WHAT THE BUDDHA KNOWS

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Most patients call me Phil. A teenager, whose DOC -- drug of choice -- was crystal meth, likes "Doc". A concert pianist who used to shoot heroin between her pedicure toes prefers the boundaries of Dr. Brine, Dr. Philip J. Brine, Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology.

My specialty is substance abuse. Those at the end of the therapeutic road, lined with remedies *du jour*, fancy clinics and self-help books, come to me. It's one addiction or another: alcohol, drugs, gambling, or even food (although one alcoholic complained that no Hostess Twinkie ever had him raving with dementia). Addictions are from the same treasure house of self-destruction.

Along with therapy, my patients carry pictures of them, drunk or high, in a stupor or sometimes covered with vomit. When in doubt, they can open up their wallets or purses and glance at themselves as they no longer wish to be. Patients may call their AA sponsor, spouse, family, the Almighty or me, but in the end they are in charge of their lives. My approach is trite and true: Without self-respect, the love of others is not enough, including mine.

On the office credenza are a gavel from the brotherhood at my synagogue (an ancestor changed Salz to Brine at Ellis Island); a skull-sized piece of white driftwood from near our house on the Cape; finally, a teak reclining Buddha, the hint of a smile on a face at peace.

Few notice among my degrees, plaques and family portraits, a small, grainy picture of a Marine platoon in the Republic of Vietnam. The Marines look hot, sinking under 60-pound packs of rations, bullets, bombs and canteens. Girded in belts for the machine gun, they hold M-16s as casually as golf clubs.

In the center is Gunnery Sergeant Roy Sparks. He grips a pump shotgun, a bandolier of its red shells over his shoulder, a pistol on his hip, and two grenades hooked to his gear. He is looking above the camera, across his forehead a groove. Out of the field, he relaxed, but in war, he was part father, part mother, part warden, part coach and always the warrior, the Gunny.

Fifth from the center, green fatigues black from sweat, a 32-inch waist, body fat burned off by heat and fear, is Specialist First Class Philip J. Brine, USMC. "Was that really you, Daddy?" one of my daughters asked her pudgy father. When I fit in my dress blues, I'd attend the Marine Corps birthday bash. This embarrassed my wife, committee chair of many organizations with peace or amnesty in their names. In this town near Boston, our friends wonder if I have a genetic flaw, a chromosome twisted right instead of left.

So how did an 18-year old college sophomore with a deferment, whose patriotism was watching the Red Sox on July 4, end up in Vietnam with the Marines?

Cultures sometime promote restraint and sometime excess. The 1960s invited me and my youth culture to get high, and I stayed that way as often as I could. One night a neighbor smelled the aroma of cannabis in the hall and knocked. I knew a guy who knew a guy and the profit from the sale made me into an entrepreneur (sounded better than pusher). A college town like Cambridge gave me the market for products that I always tested myself. My risks were low, I thought, and the profit margins higher than a robber baron's. I did have to deal with suppliers in tough neighborhoods. I smoked or snorted to take the edge off.

My parents were lawyers who knew how to argue, and divorced when I was twelve. The extra cash freed me from asking them for more handouts. One night in the parking lot of a Dunkin' Donuts, I sold a bag of marijuana to a new customer, a poster boy for the sophomore class of Anywhere U. He turned out to be a thirty-year old narc from Braintree. My quick arrest, he confided, would get him home before baths and bedtime with the kids.

I was sitting in the lockup in the Cambridge Magazine Street police station, fretting about what I would say to my parents, when Thomas Flaherty showed up. At six in the morning, with the stirrings of unwashed men, Flaherty in his silk suit and glistening shoes seemed out of place. He asked if I had an attorney. When I shook my head, he handed me a paper to sign and left to bail me out.

Flaherty drove me to my studio apartment off of Mass Avenue. "What a dump," he commented. "You'll need money," he said. He pushed newspapers off of a kitchen chair and sat. Out of a coffee can in the freezer I took a wad of cash. I counted it twice. $7200. Flaherty left me $3600, and then turned around at the door for another $300 – this time for the officer who called him. I was too scared to question. Flaherty said that I was to meet a judge, a friend of his, the next day at Cambridge District Court. I was to be suited, sober and on time, unless I wanted to spend the next few years running from bullies at MCI Concord. He flicked the hair from my shoulders and said, "Short, please."

The next morning, Flaherty brought me straight into Judge Sullivan's chambers. We came to attention when the judge arrived. He never looked at me as he installed himself behind a massive oak desk. His hair was even shorter than Flaherty's. Sullivan wore a bleached white shirt starched hard as wood, a tie that matched the Atlantic blue of his eyes, and a gold Marine Corps tie clip. Flaherty approached the desk, and motioned me to join him.

I remember that without the filter of dope or drink, I was not coping well. My nerves felt like they were smoldering, and I missed the things to ice them down. Flaherty introduced me as the young man he had mentioned over supper at the Ritz Carlton. (I guessed I paid for that too.) I was a good kid, he asserted, corrupted by what is going on in the world today, worse than anything he or the judge ever faced. I came from permissive, divorced parents – the judge nodded – who taught me to value little.

