

*The personal memories of the wife of a Vietnam Veteran.*

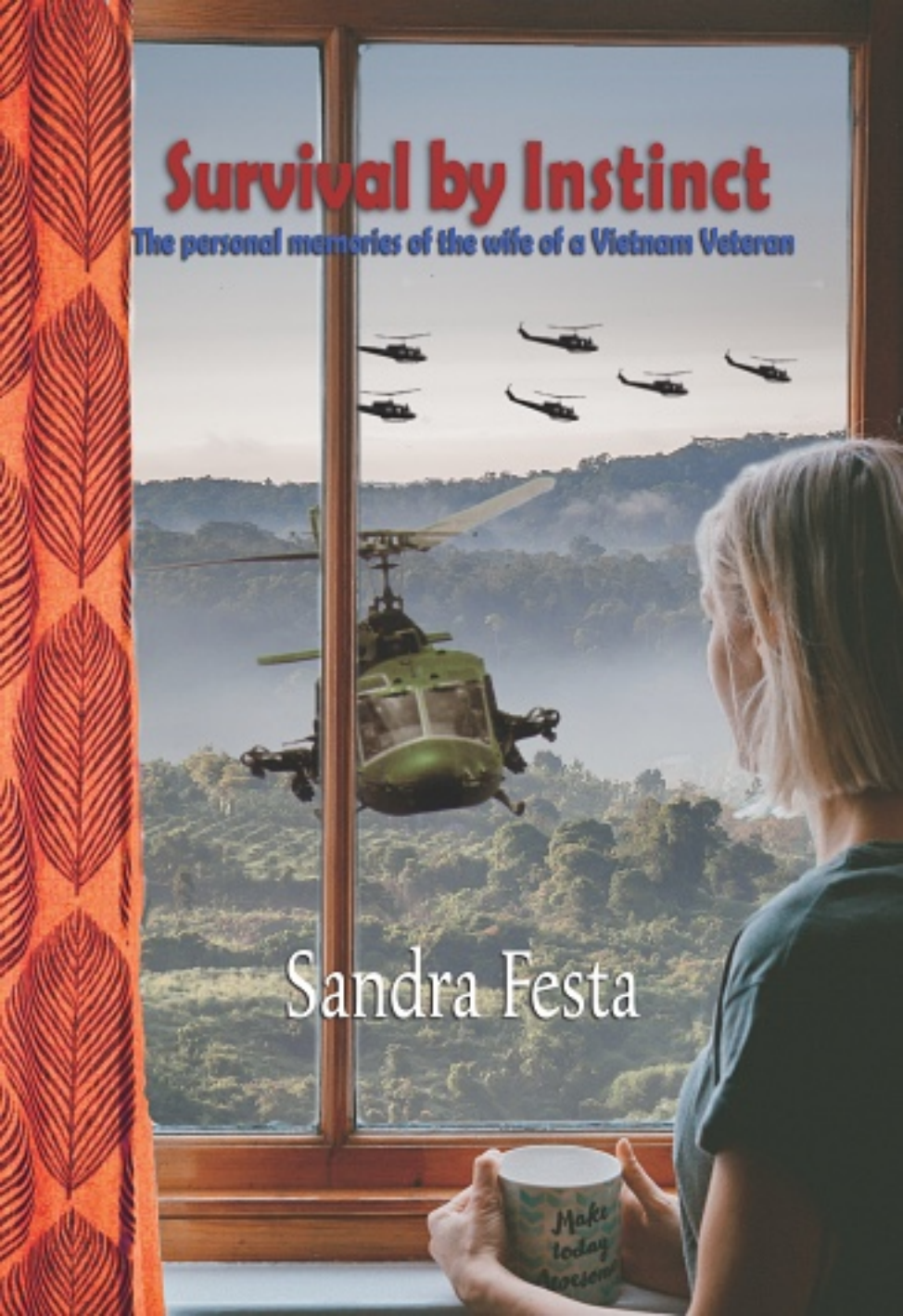
**Survival By Instinct**  
By Sandra Festa

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# Survival by Instinct

The personal memories of the wife of a Vietnam Veteran

Sandra Festa



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## **Chapter Three:**

### **Walter Reed Hospital**

When we got back from Florida, Joe was transferred to Walter Reed. At that time my parents were in the midst of separating. My father, JC (John Carleton Smith), was an alcoholic on his way to being drunk every day by 5 p.m. My mother, Aunt Fran, and my godfather (soon to become my stepfather) Donald Woomer (Red) had grown up living next door to each other in Pelham, New York. Red was now living in Queens. I would drive to Red's apartment, leave my Mom and Deb with him, and continue on to DC where Joe was an inpatient at Walter Reed Hospital. I had to go down to DC, find an apartment, and move Deb and me. Only then could Joe get passes to leave the hospital, just for hours in the beginning and eventually for overnights. I had to leave Deb with my mom when I went to search for an apartment. That meant I needed to stop nursing. That was very hard—Deb

screaming and rejecting her bottle of formula. And me, aching terribly as I “dried out.” Deb liked her food. She was never attached to her bottle.

