Then I turned, carefully lifted the cloth, and went back out into the yard.

There were no animals, though bits of feathers stirred in the dust by the wind indicated that there had been at least one scrawny chicken and prints on the ground looked like those of a dog. The ground was bare dirt, except for clumps of grass that grew where the vertical bamboo walls of the hut touched the ground. The curtains over the door and the window moved with a wisp of air that also rustled and twisted the fringes of the thatched roof. The

faint sound of the wind blowing intermittently through the vegetation played an eerie counterpoint to the silence.

It made me feel strange, standing there in my olive drab fatigues, my combat boots, my flack vest, and the spherical flight helmet that I held in the crook of my arm. I was an over-sized hulk of a man, compared to the dimensions of the house and the clearing that had been cut to fit the smaller frame of the Vietnamese peasant to whom it belonged. There, I was the stranger: the out-of-place figure. At that moment, more than ever before, I felt not the strangeness of Vietnam but how incongruent I seemed in that environment. For in that small clearing of bamboo, surrounded by war, there existed a feeling of peace – the first moment of peace I had felt since Mike and I sat in the restaurant in An Khe and I made my first eye contact with the Vietnamese in the person of a pretty little girl in a pink party dress. My nerves relaxed and I felt my heart beating softly. My breathing released months of tension, rising and falling with a serene rhythm that emanated from a barely perceptible vibration in the air. I stood for what seemed like a long time, drinking in that feeling and just staring at the wall of bamboo trees that surrounded me. Then my gaze focused on the work shed.

I did not immediately move to investigate, because my feet felt so solid on the ground, connecting me to the earth and to the peacefulness of that place. Then the muffled shouts of soldiers and the distant crack of a rifle shot brought back the reality of the war. I sighed deeply, released what was left of my paranoid sense of caution, and walked toward the shed. I simply knew that the warning against booby traps did not apply, for my intuition told me that this was not the kind of man to shatter his own peaceful setting with explosive destruction. I amused myself with the thought that it would not be in the character of a man who worshiped his mother-in-law.

I had been staring at an object that projected perhaps fifteen feet beyond the open side of the shed. As I got closer, I realized that it was a waterwheel. The hand-made mechanism had an elongated arm containing a double row of bamboo cups attached to a bamboo chain. I had never seen anything like it before, and I inspected it carefully. The cups were segments cut from thick bamboo stalks, and each cup was about ten inches deep and five or six inches in diameter. The cups were fixed onto a bamboo assembly that was really a combination conveyor-belt and chain. It had a gear wheel at each end, and this, in turn, was supported on the frame. The entire mechanism was made of bamboo. Where pieces were joined together,

holes had been drilled and carefully carved bamboo pegs inserted. The complete mechanism was over twenty-five feet long. It stuck out of the shed diagonally, angled upward to a height of about ten feet, giving me a clue as to how it worked.

The waterwheel was moved to the edge of the stream on four wooden wheels. The lower end was set in the water, and the conveyor/chain assembly moved so that the cups scooped up the water. The incline of the elongated arm was such that the water did not spill until the cups rounded the upper end of the conveyor. Then each cup descended, inverted, back down to the stream. By inspecting the mechanism to see how it was operated, I discovered a small-toothed metal gear. The waterwheel, it seemed, could be operated with a bicycle simply by removing the rear wheel and attaching the bicycle chain to the metal gear.

This was technology. Like everything else I had encountered in rural Vietnam, the technology was primitive, but it displayed imagination and ingenuity, with an uncanny faculty for adapting the materials and mechanisms at hand to the work to be done. The contraption contrasted sharply with my own experience of technology, but it also made me realize that it did not matter that this farmer had no sophisticated pumping equipment. Considering the size of his plot of land, his simple country life did not need automation. Then, in my imagination, I began to conjure a vision of the man who had built this contraption.

This man – this "gook" – may have said to his wife, "Today, I water the field." With the help of his neighbors, and perhaps a neighbor's water buffalo, the mechanical contraption was pulled to the stream along narrow paths lined with the overarching boughs of bamboo trees. He gave directions to his neighbors in the singsong, heavily accented peasant idiom of his native tongue. Then he threw back his head and laughed, his dark eyes squinting into the bright glare of the morning sun, his lips pulled back over large teeth that protruded slightly and gave his features a characteristic country look. He was happy, for this was his day.

