

# Unwelcomed

A Short Story

By

John Podlaski

Digital Edition

Copyright © 2020 John Podlaski

Nicole A. Patrick – Editor

Cover photo licensed by Shutterstock

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without the author's permission. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Please purchase only authorized editions.

This is a work of fiction. The places mentioned were real and did exist. All characters portrayed are fictional, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, organizations, events, and locales, are entirely coincidental.

For Jan, Nicole, and Scarlett

## Part I

I had only two weeks remaining of my year-long tour of duty as an infantryman in Vietnam when I received a distressing letter from home. In it, my sister proceeded to tell me about an unwelcomed incident that recently occurred.

*It was almost midnight and the warm July weather made it difficult to sleep. Dad happened to be in the much cooler basement working on another of his many special projects. He was frugal about the use of electricity and forever advocated to turn off the light when leaving a room. Practicing what he preached, only a single overhead bulb illuminated his workbench.*

Our house was typical of those on Detroit's east side: a small, three-bedroom bungalow with the upstairs attic converted into a small three-room apartment. I lived upstairs with my older sister before she left to get married, leaving me alone until

the military called me up. Soon afterwards, my parents moved their bedroom upstairs into my former room, the largest, then converted the small kitchenette into an office. As a part-time writer for the local Polish newspaper and a chairman on several Polish veteran committees, Dad spent much of his spare time in his private space. My younger sister quickly claimed their vacated room, the largest of those downstairs, while my younger brother remained in his own room. The smallest bedroom at the front of the house would be used as a guest room until my return.

A partially enclosed front porch spanned the width of the house. Six wooden steps led downward from the right side of the porch; the front edge of the bottom step ran flush with the side of the house and emptied onto a walkway. The three-foot wide concrete pathway ran from the front sidewalk straight back through the yard, ending at a locked cyclone gate which secured the portal between our

yard and the deeply rutted, weed infested, dirt and gravel alley behind the garage. Just inside the back fence and crammed into the corner between the walkway and the neighbor's garage, a two-foot by four-foot wood platform rose from the ground with two aluminum garbage cans standing atop like sentinels to the property. Scraped paint on the wall of the garage evidenced the city workers' rough handling of both cans every week.

The back porch was comparable to the front, albeit fully enclosed. Five steps led down to a landing with two doors diagonal to one-another: one exited the house to the outside walkway and the other led into the basement. Up on the main level, two doors stood side-by-side in the center of the interior wall with one leading into the kitchen and the other upstairs.

Outside, faux brown brick, asbestos siding comprised of pressed cardboard and tar encapsulated the four sides of the house. The half

inch-thick material provided great insulation during the cold winter season and many homes in the neighborhood were adorned with the siding.

*As Dad concentrated on his project, the subtle tinkling of glass breaking at the rear of the house interrupted the silence. Not as loud as a windowpane breaking or a bottle smashing against the cement, but enough to pique his curiosity.*

*He cautiously approached the steps in the rear corner of the basement, knelt on the third one, and leaned forward to peek around the doorjamb to the outside door on the landing. The sight took his breath away. Half of the glass from the two-foot square window of the exterior door was broken and hanging from the frame; the pieces held in place with crisscrossed strips of masking tape. A man's forearm stuck through the opening, his hand moving behind the dark curtain along the door edge trying to unhook the safety chain and both deadbolts.*

*Dad quickly returned to his workshop table and scanned the shelves for a weapon of some kind. Without guns in the house, his options were limited to a few tools stored in shoeboxes. He chose a three-pound ballpeen hammer and rushed back to the landing. Already having removed the safety chain and opening one of locks, the intruder's hand now fidgeted with the final deadbolt. Once opened, he gained access into the house. Dad said he held onto the hammer with both hands like a baseball player and swung with all his might, aiming for the center of the leather gloved hand. Connecting, a loud bone crunching sound was quickly followed by a terrified scream from the other side of the door; the painful shrieks drowning out the sounds of crickets and the mating calls of other insects. Dad wielded the hammer and readied himself for another blow, but the arm quickly withdrew. In his haste, the burglar brushed against the jagged edges of the remaining windowpane. Blood spurted onto the glass and*

