

*The day the multiple sclerosis diagnosis came was foreboding. She had thought for years that one day Agent Orange would catch up to him. Hadn't PTSD been enough? Their life was about to turn upside down.*

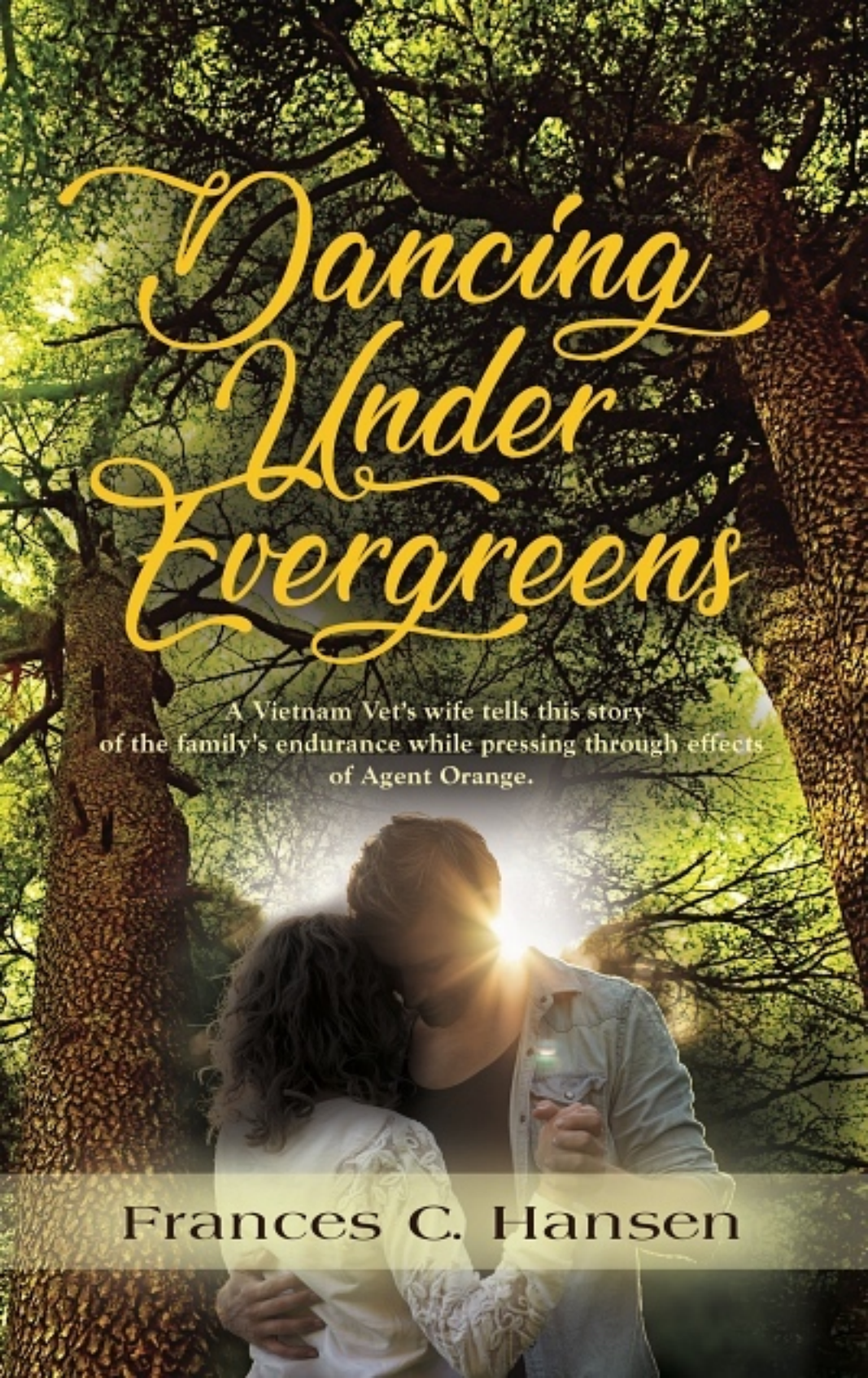
## **Dancing Under Evergreens:**

**A Vietnam Veteran's Wife's Experiences and the Trials and Hope that Followed**  
By Frances Hansen

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A romantic couple is shown from behind, embracing in a lush forest. The man is wearing a light-colored button-down shirt over a dark t-shirt, and the woman is wearing a white lace-trimmed top. Sunlight filters through the dense canopy of evergreen trees, creating a warm, golden glow around the couple. The background is filled with the intricate branches and green leaves of the forest.