His neighbors followed his instructions as he had followed theirs on other days, and the waterwheel was positioned in the stream that ran beside his field. The stream flowed very slowly, and he noted that it would allow him to pump a great deal of water. The small field needed two or three inches of water. That meant he would spend all day on his bicycle and, in return for his day's labor, he would have a good crop to harvest – enough to feed his family and to give the soldiers their quota.

He did not think of politics. The village elders decided what was best for the village

and, because this was his home and his land, he would do as they wished. In fact, if he had lived on the other side of the stream, his life would have been much the same – oriented around tending his field and raising his family. The leaders of both villages told propaganda lies. The man who lived across the stream had neither more land nor a better life.

He set to work on his bicycle with his back to the neighbor across the stream with whom he had never spoken face to face. But he was not concerned with danger. Yes, there had been violence between the two villages during the years of warfare when each village had allied itself with a different political system. Some men had been killed, and the boys still fought each other when they went to bathe in the stream, coming by chance to the same bathing spot. But today, the "gook's" only concern was to pump enough water for his crops, and he had found the rhythm to keep the buckets flowing smoothly along the conveyor assembly of his waterwheel.

At noon, his wife came to the field with a bowl of rice and some fish. She wore the traditional black silk pajamas of peasants. Her feet shuffled along the path in her simple sandals, and her long black hair streamed down her back beneath the conical straw hat that shielded her face from the sun. She carried the bowl in her cupped hands, her face down and her eyes on the path. She had worked that morning in the house and would spend the afternoon working in the field while her husband continued to pump water.

I mused at the textbook images that flowed through my mind painting an imaginary portrait of my enemy. Was he, indeed, as simple as I imagined? I accepted the vision, for never before had I encountered peasants – people whose simple existence hugged the earth that nourished them. Certainly, it was there that his allegiance lay, with the land, and not with abstract political objectives of revolutionary warlords and the communists in Hanoi. What was most important to this man was what he raised – a crop and a family. The family depended on the crop, and the crop depended on the cycle of the seasons, the rains in the mountains and the benevolent Earth Mother and gods who kept pestilence and the ravages of war away from his tiny field.

As for the village government that was aligned with the communists against the repressions of the regime in Saigon, perhaps it also ensured that he could work the same field as his father before him and even provided him young rice shoots from a communal stock. Perhaps, too, he was particularly sensitive to the communal effort required to ensure the

survival of the whole village. For those reasons, he may have agreed with the form of government that the village elders had chosen. Had he not agreed, he could have left his home and joined the ARVN forces.

His part in the war, however, was not to fight for a political ideology, but to defend his land and his home, to defend his intricate allegiance to the forces of nature that provided him with a livelihood and a reason for being. Many like him had lost those allegiances, lost their homes, lost their families, lost their lives. Like him, they did not follow the dictates of challenging intellectual controversies but only the propaganda slogans of their leaders and their own instinct for survival. That instinct, like my own, could easily be molded to the purposes of the warlords of the socio-political machinery that determined his destiny.

My warlords, perhaps unwittingly, had shaped my allegiance to the warrior spirit. The peasant's allegiance, I imagined, was to the land, the rich, green earth between the mountains and the sea that formed the boundaries of his world. But he was also loyal to an ancient memory of the origins of his people, his world, and his culture – the memory of the Goddess from the 36th heaven, the Sea Dragon, and other deities drawn from Buddhism, Catholicism, and animist religions, blended into a religion that revered the deities of Life and Love. The seedlings from which he grew his crop were sacred, and offerings to the gods were taken from the crops. Flower petals were thrown into the stream as a reverent gift to the Dragon King who made the clouds and the waters that flowed to the sea, and prayers for rain were carried on the songs of the people in memory of Au Co's tears. Those prayers were projected into the ethereal realm where both the gods and demons dwelt.

Were we, in his simple peasant mind, the demons? We swept down from the sky not bringing rain but raining fire that devastated homes and crops – fire that came from the droppings of enormous silver birds that streaked like lightning across the sky. Those droppings plummeted down through the clouds with a shrill whistle and an explosive force that blasted away the velvety green covering of the nourishing earth and left the Earth barren and poisonous.

Were we those demons? For we were mechanized soldiers whose only announcement of arrival was the terrifying "whomp, whomp" sound of rotor blades shattering the air above the tree line, mechanized soldiers whose machines were so sophisticated that they defied the imagination of a simple people whose consciousness accepted them as mechanical constructs

but whose dream-vision saw them as monsters that disgorged death and destruction on the land of which the peasants were a part.

