

# **NAM: THINGS THAT WEREN'T TRUE & OTHER STORIES**

**a short story collection by  
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## **Going After Tafani**

He figured he was just *born* scared.

At recess in first grade he'd conceal himself behind a tree. Pretending to play, he told me, but really only hiding. So the teacher would now and then come out and make him join the other kids in whatever games they were up to, which was exactly what little Tim O'Hunter had been trying to avoid, being with kids he didn't know and didn't know how to behave around, afraid of something he couldn't at six years old identify. Kids his own age made fun of him, he said, because he "didn't interact successfully with others," is the distanced, clinical-sounding way he put it. And he didn't get any better, only worse. In third grade, every morning for weeks on end he'd start crying uncontrollably as he sat at his desk before class started. Purely out of fear. Of exactly what, he still wouldn't have been able to say. But looking back, what he concluded he'd been scared of was not fitting in and being ridiculed because of it. He always felt different and therefore isolated. And he never really grew out of it. It's just that as he became older, entering finally into adulthood, he learned how to live with his fearfulness, accepting it finally as a feature of his inherent nature. But he'd remained mostly

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a loner even so. A habit he'd grown into long before he was aware of it. Mainly, he understood now, as protection against being picked on and teased, of which he'd so often lived in dread.

He was mystified, he told me, that after a lifetime of feeling always scared, even if he didn't know of what, he'd never once felt any fear at all after he got to Nam, where there were needless to say plenty of real perils to be afraid of. The mortar attacks, the less frequent but petrifying ground attacks, both often deadly, the unpredictable nature of Army life, never knowing what misery or danger they'd throw you into next . . . he was unaccountably blasé about all of it. He'd nonetheless by long habit retained in outward appearance the apprehensive, even skittish demeanor that had been characteristic of him over his entire life prior to his arrival in country. For which reason he was thought by his companions in Nam to be more fearful and jumpier than most other guys, despite his being in truth, beneath the surface, anything but. Tim said he'd become immediately aware of his sudden release from fear on first setting foot in the Nam and had puzzled intently over its occurring so unfathomably in connection with his entering into a for Chrissakes full-blown combat zone, the prospect of which had terrified him since his first days in basic training.

Tim was telling me all of this in recalling what he referred to as The Tafani Incident.

Which incident had caused everyone around Twitchy Tim, the nickname they'd not very kindly taken to calling the poor guy, to adopt a wholly revised view of him.

In 1969, Spec4 O'Hunter (specialist 4<sup>th</sup> class is equivalent in rank to corporal) was a chopper mechanic at Cu Chi base camp northwest of Saigon. He and several other mechanics were stationed

there to maintain a large hive of Hueys and Chinooks. Joe Tafani was one of them. And Tafani was an annoying little shit. He bitched incessantly, about not getting mail, about getting mail he didn't want, about the discomforts of hootch life, the light, the noise, about having to work more hours than he thought fair, or having to work on choppers he didn't want to work on, about the dusty season, about the rainy season, about, naturally, the chow, about missing the Bob Hope show, about the showers being out of water, about the smell of the water when they weren't, about nearly every-damn-thing that entered his pouty peevish head. Tafani was a gushing fountain of sullen complaint who made a miserable time even more miserable for everyone constrained to be in contact with him.

Cu Chi, 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division headquarters, was a large installation, well defended. Significant damage from mortar and rocket attacks was uncommon, ground attacks less common yet. But on February 26 at around four in the morning, Charlie outdid himself several fold. Under cover of their own mortar and rocket bombardment, NVA sappers penetrated the base perimeter with small arms, satchel charges, and RPGs, destroying nine and damaging two of Cu Chi's sixteen Chinook helicopters. In total, fourteen guys on base were KIA, some on the chopper pad, a few in the perimeter guard bunkers, which had been the first to take fire, as well as several deep inside the base camp. Thirty-one NVA were killed, numerous wounded, a few taken prisoner.

For several hours prior to the attack Cu Chi had been on yellow alert, an alert status denoting not that an attack was underway or imminent but only that a possibility of attack had been discovered. And when the base was on yellow alert it was the practice that someone be assigned to remain overnight as a security

presence in each of the Chinooks. One of the guys to whom that duty fell this time was Spec4 Tafani. Who needless to say was vocally disgruntled about so grievous a disruption of his usual downtime routine. Bitch, whine, grumble. He said the noise level in the immediate area of the chopper pad—late-shift mechanic work, choppers starting up and taking off, others returning—was impossible to sleep through, and Tafani asserted he wasn't too damn sure he wanted to stay awake all night the way the fucking goddamned Army sombitches expected him to. Motherfuckers, he said. So he announced defiantly that in order to help him get a few hours' decent snooze time he'd take a set of headphones from his stereo tape player to help seal out the racket, which was a dumbass stunt officially prohibited for the obvious reason that it greatly diminished the wearer's ability to detect sounds that might otherwise warn of trouble.