*small bright red rivulets ran down the length of the door.*

*The forced entry surprised the rest of the household who were abruptly woken by the shrill screams. I was the first to arrive on the scene, shocked to see the broken window and Dad standing on the landing with a hammer in hand. I ran to the phone and called the Seventh Precinct; two police cars arrived within fifteen minutes.*

*The police found that the intruder cut through the screen on the outer door and used masking tape to form several X's across the window before breaking it. They also found blood spatter on the screen door and fence, likely resulting from the intruder shaking his arm to make the hurt go away. A trail of blood spatter also led to the gate at the alley. Unfortunately, a police search of the neighborhood failed to locate the perpetrator.*

*The four officers wrapped up their investigation within an hour and issued us a case number. Before*



*leaving, one of them told Dad that he should beef up the rear door, buy a gun, and be extra vigilant over the next few days. In the meantime, a patrol car will pass the house a few times each night for the next week or so.*

*Nobody slept that night.*

*The next day, Dad replaced the broken windowpane and screen, attached chicken wire across the screen door, and installed a checkerboard shaped metal grill over the window frame. Afterwards, he strung some strands of barbed wire above the small fence and gate at the entrance to the alley. Unfortunately, Mom would not agree to the purchase of a gun and forbade Dad to get one, so he added a baseball bat, a long butcher knife, and an axe to his defensive arsenal.*

*Dad slept little the next few nights, choosing to guard and protect the household instead. He sat in a cushioned chair in the darkness of the back porch,*

*alone in his own thoughts, surely contemplating his actions in the event the intruder returned.*

*I promise to tell you more when you get home.*

Little did she know that shortly after reading her letter, I was cowering in a foxhole, and praying that I survived the night as mortar rounds impacted within our small mountaintop perimeter. Her letter caused me some anxiety, but at the moment, it was the furthest thing from my mind.

## Part II

I made it out of Nam in one piece and finally arrived at Detroit Metropolitan Airport after travelling for thirty hours.

Seven of nineteen Army Veterans remained on board for the final leg of this flight which originated from Washington state, after twelve brothers-in-arms deplaned at the previous stop in Chicago. With the plane at one-third capacity, our group took advantage of the extra space sprawling out across

the last three rows to resume our discussions. Each wore a short-sleeve khaki uniform adorned with colorful award ribbons, unit patches, rank insignia, and blue infantry braids draped across the right shoulder. We boarded the plane as strangers, but the camaraderie exhibited on the flight made it appear we were life-long friends. Even the flight attendants were overly friendly and offered us a beer in this final hour of our long journey home: an unexpected treat since none of us were of legal drinking age yet.

Physically, we were in the best shape of our lives. I lost fifty pounds while in Vietnam and the remaining 135 pounds on my six-foot frame was now pure muscle. I was, however, certain that I would outgrow my 28-inch waist and need a new uniform within a few months.

Last to disembark on this early August afternoon, we seven briefly hesitated on the portable steps to take in our surroundings. Jet engines screamed everywhere, the overwhelming scent of

exhaust fumes permeated the air, and an assemblies of vehicles in various colors, shapes and sizes all performed a ballet of sorts as they scurried back and forth between the terminal and dozens of aircraft, carrying luggage, fuel, food, garbage, sanitary waste, and firefighting equipment. Many passengers covered their ears or noses en route to the terminal. The overcast sky and high 89-degree temperature with high humidity felt like I was back in Vietnam. Though unpleasant, nothing compared to the noise, mugginess, and stench that I endured there.

We joined the line of people as it snaked across the short distance of tarmac and entered a set of double doors leading into the terminal building. After ascending a stairway to the second floor, we found ourselves in a gate area filled with people. There, passengers scanned the crowd for a familiar face.

I'm the only veteran with a cheering section. My family stood together just outside the seating area wearing wide toothy smiles and waving hysterically. Sis held a sign high reading, "Welcome Home, Johnny!" I ran to the four and roped them all in for a group hug.

Once my fellow soldiers reached us, I introduced them to my family. My dad and brother shook their hands, while my mom and sis offered hugs to welcome them home. We walked together as a large group through the concourse and then to the baggage claim area, where the air was abuzz with chatter. The carousel already rotated with luggage from our flight.