Was I one of those demons? For I was the control unit of a mechanical monster that hovered a few feet above the ground, a monster with twin Plexiglas bubbles that looked like a pair of eyes slung beneath wings that thrust the wind against the earth and pointed long, black metal fingers that spit death. Inside, I sat rigidly at the controls, clothed in armor with a huge, shiny, round-helmeted head whose dark green window hid the human feature of my eyes. Was I, in the peasant's eyes, only an instrument of the god of death?

I looked down at the spherical shell of the flight helmet that I held in the crook of my arm and moved the visor up and down, watching the reflection of the waterwheel appear and disappear as the visor slid back into its housing.

What would happen now to the man who had built that waterwheel? Would he be forced to join the guerrillas? His survival skills and his dexterity were verified by the success of his simple existence, but did they include the skills of an earth warrior? Would he go to a camp somewhere in the mountains to be trained to kill? Would his allegiance be transferred from the defense of his home and land, to the defense of an abstract political doctrine that now controlled his life in a whole new way? Perhaps he would form an allegiance to the God of War, as I had done. Still, I could not imagine that he would break so completely with the earth as to become a mechanized soldier. No, he would remain an earth warrior and, like the ARVN forces, he would remain true to himself, to the inherent sensuality and softness that emanated from the earth, his first true allegiance. What power and ferocity that would give him as a warrior I did not know, for I did not know the earth deities or how they gave to their own the courage and strength to defend the land against the demons from the sky.

Again, I ran my hand over the smooth surface of the waterwheel's frame, feeling the strength of the joints that were pegged with bamboo and tied with vines. The conveyor assembly was supple and moved in my hand, causing the gears at both ends to turn with a squeaking noise that shattered the silence of the clearing. This piece of machinery, primitive yet both strong and supple, was like the man I would face in battle.

Then I knew in my heart that he would defeat me. He would defeat me because he was certain of his strength and because he could bend and adapt more easily than me. He would defeat me because he was certain of the deities he defended, and because he would go

into the battle with the boyhood friends with whom he had bathed in the river. He would defeat me because he could share with them, without moral shame, the triumph of life over death. And he would defeat me because the warrior's creed emblazoned in his peasant heart told him to stand firm and defend his home.

And after he defeated me, all his warrior passions would subside, and he would return to raise his crops and his family and show reverence to the deities that ruled over his life. The government to which he would swear allegiance would make as little difference to him in the future as it had in the past.

Just then, my crew chief burst into the clearing to announce that we were ready to leave. I pulled on my leather gloves and followed him back down the path. A young lieutenant, accompanied by a soldier with a flame-thrower, walked past us toward the clearing. As I strapped myself into the copilot's seat, I could see thick curls of black smoke rising above the bamboo – the hut, the shed and the waterwheel were burned as offerings to the God of War. Search and Destroy!

Sky Demons

Steve was an excellent pilot who already had several months' experience flying scouts. He had killed his quota of "gooks" and was getting nervous over the law of averages that pitted his warrior skills against the survival rate of scout pilots. During our evening drinking sessions in the tent that served as our unit clubhouse, he and the other scouts – the two observers, Lance and Gordon – kept mainly to themselves, as though the pressure of being real warriors set them apart from those of us whose piloting duties seemed routine by comparison. As our best observers – a couple of sharpshooter mountain boys from West Virginia – they even bragged about scouting. When Lance and Gordon were drunk, they maintained a rivalry over their number of confirmed kills, sometimes arguing for hours about the "gook" in the bushes whose leg was still twitching as the scout ship turned into the wind and flew away. Sometimes they would call Steve into the argument, but he waved them off to show he could not be coerced into talking about the blood on his hands. Then, with morning sobriety, the look on the faces of Lance and Gordon revealed the deep scars they acquired on

the killing field the day before. But when orders were issued for another mission, they steeled themselves to "get the job done."

Steve struggled silently and alone with his initiation into manhood. As I observed him, I could see that his nerves were edging toward the breaking point. We both knew that I was the relief he was waiting for. Though we rarely spoke with each other, we sensed the bond between us – the knowledge that I would soon take his place and perhaps received the bullet that had his name on it: the one he saw in his dreams and visions waiting *out there* among the "gooks."