Well, on one of the trips, while still at Red's, a telegram was delivered via the Red Cross. They had tried to reach me in Cohasset, and my father had given Red's address. The telegram said it was an emergency, to call Walter Reed. I went down to the corner and called from a telephone booth. I was then connected to Joe who told me that I needed to get checked for syphilis because while in Vietnam he'd gone on a three-day leave to Thailand. I remember he said, “I thought I was going to die.”

I said something like, “Okay, I understand, I'll figure out how.” Then hung up and immediately called my Aunt Fran. Of course, she arranged the checkup and I was cleared. Of most importance to me now, I don't think the subject was ever discussed again between Joe and me!

I did go to DC several times and picked up Joe at Walter Reed to show him the apartment I had found. It was located in an older section with big, lovely houses. Our apartment was attached to a huge white colonial. It had a grand entrance foyer, with black and white tile, a

huge living room, one bedroom, and a tiny kitchen—furnished. I don't remember the cost, but it couldn't have been much because the Army still hadn't caught up to the fact that Joe was not missing. Joe was listed as “missing in action” for almost a year after he had returned home. I kept getting a monthly check for \$310 and that is how we lived. Somehow, we made it work—for almost a year. Deb was sleeping in her carriage. Life was okay.

During this time, Joe got passes—the first couple of weeks, just for hours during the day. Eventually he got overnight privileges. So, Deb and I were alone much of the time. Our next-door neighbor who was a prominent New York attorney at that time. Though the info online says he was married with a son and a daughter, he lived next door to us with someone introduced as his wife and two young girls, approximately four and five years old.

At first, they would come to visit when Deb and I were outside. This was about July 1966. However, there were many times when they would come crying at our door in the evening because “Mommy and Daddy” were fighting. My memory is that the little girls would come to me for safety. Then, when everything was quiet, go

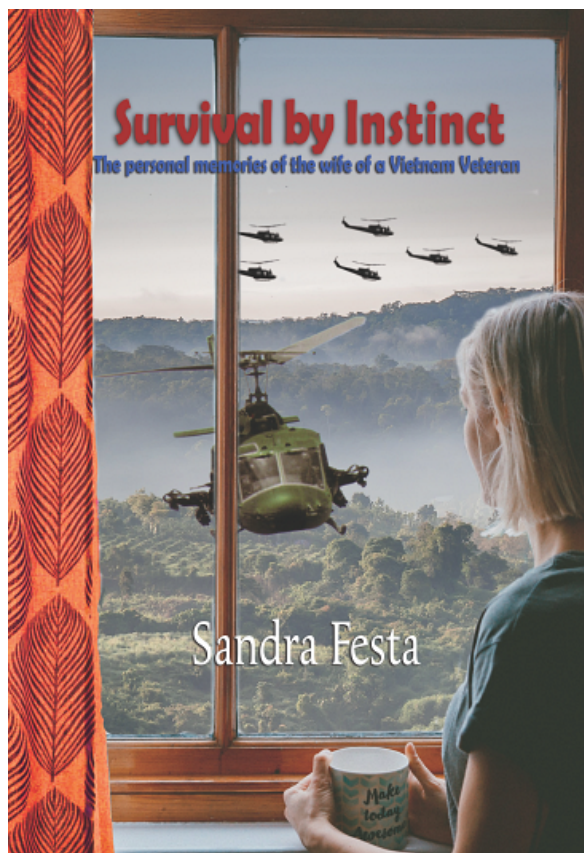
back home. His wife would often thank me the following day but wouldn't let me see her—she'd stand behind her door, saying she didn't need help, and just gave a thank you for befriending her girls.

One morning the girls came knocking at the door to see if Deb and I were coming out. Joe happened to be home and observed the exchange as I told the girls we'd come out in a little while. Joe, who seldom argued or showed anger, was in a fury saying, “No daughter of mine is going to play with those kids.” It was our first big disagreement. To say the least, I was in shock. I had no warning regarding his prejudices, but I believed he should have known who I was. I remember asking, “Didn't you read all the info I sent you before we were married?”

It makes me smile now, thinking back to when I was sitting in the bathroom at United Fruit writing madly on TP all that I thought was important about me. This included my strong belief that there is only one race, the human race. I am sure I clearly restated my stand on that subject.

Our first anniversary passed. I do not remember anything about it.





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