Military duffle bags in hand, we hugged and wished one another well before departing. The odds of seeing each other again next month was high as we all had orders to report to Fort Hood, Texas, after a thirty-day leave. In my case, this would most likely be my last duty station as only six months

remained in my two-year military obligation. I looked forward to leaving the Army permanently in February.

I barely slept during the last two days in transit from Vietnam, except for a few catnaps that hardly refreshed my body and mind. My eyes were bloodshot and I dozed on the ride home, only to be startled awake every few minutes after hitting potholes in the road.

Upon our arrival home, the rest of my family, some neighbors and friends were there to welcome me home. Sleep would have to wait until after my welcome-home pleasantries.

That night I tossed and turned in bed, not restless, but uncomfortable because the mattress was too soft! I eventually threw my blanket and pillow on the floor and joined them on the hard surface. Sleep came quickly then.

When my sister woke me the next afternoon, I panicked after noticing my weapon missing. I felt odd as it was always within arm's reach for the last twelve months. Unaware of my surroundings, I felt confused and out of sorts.

“What are you looking for?” Sis asked curiously and concerned about my behavior.

“My rifle, I don't see it.” I answered with a perplexed look on my face.

“There's nothing here,” she stated. “If you want a gun we have to go out and buy one.”

As if a light switch suddenly turned on, I stopped fidgeting as the realization kicked in. “I forgot...I'm home.”

“No problem. Mom left you a plate from breakfast. It's warming up on the stove. Grab something to eat and I'll drive you to Montgomery Ward. They sell guns there.”

“I’ll have to wear my uniform and buy some new clothes while we’re there, everything in my closet is too big.”

In the store’s sporting goods section, I learned that I was ineligible to purchase a handgun because I was not 21 years old. The salesman, unfazed that I was still in the Army and had just returned from Vietnam, pointed to a sign and quipped, “The law is the law and rules are rules.”

Upon seeing the disappointment on my face, the salesman, whose nametag read Bert, stepped over to a further showcase and swept his arm across its length like a model presenting prizes on a game show. “I can, however, sell you a rifle or shotgun,” he volunteered. That brought a smile to my face.

After handling a few of them, I settled on a Westernfield 20-gauge shotgun, cleaning kit, a box of three-inch magnum shells, and a nice khaki colored vinyl storage bag. Enough firepower for home protection and well within my budget.



When we walked into the house with armfuls of clothes and supplies, both my parents gasped.

“I don’t want that gun in my house,” Mom said after spotting a picture of the shotgun on the longest box. “Get it out of here before somebody gets hurt.” She folded her arms and stomped her foot.

I stopped in my tracks and eyed them both, “What are you going to do the next time somebody tries to break in the house?” I asked.

Mom and Dad glared at each other, shocked, wondering who spilled the beans. Neither had mentioned the incident to me. Sis blushed and shifted her eyes to her sneakers as their gaze settled upon her. “Did you tell him?”

She hesitated for a moment before answering, “Yeah, I mentioned it in a letter right after it happened. It really does scare me, and I’d be more comfortable with a gun in the house.”

“We don’t need guns. I have things to protect us against a burglar,” Dad said, puffing out his chest.

“Come on, Dad.” I retorted. “You’re 60 years old and no match for somebody younger. What are you going to do if they have a gun?”

This caused him to pause and reconsider his stance. He waivered and glanced to Mom for support. She said nothing.

“I’ll teach everybody how to use it and we’ll all go to the range and practice shooting. After you shoot it a few times, you’ll be more comfortable with it. Besides, I’ll be gone for six months and I can’t take it with me when I leave for Texas.”

Both parents relented and nodded their heads affirmatively.

After changing clothes, we all gathered around the kitchen table as I explained safe practices for this weapon, allowing them to each handle the shotgun and get a feel for it. They marveled at how easily I disassembled the shotgun, then cleaned and

oiled it without referring to the instruction book. Finally, I loaded it with six shells, set the safety, then placed it in the corner of my bedroom. We planned our first visit to the range later that week.

Our neighborhood suffered turnover during the last two years as many families moved out to the northern edge of the city and outlying suburbs. Most new families were friendly enough and neighbors looked out for one another.