I could see that with each new mission Steve seemed to struggle with an internal tension that threatened both his courage and his sanity. Since he was the only active scout pilot left in our unit, he had the rare luxury to accept a mission or turn it down. But upon accepting it, he could not know what waited for him on the field of battle nor share with others his lonely confrontation with death. Then, one day, he did share his experience of this confrontation, directly from the field, by radio.

Practically the whole platoon was gathered in and around the communications tent as Steve's voice came crackling over the radio with increasingly violent agitation. The prerogative of his warrior spirit had faltered, and he demanded to speak directly to Colonel Compton, the brigade commander.

Steve had encountered a man walking on a dike between two rice paddies. He flew up behind him and hovered the aircraft just a few yards away. The man turned to face the demon from the sky with clear unflinching eyes. As Steve described him, he was an old man with long, white hair braided into a pigtail and a thin white beard that streamed down onto his chest from his sun-darkened and wrinkled face. He wore the traditional sandals, black pajamas, and conical straw had of a typical peasant.

While Steve hovered the aircraft, his observer, Lance, leaning half-out of the helicopter door, pointed his M-16 at the old man, and ordered him to place his hands on top of his head. The old man's hat was blown off by the wind from the rotor blade, and he squinted against the dust. Lance, whose orders came from Steve over the aircraft intercom, lowered his rifle so he could conduct the interrogation with hand signals and a few words of Vietnamese, while Steve kept the black, perforated barrel of this skid-mounted .30 caliber machinegun pointed at the old man. Lance told the old man to lift his shirt, and the old man complied. Then Lance

ordered the old man to drop his pants, to see if he was concealing a weapon. The old man shook his head in a firm, “No!” and there the stalemate began.

We all listened as Steve first briefed Captain John and then Major Franks, his voice growing more riddled with tension at each passing moment. Steve would have to turn the tail of the aircraft toward the old man in order to take off into the wind. If the old man was concealing a weapon, one well-placed round could bring the aircraft down, possibly killing Steve and Lance. But as the stalemate continued, Steve seemed more convinced that the old man was only stubbornly protecting his pious, country modesty, defying the will of the monster and its demon-pilot that hovered in front of him.

The problem was that our area of operation was a tactical “free-fire” zone. Everything that moved was subject to interrogation, and resisting interrogation meant getting “wasted.” All the locals knew that. But Steve did not want to kill the old man. Perhaps he already had too much blood on his hands, or his stomach turned at the thought of an uncontested killing, an outright murder, a crime against man and God. But even though Steve knew those things, he was caught up in the grip of fear. He dared not turn the aircraft and fly away. And with every passing moment, the hungry fires of the engine drained his tanks of precious fuel. A decision had to be made, but Steve would not kill the old man without a direct order from the brigade commander.

Colonel Compton had been summoned. As he walked through the crowd assembled at the mouth of the tent, he was obviously disturbed at having been called away from lunch with his battalion commanders. Compton was impeccably dressed in crisp, starched fatigues with black eagles sewn to the collars. A man in his mid-forties, his silver hair was smoothed back along the sides of his head, just long enough to reach his shirt collar. He had a trim, silver mustache and steel-blue eyes that accented his well-tanned face. Major Franks had briefed him on the way to the communications tent.

Steve was shouting, his voice cracking with tension. The radio operator tried to calm him by telling him that the colonel had just arrived. Colonel Compton picked up the microphone and confirmed his identity. Steve, recognizing Compton’s voice, acknowledged. Then Compton turned calm and icy cold. “Mister, you kill that son-of-a-bitch right now or you’re going to face a court martial!”

The tent fell silent as everyone listened for Steve’s reply. Holding back the emotion in

his voice as best he could, Steve replied with a crisp, “Yes, Sir.” Then he left the microphone key open so that we all heard the burst of fire from the .30 caliber machinegun.

Compton keyed his microphone again. “Well done, soldier. Return to base.” He put down the microphone, and we cleared a path for him as he strode out of the tent.

Some of us went to the landing pad to watch the eastern sky for Steve’s aircraft. We each harbored an unspoken compassion but still could not find the strength to break through the facades of our professional egos and express, even among ourselves, the deep emotions that we shared with him.