# Dancing Under Evergreens

A Vietnam Vet's wife tells this story of the family's endurance while pressing through effects of Agent Orange.

Frances C. Hansen



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## Chapter 5: Night of Fear

After much persuasion, my brother-in-law persuaded Phil to let me take the wheel. The car bounced over the rugged dirt road en-route to my sister-in-law's cabin in the woods. I wondered what the baby, now eight months old in my womb, was thinking of this bumpy escapade. It was late, somewhere after midnight, and the road grew narrower as we progressed. Tall grass closed in on us on both sides. The smell of alcohol hung in the air like a bad memory. Regardless of the cold September night, I wanted to open the window. My thoughts were quickly pushed aside when my husband started to be actively alarmed. Without warning, he began to yell at me.

“Hit the lights! Lay Low! Charlie's out there!” Simultaneous with his yelling, he began to hit the dashboard. He hit it so hard that he cracked it. The sound of his hand smashing into it every time made me wonder what he would destroy next in his frenetic state of mind.

I tried to rationalize. We had been under all that stress. His Mazda had even been repossessed because we couldn't come up with twenty dollars. They came in the night and took it away. The intrusive memories of Vietnam had become part of every day. His frantic state continued to escalate. He seemed to be in a panic. I tried to use reality orientation. This always worked with elderly people who had straying minds and wandered off on unrelated topics in their conversations.

“Phil, we're in a car going to your sister's. We just left the birthday party for Ella.” This was all done in vain. He kept banging the dash.

“Stop the jeep!” He yelled. Desperate tones emanated from him as he shouted his demand. I turned the radio on, thinking the reality of music would stop him. It didn’t.

“Charlie’s out there!” he cried out hysterically.

Driving the Malibu further into the darkness, I realized that this must be a flashback. I tried to talk to him to distract him.

“Come on, Phil, you had too much to drink. We are going to your sister’s house. We are in New York, not Vietnam.”

None of my words deterred him. At that moment, to him, the cornfield was elephant grass in the jungle, and we were in a jeep surrounded by the enemy. Fear clutched me as I drove, eager to get to that house. I prayed that they had arrived home from the party before us. The trees along the road blackened. Their branches lured us like groping tentacles, pulling us closer to the tall grass where Phil believed the enemy was. The dank smell of Autumn’s rotting leaves hung in the air. Threatening thoughts filled my mind.

“He acts as if he doesn’t even know me. I had heard some of these stories in the news lately. Will he suddenly think I am his enemy?”

Phil’s bizarre motions grew more desperate with each passing second as the invisible Viet Cong approached. If he could have made us disappear, he would have. Would he grab the wheel? Would he jump out of the car? Would he grab me if I didn’t comply with his demands? The presence of this stranger in my car gave me more angst and confusion. I thought of the baby and prayed under my breath. No one was on this road but the trees, elephant grass, the enemy, and us. Waves of nausea flooded me as I drove. Every intense moment lasted too long. I tried to

focus. My arms began to shiver, and a chill crawled slowly from my hands on the steering wheel and up to my shoulders. My chest was pounding. At the same time, it felt like the blood was draining from my head. I felt faint. How would anyone find us here if he decided I was the enemy? His strength frightened me, as if he was a giant, and I, a mere ant. Realizing that I was the only one in control, I pushed on trying to suppress the frightening thoughts.

“Hit the lights!” He demanded again. His voice was more anxious. The irritated urgency in his tone told me that this couldn’t go on much longer. A man in fear must conquer that fear to survive. I reached out to touch his arm, hoping it would calm him. His muscles were taut and hard as concrete. His eyes were fixed on the field beside us. The unknown gripped me just when the sight of the driveway came into view.

Upon arriving and seeing lights on, I felt relief. Help was surely near in the form of my brother-in-law. My sister-in-law came to the basement door.

“Hurry! Get your husband!” I yelled. She went in and returned quickly. Approaching the car, she informed me,

“He’s passed out on the bed. I can’t get him up. What’s wrong?”