During the next couple days, I met two active duty Vietnam vets new to the neighborhood who lived several houses away. One was a Marine who just returned home with orders to report to his next duty station in California after his leave. The other was Army, and only had a week left before reporting to Fort Polk in Louisiana. The three of us sat on the porch and shared stories until the wee hours of the night.

I also met up with some of my old friends from those days before the military, but the atmosphere

was different. We had nothing in common anymore. I realized that I was gone for 18 months, but thankfully, a couple true friends remained.

On my fourth night home, my sister woke me at 1:30 a.m.

“Johnny, wake up! I think there’s somebody in the back yard,” she whispered nervously from the doorway.

It was another warm night with all the windows in the house wide open but no breeze. I was still asleep on the floor in only a pair of green military boxer shorts, but I quickly sat up when I heard her voice.

“What makes you say that?”

Her bedroom window was just above the wrought iron gate leading into the yard. “I heard the gate scrape against the concrete a few minutes ago and heard some whispering going on.”

I slipped into my sneakers and grabbed the shotgun. “Call the police,” I said, walking to the front door.

“Where are you going?”

“To check things out. Keep quiet.”

When I reached the bottom step of the front porch, I poked my head around the corner of the house and saw two shadows moving around by the back door.

“Hey,” I yelled. “What are you doing there?”

Suddenly, I saw two bright flashes, followed by three back-to-back popping sounds. The gunshots surprised me. One projectile hissed by closely overhead, while the second and third impacted into the artificial siding of the house, causing flying debris to cut my face. Thankfully, the superficial cuts stopped bleeding after a moment. Just as quickly, I pointed the shotgun toward the shadows and fired twice in quick succession before ducking

back onto the steps. Without any return fire, I chanced a peek around the corner. One shadow writhed on the ground, while the other ran toward the alley gate.

When I jumped out, he had just reached the gate and fired twice more in my direction. He started climbing onto the garbage can platform and prepared to launch himself over the fence when I returned two more shots in his direction. I cocked another shell into the barrel and cautiously approached the figure lying by the back door. He was bleeding profusely and blood from his side and hip area had already pooled on the concrete. A pistol lay on the ground next to him. I picked up the 38 Special and raced the 40 feet to the alley gate.

Once there, I found the barbed wire cut; strands dangled from where they once attached to the two garage walls. The lock on the gate was still secured, but blood spatter was visible on the garbage can lids and the top of the fence. When I peeked around my

neighbors' garage, I saw a shadow limping down the alleyway about four houses down.

“Stop!” I yelled. The assailant turned and fired twice more in my direction, both rounds impacting the back wall of my neighbors' garage. I hopped over the gate angrily and took chase. I deduced he was carrying the same weapon as his partner which meant his ammunition was spent. I had two more shells left in my shotgun and whatever remained in the added second pistol I took from the first perpetrator.

The limping shadow reached the end of the alley and fearing that he would get away, I stopped and fired my last two rounds at him. Just then all hell broke loose, and the dark shadowy alley turned into day.

Several police cars with spotlights, flashing red strobes, and piercing sirens appeared from both directions. Officers also cut through backyards from

the adjoining streets, with flashlight beams bouncing all around.

“Stop and drop your weapons!” authoritative voices barked from all around me.

I remember the running shadow falling to the ground even before hearing the police command to stop. I dropped both my empty shotgun and the pistol in the dirt, raised my arms, and stood still in my green boxer shorts and black Converse tennis shoes. Within seconds, several officers converged on me and cuffed my hands behind my back.

“He was trying to break into my house,” I protested. “My sister called the police.”

“Why are you out here in the alley when your house is half a block away?”

“He and his buddy were shooting at me and I didn’t want them to get away.”

“Oh, so you were playing war?”



“No, sir, I just returned from Vietnam and had enough war for a lifetime.”

The officer shook his head and placed me in the rear seat of a squad car. “You’ll get a chance to tell your story at the station.”

At the Seventh Precinct, I was booked, issued an orange jump suit and a pair of slippers, then subjected to several interviews over the next few hours. Even though I was the victim in this scenario, the police treated me like a criminal. I retold my story several times, but they still threatened to charge me with attempted murder and a handful of other felonies.