When he landed, Steve stepped out of the aircraft and threw his helmet to the ground with tremendous rage. Making no effort to hide the tears that streamed down his cheeks, he turned his face to the sky with a look of pain marked by the flickering shadows of the still-turning rotor blade. He fought off every attempt at being consoled, and he defied a direct order to report to Captain John for a debriefing. Instead, he went directly to the chaplain’s tent where he refused, under any circumstances, to ever fly scout missions again. As far as the unit was concerned, there would be a one-for-one trade off. I only had two hours left on my transition. The following morning, I would be the scout pilot.

* * *

The dawn came with a clear golden light and a crisp blue sky that, with the end of the rainy season, we had come to expect. Steve had not left the sanctuary of the chaplain’s tent, and I had orders to complete my transition immediately. I went to the landing pad, strapped the aircraft to my back, and took off for my practice area.

That morning, I practiced autorotations. Thoughtlessly, effortlessly, instinctively, I flew the aircraft upward in a graceful spiral to five thousand feet, closed the throttle to idle, bottomed the collective stick to minimize lift on the rotor blades, and dropped out of the sky at a rate of two thousand feet per minute. At fifty feet, I flared the aircraft to slow my speed. At eighteen feet, I “popped pitch” by pulling up sharply on the collective stick to arrest my fall. At three feet, I eased-in the remaining blade pitch and set the aircraft gently on the ground. Again, I revved up the engine, took off, climbed, and dropped, over and over again, feeling the vibrations of the aircraft in my back, butt, and thighs where I was strapped securely to the machine, merging myself and my anxieties with the insensitive mass of Plexiglas and metal; burying within myself the desperation I felt so that I could become an

emotionless, efficient control unit for this machine of war – an attitude that would either ensure my survival or make me a justifiable homicide in the peasant warrior's struggle with the demons of the air.

Those last two hours of my transition time were consumed, simultaneously, with the aviation fuel in my tanks. I returned to the camp, landed, and refueled. Already, I had received orders by radio for my first scout mission.

I was to fly into the ridge of mountains where the Song Bo flowed through a deep gorge, and pick up Captain Miles, an infantry company commander. I located the coordinates of the landing zone (LZ) on my map and traced the route I would fly – southwest to the river, then inland along the river into the mountains at an altitude of five thousand feet above the ground. The LZ was on a high, narrow spit of land at a sharp horseshoe bend in the river. Miles' company had been flown in that morning with orders to sweep the area. He wanted to make an aerial reconnaissance before moving his infantry units.

I knew Captain Miles. We had been through the orientation at Camp Radcliff together, and I felt more secure knowing that my first scout mission was also to be a reunion with an acquaintance. On this mission, I did not have the .30 caliber machinegun mounted to the skid. We would be flying high above the ground, and I had no intention of drawing fire. It was a simple reconnaissance mission. I had only to follow his orders on the areas he wanted to observe and to stay within the range of my proficiency and the limitations of the aircraft.

I flew toward the wall of mountains with confidence and, as I passed through the gap where the river flowed, I spotted the hilltop LZ. I had never flown that far into the mountains before, and the landscape was more dramatic than any I had experienced on the coast. The slope of the far riverbank rose dramatically, nearly two thousand feet, to a rocky pinnacle. It was covered with lush green foliage that made the steeply rising wall soft, virgin, and natural, though it occurred to me that it was also good cover for a sniper. Still, my warrior spirit was uplifted by the grandeur of the landscape, and I felt lucky to have the privilege and power to fly over it with the confidence that I was in complete control of my flying machine. At that moment I was not thinking of my helicopter as a monster of war and myself as its guiding demon. On this mission, while Miles studied the topography for its military value, I would study the magnificence of creating such a beautiful landscape and listen to Miles' tactical analysis of the war's terrain.

I circled the LZ at five thousand feet, waiting for a logistic supply ship to depart, for it was a small space with room for only one aircraft at a time. Then I cut the throttle to idle and dropped out of the sky in a graceful spiral. Only this time I maintained enough forward speed to bring back power at about two hundred feet above the ground and finesse my aircraft into a gently descending glide path that brought me to a three-foot hover over the center of the LZ. The maneuver was perfectly executed, but the problem was to set the aircraft on the ground, which sloped down to my left. The Hueys that had delivered the troops and the Huey that had just departed had little difficulty settling on the ground because those aircraft had a wider skid-base and could land more easily on slopes. The OH-13 was smaller and more limited on slope landings. I proceeded with caution.

