

Home Alone
By DANIELLE TRUSSONI

MY father's Army uniform came in three pieces: a jacket, slacks and a button-up shirt. It was made of 50 percent wool and 50 percent polyester and felt strangely resistant to the touch, scratchy, without give. In November 1992, Dad went to his bedroom to put it on, his first time in uniform in 23 years. Ten minutes later, he stood before me in full attire: government-issue ankle-high lace-up black shoes, a black tie and a tight-creased sandwich cap. Two hash marks slashed on the right sleeve of his jacket - one for each six months of overseas duty - and a blue braided ribbon looped his shoulder and chest, signifying infantry. There was a combat infantry badge, a rifleman's badge and patches for rank, unit and division: 25th Infantry "Tropic Lightning" Division. "How do I look?" he asked, pulling the cap low on his brow. If you didn't know my father, you might never guess how uncomfortable he really felt; he was so good at masking his misgivings. Although pushing 50, he was as trim and soldierly as he had been at 20. He looked dignified, put together. When I hugged him, he did not wrinkle.

That was the year my father walked in his first Veterans Day parade. He had been drafted in 1967 and spent 1968 stationed in the jungles between Cambodia and Saigon. A few months into his tour, he volunteered as a tunnel rat. At 5 feet 8 inches and 140 pounds, my father, small and strong, was the perfect size for tunneling. The tunnels - with their hospitals, kitchens and sleeping chambers - sheltered thousands of Vietcong over the course of the war. Tunnel exploration was dangerous, with a high rate of casualties, and yet my father wanted to do it. He studied the techniques of seasoned tunnel rats. He learned how to enter a tunnel headfirst and how to disable a booby trap embedded in clay.

Dad came home to Wisconsin in 1969 with shrapnel in the back, an ulcer and a two-pack-a-day smoking habit. When his plane landed, no relatives or friends were waiting to greet him. He and his first wife had divorced before he'd left for Vietnam, and although four of his brothers had served in the military, none of them remembered to pick him up. His cold-shoulder homecoming was something I did not witness (I was born five years later), but Dad once told me how lonely he had felt, coming back to nothing and nobody.

He called his older brother Gene, a former marine, to come get him. They went for a beer; they played a game of pool. Then, Dad took the bus to Eversole Motors in La Crosse and bought a 1969 Plymouth Fury III, a milky-white car with caramel racing strips and tan leather interior: \$2,400 (after some haggling), \$500 down. I still remember Dad's Fury (he kept it for years, until after my younger sister Kelly was born), and how fast he drove it, Kelly and I knocking around in the back without seat belts. Dad drove that car as if trying to escape, speeding along the Mississippi River, driving faster and faster.

After buying the Fury, Dad stopped off at a record store and bought all the hit singles he had missed while he was serving. The Beatles' "Hello Goodbye"; Otis Redding's "Dock of the Bay"; the Doors' "Hello I Love You"; the Rascals' "People Got to Be Free." Dad's tour in Vietnam had been his lost year; the year his record collection suffered. Of course, he had heard

many of the songs in Vietnam on a portable radio, but it hadn't been the same (he once told me) as listening to his own records.

Dad stashed the 45's in the back of the Fury and detoured to Frog Point, a tavern in Stoddard, for a drink. He spent the rest of the afternoon shooting pool, the hot July sun broiling outside. At dusk, when he unlocked the Fury to drive home, he found that the records had melted, the whole stack. That's when it hit him: he couldn't go back. Any hope of salvaging 1968 had melted with his 45's.

My father did not talk about Vietnam, unless he had been drinking. He started his own construction company in the early 70's, worked 14-hour days and drank in the evening, hoping to fall into a pure, dreamless sleep. He avoided counseling, even after my mother, whom he had met shortly after returning from Vietnam, left him in 1984. He knew very well he had served in an unpopular war; he had opposed it himself. "I was drafted, for God's sake," he would say, shaking his head and lighting a filterless cigarette. "I didn't want to go. I *had* to go."

My father never wanted to march in a Veterans Day parade, not in 1969 and not in 1992. It wasn't until his buddy Pat, who had been in the National Guard, came by one afternoon and asked him to march in a parade over in Soldiers Grove that he even gave it a second thought. Pat had known my father for years - they hung out at the same bars - and sometimes, when they'd been drinking a bit too much, they talked about Vietnam.

"I can't march in a parade," Dad said, fiddling with his lighter. "I don't even have a uniform." Except for a box of Polaroids and his dog tags, my father had long ago thrown out everything that reminded him of his time in Vietnam.

"You got your discharge papers?" Pat said. "That'll do the trick."

Pat took my father's military discharge papers and ordered him a full set of dress greens from Fort McCoy, medals, rank and all. The night before the parade, Pat stood on our doorstep. "Here you are," he said, handing my father the uniform, the shoes, the sandwich cap. Detecting my father's hesitation, Pat said, "I'll pick you up tomorrow at seven sharp."

I did not see the parade. Dad didn't invite me, my sister or my brother to go with him that day. But he told me later that he was glad he went. It was the first time he had admitted, to the public and to himself, that he felt pride in his service, a complicated pride, yes, but pride none the less. As he marched through downtown Soldiers Grove, people from the crowded sidelines stepped out and shook his hand, looked him in the eye and thanked him for his service. It was remarkable how much those thank yous meant to him. Those were two words he didn't hear in 1969.

My father believes that the war in Iraq is misguided. It saddens him to watch a new generation of soldiers going off to fight what is becoming an increasingly unpopular war. But when he sees a soldier just home from Iraq, he always says, "Thank you."