I sat in the main lockup with two other inmates. One appeared to be a local street gang member who kept quiet, his beady eyes staring straight ahead. The other was a smelly drunk sleeping it off.

I began to shake as the adrenaline finally left my body. Having been through this type of situation

before, I knew that it was a normal response to what transpired. Closing my eyes, I leaned against the wall hoping for a few minutes of shut eye.

At two o'clock the following afternoon, I was summoned to join a couple of detectives in their office and expected another round of questioning. Instead of verbally berating me, they were extremely cordial. The younger man even offered me a cup of coffee and a Marlboro cigarette. I smoked Kools at the time but accepted his kind offer anyway and took a seat.

The other, more senior detective perused through a manila folder on his desk when I entered. He then closed the file and addressed me. "Mr. Kowalski, some of our guys spent most of the night investigating your shooting. They recovered all seven slugs fired at you, and ballistics has confirmed they were fired from the two revolvers recovered at the scene. You should also know that by dropping these two, you did us a huge favor."

“How so?” I asked, squinting my eyes and looking at him as if not hearing him correctly.

He continued, “The two guys you confronted last night were responsible for a string of burglaries throughout the area, and we’d been trying to catch them for months. This morning, officers found property at their homes that matched many of the stolen items from dozens of break-ins. Now, in addition to the charges of burglary, to start, they’ll be charged with attempted murder and the use of firearms while committing a felony.”

The younger detective added, “You were lucky last night. Now when these two guys get out of the hospital, both will be locked up for a long time.”

“So, what about me?”

Senior chimed in, “Here’s the good news. We’re going to treat this as a case of self-defense – although extreme – and we’re going to drop all charges against you.”

My jaw fell to my chest, and I had a difficult time in finding the words.

“No shit?” I finally croaked.

“Yeah, no shit.” Junior tossed me a shopping bag with clothes inside. “Here, get changed. Your family dropped off some clothes for you.”

I tried raising my cup to sip more of the black coffee but my hand shook too much, causing the liquid to slosh around like an angry hurricane battering the shoreline. Instead, I set it back down, and took a deep drag from my cigarette hoping that it would help to settle my nerves.

While I changed, the detective continued, “I’ve got to ask you though, how come you didn’t wait for us to arrive and took it upon yourself to chase that guy down the alley?”

Tying my shoelace, I looked up at the older of the two men. “This is the second time in less than a month that somebody tried breaking into our home.

I've only been back from Vietnam a week and haven't quite made the transition to peace time yet. I'm also still in the Army and have to report to my next duty station in three weeks. If these guys got away, then I'd be worried about my family's safety the whole time I was gone."

Both detectives smirked and nodded in agreement. "Well you're back home now, so in the future, let us do our job. Unfortunately, since a shooting took place, we have to confiscate your shotgun."

"Will I get it back?" I asked hopefully.

"No."

"Can I get another?"

"You can. In fact, I'd recommend that you do. As part of this investigation, we also looked through the report of the earlier attempted break in at your home last month and saw that your father used a ballpeen hammer as a deterrent against the burglar."

I nodded my head affirmatively.

“Had you not been there with a shotgun this time, it might have ended badly for them.”

“Why? Do you think they would have shot somebody once they were in the house?”

“We’re certain of it. They wanted revenge.”

“What makes you say that?”

“The guy you chased and shot in the alley had a cast on his right hand and his forearm was scarred in several places from deep wounds that were recently stitched. Looks like your dad’s unwelcomed visitor came back to settle the score!”

I pursed my lips and nodded my head in satisfaction. “Good, he got what he deserved. So, am I free to go?”

“You can go. Your family is waiting for you in the front lobby.

“Thanks for the coffee and cigarette!”

“No. Thank you, soldier. And welcome home.”

I shook both their hands and headed for the door.

When I opened it, there, in the lobby stood my family, all smiling proudly, thankful to see me, and ready for another group hug. For the second time in less than a week my family gave me a loving embrace and welcomed me home.

## The End

I hope you enjoyed my short story, and I would appreciate if you would take few moments to leave a review at your favorite retailer. This is the only way for authors to get feedback regarding their work, and without it, improvements are difficult to make. Thank you for your continued support!