By this time, Phil was already out of the car, crawling combat-style in his beige suit pants through the muddy yard, rock in hand. Apparently, the rock was needed to silence the barking dog that was tied near his doghouse. The VC couldn’t be allowed to hear that noise. My husband was transformed into a soldier that night, defending himself from the invisible enemy as we watched without knowing what to do, or what came next. His sister had a brainstorm. She called out to Phil.



“Hey Phil! Do you want some popcorn?” Phil acted like he didn’t know either one of us.

“Phil, this is your sister! We’re at her house. Let’s go in.”

We began walking and he followed. Immediately after entering the basement, my husband-turned-soldier began to give us orders to barricade the door and place the container of gasoline in front of it. His sister lured him with the popcorn, and he was distracted enough to get him upstairs away from the gasoline. Once upstairs, we began to show him pictures of his children. He didn’t seem to know any of them. We told him the obvious. I was pregnant. He thought it was great that it was his child, but didn’t seem to know me, his wife. The calendar we showed him was accurately dated 1979 but he read 1969. He was paranoid about the adversary outside. Pacing about the room, he retrieved a cigarette from the counter and then found his way to the gun rack on the wall. Taking one gun from the rack, he aimed it out the window towards the invisible enemy.

“Lay down on the floor!” He commanded us. It was then that the baby pressing on my bladder summoned. I made a move to go to the bathroom. He stopped me.

“I need to go to the bathroom, Phil. You know, the baby keeps me going.”

“Okay. You need to go to the head? Go on.” He retorted briskly.

I was relieved to hear that the guns on the rack weren’t loaded. I held my breath at the thought of Phil wandering upstairs to the gunroom and prayed that it wouldn’t happen.

I can’t remember how we got to the phone that night, but someone managed to call the ambulance. They showed up much later and told us the only thing they could do was take Phil to the VA hospital which was over an hour

away. I bit my lip, hating the decision that rested with me. I was not willing to surrender my husband to more of the unknown that night. I decided if we just waited until he fell asleep, then he'd be okay after he got some rest. The paramedics left. The night wore on.

I listened to my heart pound in my chest and wondered how the night would end. My brother-in-law was still sound asleep. We were getting exhausted. We decided to call and wake up the other family members for help. Phil was wide awake, hyper-alert, and on-guard, making sure that Charlie wasn't going to invade this perimeter. Finally, after what seemed like a week of nights, my two other brothers-in-law cautiously approached the long dark driveway leading up to the log cabin. We had managed to sneak a call in to them. They entered the lower level and approached Phil under the guise that they were fellow soldiers. First, they convinced him that they were taking his place on guard duty that night, and then they played Vietnam with him.

"Phil, you need to get some sleep so you can take over in the morning. We'll take over so you can get some shut-eye."

Phil's nervous pacing continued as he talked with them, his voice heightened with intensity. He seemed to want to have some assurance. Pregnancy and suspense were squeezing the energy out of me. My hands were clammy, and I felt nauseated. Every cell screamed out for sleep. Finally, they persuaded him to lie down. After much pleading, he followed their instructions. The others stayed awake until he was asleep, then spent the next hours camped out in chairs. With much restlessness and tons of persuasion, my weary vet closed his eyes and slept. It was 5:30 am.

He woke with a start at eight o'clock and bolted upright as the morning sun greeted us all too soon. He gave me a morning kiss, and then began to inquire.

"Where is everybody?"

"Sleeping. It's been a long night."

"Why did I sleep with my clothes and shoes on?" I told him what happened. He wandered into the living room where the others were snoring in their places. He suggested we go for a walk. I shuddered when the cold air kissed my face. It helped to wake me up.

The country hills were beautiful that September morning. We could see for miles around as the morning mist began to lift. Except for the singing birds, the new day was quiescent as we walked up the dirt road. Exhaustion and tension walked up my spine. I began to shake inwardly, wondering what I would do if he went into another flashback. Approaching the dense trees, he wanted to go further in. I persuaded him we had to get back to the others who would be worried about us. I prayed that they'd wake up when we came in. They did. We put the coffee on while the men talked to Phil about the night. Before we left for our two-hour trip home that day, they had convinced him that we needed to seek psychiatric help for Phil. Bonded by this experience that would forever be a part of our memories, we said our good-byes and went home to our apartment. As we drove silently home, we knew that the unknown lurked ahead, waiting for us in Syracuse.