The company radio operator sat on the ground about twenty yards in front of me. I explained that the landing was going to be tricky and asked to speak with Captain Miles, but he could not be found. Cautiously, I descended, letting the upslope skid rest on the ground while I slowly lowered the downslope, left skid. Then a gust of wind rocked the aircraft. I pulled pitch so that the right skid hovered about a foot above the ground.

At that moment, Miles emerged from beyond the limits of my peripheral vision and jumped onto the right skid. His two-hundred twenty pounds of mass, multiplied by the velocity of his jump, created an incredible amount of destabilizing force that was thrown, suddenly and uncontrollably, into the delicately balanced equation that kept the fuselage of my helicopter suspended beneath the rotor disc. It was an incredibly stupid miscalculation in helicopter protocol on the part of Captain Miles.

The right skid hit hard against the ground. I struggled to regain control, and the aircraft leaned too far to the left. But already recovery was impossible. The impact had ruptured a fuel line, and, at that moment, the cockpit was engulfed in a ball of fire. I was in the left seat and did not want to be pinned on the down-slope side. I threw the cyclic control stick hard to the right to force the aircraft to the ground on the up-slope side, opened the latch on my shoulder-waist harness, and lost consciousness.

Later, they told me that a young lieutenant had pulled me from the wreckage and, miraculously, was not burned. But I knew that it was my Guardian Angel disguised as an army officer.

Two or three minutes later, on the ground about ten yards from the aircraft, I regained

consciousness, not knowing how I had escaped the inferno that was consuming the twisted and tortured scrap of metal and Plexiglas that had been my flying machine. A medic squeezed a tube of morphine into my veins, while someone cut the gloves from my burned and rapidly swelling hands. I looked back at the aircraft with my eyes riveted on the flames that licked at the recently filled fuel tank. “She’s gonna blow,” I yelled, and we all got up and ran another twenty yards from the crash. Then I collapsed in uncontrollable sobs, my entire body racked with pain. Most of my clothes had been burned away and the skin on my arms and legs had turned charcoal black, swelling, cracking, and hissing with steam. The flack vest had protected my torso, and the helmet had protected my head. But my face, too, was severely burned and began to swell.

The medic cut away what was left of my clothes, wrapped my body in field bandages and treated me for shock. I fluctuated between uncontrollable fits of hysterical sobbing and periods of clear, lucid calm. A med-evac helicopter had been called, but it would have to wait for the fire to burn out before it could land in the small LZ.

It was more than an hour after the crash when I arrived at the field hospital at Camp Evans. Again, my wounds were dressed, and I could see the extent of the third-degree burns that covered forty percent of my body. But most of all, I was afraid of losing consciousness, fearing it would be the moment of death. Later that afternoon, I was flown to the airbase at Da Nang and transferred to a large Marine CH-47 Chinook helicopter with about twenty other wounded soldiers. We were flown to the *USS Sanctuary*, a hospital ship located a few miles off the Vietnam coast, and I was placed in the intensive care ward.

Though I was full of drugs, I could not sleep for fear of the Angel of Death that reached out for my warrior spirit each time I closed my eyes. Then, late in the night, when all was dark and still, buzzers sounded, and a red light flashed. Painfully, I rolled my head to the side to investigate. Nurses and a doctor dressed in white flashed by me to the side of another wounded soldier whose bed was in front of mine. The doctor placed the round pads of the defibrillator against his chest. Once. Twice. Three times, I listened to the “thud” of the electric charge as it passed through his heart. Then silence. A white sheet was pulled over his face, and the doctor and the nurses quietly disappeared, leaving me alone with the dead.

The Angel of Death had turned his emaciated face away from me and pointed his bony finger at the other as if to say to me, *your time has not yet come.* He made his choice and left

me to survive the war in Vietnam. I rolled my head back toward the wall. Tears that I could not wipe away with swollen hands wrapped in gauze soaked the bandages that covered half my face. I said a silent prayer for my brother-in-arms and closed my eyes to sleep.

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Robert Mitchell was discharged from the United States Army, in 1970, “with my soul wounded by the betrayal of the warrior spirit” by the U.S. military (as stated by his novel’s protagonist). A subsequent twelve-year odyssey of redemption and healing is the subject of a two-volume, autofiction series, of which *John Christian: Warrior-Shamen, Book I: Redeeming the Warrior Spirit* is the first volume. For the following thirty-years he taught secondary school. Currently, he writes and lectures on educational reform in the United States. His latest book is *TEACHER: Seeking the Vocational Archetype* (2023).