### **About the author:**

John Podlaski served in Vietnam during 1970 and 1971 as an infantryman with both the Wolfhounds of the 25th Division and the 501st Infantry Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division. His awards include the Combat Infantry Badge, Bronze Star, two Air Medals, and a Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry. He has spent the years since Vietnam working in various management positions within the automotive industry, and recently received his Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration. John is a life member of Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 154. He and his wife, Jan, are both retired now and live in Sterling Heights, Michigan where they occasionally ride his Harley Davidson motorcycle and cater to the demands of their new two-year-old granddaughter. This is his fourth published book.

#####



## Other works by this author:

*Cherries: A Vietnam War Novel* This is a painfully accurate description of the life of a combat infantryman serving in the jungles of Vietnam. It portrays, in sometimes chilling detail, the swings he experienced between stifling boredom and utter terror that made up the life of this often-unappreciated soldier. The narrative is compelling, and the storytelling is excellent throughout. If you want to learn what these young and not so young men lived through, this will help you gain a bit of understanding of the sacrifices they made.

The e-book version remained within top 100 of the Amazon Top Sellers list in its category since its inception in 2010.

On January 21, 2013, PageOneLit dot com named "*Cherries - A Vietnam War Novel*" by John Podlaski - *BEST AUDIOBOOK OF 2012*. This was a proud moment for John Podlaski - recipient of the

*"Books and Authors Award for Literary Excellence".*

When notified by contest officials of his good fortune in winning the audiobook category, the e-mail included the following quote from one of the contest judges, "**One HELL of a book!!!**"

***When Can I Stop Running? A Vietnam War Story*** Outstanding read that paints a dramatic picture of what it was like to man an LP (listening post) in enemy territory on a night that never seems to end. Interwoven with the story is flashbacks from the author's youth when terrifying events scared him into running for his life. But now, in the darkness, a short distance from the enemy, he cannot run. He must stay at his assigned station, maintain total silence, and report enemy activities to his headquarters.

It is one thing to read that our soldiers were sent out from their outposts, in teams of two, to maintain reconnaissance of the enemy territory. It is quite

another to learn the intimate details of what that entailed. This book paints a graphic picture of everything involved in LP duty - constant mosquito bites, sitting in a mud hole being pelted by rain, hearing (and smelling) enemy soldiers taking their latrine breaks mere feet away.

The descriptions are extremely well-crafted and vivid, and the flashbacks evoke memories from your own reckless youth.

***Unhinged – A Micro Read:*** Two fourteen-year-old boys are offered a great first-time opportunity to watch a movie by themselves at a local drive-in theater. Little did they realize that the movie would affect them in ways neither imagined nor will ever forget.

**Death in the Triangle:** DEATH IN THE TRIANGLE is a sequel to “When Can I Stop Running?”. That was one hell of a night!

Only a couple of hours passed since returning to the firebase, now, the sleep deprived, and weary First Platoon soldiers must go back out on another patrol. Last night, an enemy mortar team fired several rounds into the base and was soon silenced by return artillery fire. The Third Squad also ambushed a group of enemy soldiers leaving nine dead bodies on the trail before moving out to a new location. A thorough search of both areas may locate items overlooked in the dark. It was thought to be an easy patrol – two clicks out and two clicks back, so the brass expected their return before lunch. At least, that was the plan.

Many patrols during the Vietnam War did not quite go as planned and this was one of them. These soldiers soon found themselves in dire straits to satisfy their battalion commander's thirst for body counts and fame. Will they all survive?

Sixpack, Polack, LG, and the bunch are back in this new installment from the award-winning author of “Cherries: A Vietnam War Novel.”

**2-27-70 – A Short Story:** I grew up in the city of Detroit and was taught that my heritage and strong family values were important. Every year, our birthdays were a cherished event within the family – especially when it was dad’s special day – we always celebrated his with great fanfare, a special family dinner and dessert.

However, on February 27, 1970, my dad’s birthday, that annual tradition was broken when I was forced into a situation beyond my control. I had to leave home and the family gave me an emotional send off, but the thought and possibility of my never returning devastated them.

This short story follows me on this one special day. Thousands of young men preceded me on this

path, and tens of thousands never made it home.

Find out where I was heading and why I had to go.