## Chapter 13: Life Changes

The day came when everything changed forever. We had been married for fourteen years. The intrusive ringing of the phone interrupted the hectic routine of the afternoon. I stepped over the pile of laundry and rushed toward the phone. I knew it would be Phil calling as he usually did in the late afternoon for a stress break. It was the same for me because I knew it meant only a short while before he walked through the door, and we could be together again. His voice sounded strained. I felt a momentary flash of nausea. With all the stress he had been under, I wasn't sure what I was going to hear.

"I'm ok. I'm at University Hospital emergency room. Nothing broken. I have some bruises and a laceration on my leg. I was emptying a truckload of food onto a hand truck. I lost my balance and luckily my co-worker caught my head before it hit the cement."

I felt there was more than what he was telling me. Tightness climbed from my toes to my neck as I anticipated what the "something else" might be.

"Four-hundred fifty pounds fell on my right side and knocked me to the ground. They took x-rays of my right leg. I'm waiting for the results."

Four hundred fifty pounds! My mind was already in the car on the way to the hospital. The kids played on the porch in their usual happy manner.

"I'll be home shortly."

"Are you sure you're all right?" I pried with my question, fearing that he wasn't telling me the whole story. He temporarily reassured me that all was under control, and

he'd be home soon. I hung up and counted the minutes until he would come through the back door.

Prior to that, in one of our arguments, that I told him he shouldn't become the "Rescue Mission Martyr." He was under an unbearable amount of stress on the job. They never found someone that could walk in his shoes if the job got to be too much. He was manager, buyer and cook. He made deals at the market so the homeless people would eventually enjoy the salad bar he set up for them. He bought various ethnic foods and consulted a nutritionist so he could prepare something tasty for the long lines of homeless people. The first year he was commended for the job he did. He managed, plus he covered for his cooks when they were out. My words of caution went unheeded. He was a driven person and wouldn't listen.

I tried to deny the uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. My heart felt like there was a ball and chain around it as it sunk within me. It was April 7, 1992. I was thirty-eight years old, and he was forty-three. My emotions were all over the place. When he came through the door, I examined his bruised leg. He was tired. The emergency room discharge had instructions to report back if he had further problems. He was back in his office the next morning. This time he was limping.

By Christmas, he had to take a leave of absence. He seemed more forgetful and easily agitated. Terrible headaches became the routine and lightheadedness was a daily occurrence. His body began to have intermittent numbness from the waist down. One day, driving home from work before the leave of absence, he drove through a red light without noticing. Much to his chagrin, the car was impounded. The policeman discovered that his license hadn't been renewed on time. Phil limped home and I had

to get a neighbor to drive me to get the car out of hock. It cost sixty dollars. It was the extra sixty that we had managed to squirrel away to go for kid's Christmas presents. I needed the car to get to work the next day. Everything was changing too fast.

On his teaching days, he would complete classes for the kids in the morning and fall asleep later on the mattress we put up in the schoolroom. The kids worked independently while he took his nap. He told me the fatigue was so bad it felt like someone had stuck a vacuum cleaner inside of him and sucked all the energy out. That was the first time I really began to understand the exhaustion he was going through. I couldn't imagine having that degree of fatigue continuously.

He started to lose his balance and had coordination problems trying to play basketball with the kids. It also began to affect his driving. Once we almost had an accident when he put his foot on the gas instead of the brake in heavy traffic. His feet were beginning to feel numb, and he couldn't tell which pedal he was pushing. He had to go to the VA for a cane. They discharged him after two weeks of testing.

"It's all subjective-stress." Their broken record got nauseating. In the meantime, Phil's health was digressing.



## Chapter 16: The Cabin

Seventeen doctors later, Phil's exposure to Agent Orange had finally caught up with him, though the VA was reluctant to admit it. The neuro doctor saw the lesions and confirmed the diagnosis. He also said that Phil had it for a least ten years, which coincided with his return from the war. He also had Nystagmus when he came home, which was the twitching of the eyes that my sister-in-law had told me he used to joke about. I found out more after tedious phone calls into his past trips to emergency rooms in Cooperstown and Rochester before I knew him. He had been having bouts of fevers of unknown origin, and vague, difficult to diagnose, symptoms that could have been indicative of early MS.