At the edge of the chopper pad was a storage area for tools and parts and a rough office space where the mechanics had taken some cots and bedding so to stay there sometimes overnight instead of returning after work to their hootch. Adjoining this grimy facility was a heavily fortified above-ground bunker in case of mortar or rocket attack. Tim and five other mechanics had decided this evening to remain there alongside the chopper pad, sleeping unsoundly in the din of outgoing artillery from across base near where their hootch was and where the outgoing, heavier than usual due to the alert status, would of course have been even louder. The Chinook that Tafani was assigned to occupy overnight was a mere stone's throw, roughly fifty yards or so, from where Tim and the other mechanics would be more comfortably, if only fitfully, sacked out.

The attack began with some distant and sporadic small-arms and mortar fire at a couple of the perimeter sectors but was not in itself enough to fully rouse Tim and the others sleeping in their shack beside the chopper pad. Instantly, however, the red alert sirens sounded and the flares went up, accompanied almost simultaneously by close-in outbursts of AK-47 fire from several directions, as well as deafening explosive blasts clustered on the chopper pad itself, practically right there in front of them. A shattering pandemonium of gunfire and explosions and yelling, squads of NVA swarming the choppers, all in the otherworldly shimmering red glow of drifting flares. Not one of the now full-awake and unnerved chopper mechanics even thought this time to yell *INCOMING!* They all just raced mute-struck to the bunker, piled themselves terrified into it, and hunkered down in the dark.

They would have expected Tim to be first to scramble in. But although he'd bolted out of the mechanics' shack with the others, Tim did not turn to enter the bunker next door but instead ran directly out onto the chopper pad to get shithead pain-in-the-butt Tafani, who, as it turned out, had brought with him not only his headphones but also his tape deck. Running it on the Chinook's battery power, he'd not even tried to sleep but had been lying on the floor of the chopper listening to a Hendrix tape turned up so damn loud that, even with what was going on—mortars now hitting practically right on top of him, NVA all around blasting everything they could get to—the dumbfuck was still oblivious to everything.

Tim ran up to the chopper and tumbled headlong into it, punching Tafani in the stomach to get his attention. "*What!?* *goddamnit!*" Tafani yelled, at first pissed off about being fucked with, angrily ripping his headphones off, and then, on becoming

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suddenly aware what was going on, Tafani freaked the hell out, panicked. Tim grabbed the still supine Tafani by an arm and yanked him out of the chopper, dragged him a few feet, and then as Tafani began somewhat to regain his senses and stood up, though still bewildered, Tim alternately pulled and pushed him the remaining thirty or forty yards to the bunker, where they all then sat out the next couple of hours, unarmed and hoping for the best, until the all-clear was sounded and the white flares went up, signaling everything was once again under control. A memorable night in the Nam.

Tim's companions that evening, his fellow chopper mechanics, surprised and awed by what Timid Tim O'Hunter had done, reported his action to their CO, who put him in for a Bronze Star for Valor, a heroism medal pretty damn rarely presented to rear echelon chopper mechanics. No one would have expected from someone like Tim O'Hunter an action as brave, as heroic, as they'd seen him spring to at the very instant such an action was required, and in conditions as life-threatening as were in that moment upon them.

In his remaining few months in country, Spec5 O'Hunter, promoted forthwith from Spec4 in recognition of his bravery, was no longer called Timid Tim. He was in fact treated by the other mechanics with a respect and deference he'd never before, at any other time in his life, experienced. It embarrassed him.

But when Tim got home from Nam and out of the Army, he plunged into emotional collapse. He resumed, many fold in intensity, the anxiety-ridden state that had been his most prominent psychological characteristic prior to Vietnam but that had disappeared while there. Almost wholly incapacitated, Tim was even hospitalized for a short while.

And then he got better.

“When you reach a certain level of fear,” he said decades later, “you can for some reason stop being consciously aware of it. It’s like you’ve felt all the fear you can feel. You dissociate from it, and even from yourself in a way, so it feels like you don’t have any fear at all, when the truth is that you do have it, maybe a whole lot of it, but you just don’t have a sense of it anymore. Until you’re maybe no longer in those circumstances, and then all of that fear that was there all along bubbles back up and you can’t deny it anymore. You have to feel it in order to make it go away. Whatever part of it will. If you’re lucky, maybe most of it.”

Nowadays, he said, when he tells about going after Tafani, it’s as though it was something someone else did.

As in a way it was.

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