I agonized before God and pleaded with him to let us know where we could go, since our time to stay in that house was ending. I sat on the boxes piled high in the living room, looking around in quiet desperation. I was fearful and uncertain. One of the children came to me.

"Mommy, where are we going to go?"

"I don't know, but God does." I replied, sounding like a giant of faith but feeling like a weak, whimpering kitten.

Kneeling at the couch in the middle of the afternoon, between boxes and crying, I prayed.

"We'll take anywhere but the street or the Rescue Mission." I pleaded.

The words 'bible camp' came into my spirit. As sure as I know my name, I knew He was announcing the answer to my prayer. I jumped up, announcing that God had given us a place to go. It was perfect. The kids loved it and since

we'd been there before it wasn't a strange place. It was on Lake Ontario so there would be a breeze off the lake to keep Phil cool since the MS was exacerbated by heat and humidity. It was only \$17 per week to stay in a cabin. I would be able to transport to work although the commute would be forty-five minutes one-way. We always loved camping, the outdoors, and the slower pace that it gave us. Less stress would help. If only our marriage would stabilize. Perhaps in a peaceful setting we could work on it. God knew we needed the calm setting. With our lives going down the tubes, our future loomed like a dark wall of uneasiness before us. We were losing communication daily.

On June 14, 1992, our Pastor came to our house with the entire youth group and a couple of trucks. He and the teens loaded the bulk of the heavy stuff; piano, furniture and appliances, into the trucks to be taken to his mother's barn where it would be stored until we had a home. Phil, the kids, and I loaded our two cars with what we thought we'd need to survive until the next move. He couldn't lift heavy things anymore. It was a hot, muggy July afternoon. Woven in with the physical demand of moving was the bittersweet pill of leaving our home of almost four years and facing unknown paths ahead. No other choices were ours that day, and my heart ached as I watched the pained face of my husband trying to lift anything. He was trying to have some control over the life he was losing, trying to maintain some pride in man's strength as he directed us with what we should do.

The tail end of the afternoon brought thunderclouds and rain. The children were saying good-bye to their friends on the street. The last truckload was gone and with very little strength left, we lugged the heavy tools and items from our

basement across the street to our neighbor's house. They agreed to keep some of our things until we could find a place to live. We would never forget this place. It was the place where our lives had changed unexpectedly forever.

Looking like hillbillies again, replete with everything from television to pets, we made the journey to the water trying desperately to pretend this was just another regular vacation. Phil was still able to drive, so he took the kids in one car, and I took the one of the cats in the other. We said good-bye to the big white house, leaving behind the octagonal picnic table that we loved, because we had no way to carry it.

"We'll leave it for the neighbors." Phil decided.

Cats and kids in the car, we drove off. As I drove, I wondered if the piano that Phil had surprised me with would be any good after spending forced time in someone's barn. How long would we have to be without a home of our own? The rush hour traffic was strangling and Mr. Sparky, our cat, moved back and forth, front to back, hyperventilating in panic from the long car ride. I prayed and sang, hoping the cat wouldn't cause an accident. I had to stop and drop my wedding gown off with our friends. I was not about to leave that to be victimized by the mildew of the barn for a few weeks. Little did I know at that time that a few weeks would turn out to be three months.

Finally, arriving at the camp, we checked in. Our two weeks reservations went up to the beginning of August. After that, another family was scheduled to come in. At the time, we were so tired, we just rolled with the punches, assuming that when August came, we'd just be able to move into another cabin. We began to work again, finding places for sleeping bags, two cats, two kittens, rabbit and cage. My eyes were sore and swollen from crying back at

the house while the youth group packed our belongings. Phil used his muscles and sweat as the MS ebbed in the late afternoon heat. The breeze of the lake was refreshingly splendid as we unpacked to the sounds of the waves only thirty feet from our cabin.

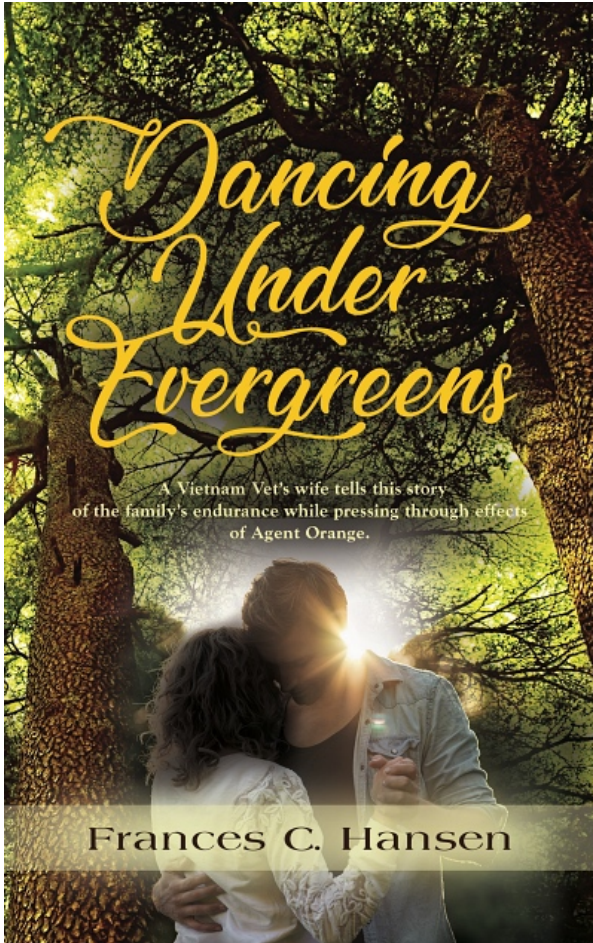
The little porch of the one-room home served as our kitchen and pantry. Underneath the red Formica table, we stowed our boxes of food. This is where the famous box of never-ending granola lived. Our children remember that to this day. They had their fill of granola that summer! The screened-in area would work fine for us on rainy days when we couldn't use the outside picnic table. Inside was another story. The dimensions of the cabin fit in the category of a very tiny house. There were five of us, one dresser, one single bed, and two sets of bunk beds. Two small windows and a back door facilitated air passage as I worked hurriedly to ready the beds, knowing that Phil was long overdue for his much-needed rest. Narrow, two-inch thick mattresses covered the springs. I arranged the room, pushing one set of bunks against the wall, and the other set against the end of the first. Phil could not climb, so I took the single bed and pushed it up against the side of the bunk closest to the front door. I would take the bottom and Phil could have the outside access next to me on the single twin. I covered the skimpy mattresses with sheets trying to give the place a woman's touch and somehow turn cramped into cozy.

Next, I had to set up the fan. This was no Holiday Inn and there was no air conditioning here. Hot nights would not benefit Phil. Fighting mosquitoes probably would make the nights long enough. The fan went up on top of the dresser. Each of the kids got a drawer to themselves. I set two boxes on top of each other, open ends facing outwards.

This was our dresser. Fortunately, on the campground was a laundry room, public phones, a mess hall, a chapel, and a first aid station. The bathroom was a short walk away in a different building. Finally unpacked, the kids took to the lake and Phil crashed on the bed. I sat outside, stared at the lake, and cried some more.

The next day came with restored energy and new anticipation. Our material things were secure, and we wouldn't have to pack and move so we were free to wander. The silence between Phil and I spoke volumes regarding the change that had forced its way into our relationship. Tension in that silence seemed to wait like a lion in hiding, about to attack at the slightest provocation.

During this, there was good news. The kid's bible camp was going to start that day. The ages of the eligible children lined up with the ages of our three. This would involve supervised activities with other children, bible contests, cookouts, campfires, and other fun things. The couple in charge of the camp knew Phil because the husband worked at the Rescue Mission. They very graciously made arrangements so our children could all attend camp at a rate we could afford, and the kids were in. They were very happy, and it helped get their minds off the circumstances that were gravely bearing down on us. Once again, I thanked God that he has opportunities hidden for us, even in adversity. In the center of the storm, he had hidden this jewel for us. It was waiting for us at the camp. He loved our children, and his fatherly characteristics rang true that summer. When we felt less adequate to be parents, and we felt too weak to have the strength to bolster each other, God came through with strength for our children.



*The day the multiple sclerosis diagnosis came was foreboding. She had thought for years that one day Agent Orange would catch up to him. Hadn't PTSD been enough? Their life was about to turn upside down.*

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