"Without admitting guilt in this matter," he said, "my client requests consideration from the court. He was never encouraged to feel pride in himself, just the pursuit of pleasure. Your Honor," my lawyer continued, "knew from serving with Chesty Puller in Korea that the Marines specialized in making men from weak trash and directing souls otherwise bound for the landfill of the lost."

When the judge started to grin at Flaherty's images, I felt better about my chances.

"The law," Flaherty rushed to conclude, "invests in people to find justice. To make his amends, my client pledges three thousand dollars in charity; one thousand to the Marines' Toys for Tots campaign and two to the widow of Lance Cpl. Gerry Joyce, from Dorchester, killed last year in I Corps, Vietnam."

Flaherty saved the best for last: "My client, your Honor, will be joining the Marines."

Sullivan looked at me once and dismissed the case. I felt numb as Flaherty led me out of chambers. The marijuana in the evidence lockup was lost *for now*, Flaherty emphasized as we walked to his car. I figured that he had made himself $3000, maybe more, for three hours' work, four if you counted dropping me off at the recruiting office and waiting until I signed up. I had a new respect for a life out of crime. Flaherty shook my hand. "Good luck, kid. Don't be a jerk your whole life."

It wasn't until I passed my physical and stepped forward to take the oath that I understood what I had paid for my freedom. I now belonged to the Marine Corps, the Commander-in-Chief, and the American taxpayer. They could do with my life as they saw fit. And if I went to Vietnam, strangers would shoot pieces of metal at me that could knock down a small tree. Many times prison looked better.

I took a leave of absence from the university – incompletes were in vogue -- and gave notice on my apartment. My neighbors and former customers did not believe that I was leaving and why. My mother slammed her palm onto the kitchen table. "You're what?" she said. "People like us don't do this. Especially in that war." She sobbed, practicing for a funeral. When my father arrived the next day, he asked why not the Air Force, his alma mater.

The two of them planned my escape from the Marines. Mom knew a doctor who would certify – no, confirm -- that I was crazy and Dad thought he could get me into the National Guard or the Reserves. I left them huddled in a rare parental conspiracy. Back at my apartment house, I had stashed some pills and a bag of dope in the basement for a rainy day. Facing Camp Lejeune was it.

I'd like to say that I was a great Marine, the valedictorian of boot camp. The drill instructors picked at me like a sore that would not heal, their words, not mine. I was weak and out of shape and hadn't run for anything except a bus since high school. I was angry with everyone and no amount of Budweiser – the PX's favorite – made me feel any better. Besides, drinking at night made me threw up on the morning run. The drill instructors called me College Boy, the term icing on the cake of contempt I ate every day.

I was sure I would fail boot camp. For one, I was afraid of swamps. Jungles, our destination, are full of them. The bugs, the snakes, the leeches, the thought of stepping into a sinkhole and drowning under a heavy pack – these terrified me. As usual, the Marines gave me something greater to fear, a drill instructor named Bateson. He called me a thousand vile names. When he screamed next to my ear, I felt as if my vital organs shrank, along with my scrotum. I waded into swamps fine, but came in last on marches and runs. I did hundreds of pushups for penance. I moved from awful to mediocre.

I excelled at one thing only -- shooting. In high school baseball, I could see the stitching on a fastball and hit it. I didn't think my vision was a gift. The Marines pride themselves on marksmanship, from the cook to the general, and I scored third highest in my class; with an M-16, I could fire a tight pattern, that is, blow the center out of a target at 300 meters; I pleased Sergeant Bateson, who made a few hundred betting on me. No doubt the many Marines killed or wounded each month in Vietnam created the demand for my limited skills. I was relieved to pass boot camp, but felt none of the confidence of my buddies. I just wanted my life back.

I visited my mother in Brookline before I shipped out. My father flew in from New York. They did their best not to argue, although one blamed the other for their boy in uniform and both were angry with me. They could not see -- and I could not express -- how grateful I was to be home and be with them both, to sleep late on a bed that felt more like cotton than bricks, to do what I wanted when I wanted. No pushups or sit-ups. I walked, not ran, to the refrigerator for a beer. I was surprised that my body missed the punishing exercise of boot camp, but I didn't listen to it.

A few days before I left for California, a friend scored a wedge of hashish. We inhaled to the bottom lobes of our lungs. I smoked until time ran like a river right through her bedroom. I was a twig on that stream, flowing away from the Marine Corps and the war. At home, my parents still probed why I joined up, sure that they failed me. I almost told them about Attorney Flaherty and Judge Sullivan's rehab program. My parents hugged me so hard at the airport that I thought

they'd leave welts. I hugged them back and told them not to worry. They were looking at each other when I waved goodbye.

On the West coast, I joined a planeload of replacements. We had plenty of time to talk and sleep while the endless Pacific rolled by. I wondered if I might return from Vietnam in an aluminum box. Still, I had to smile at the joke that life was playing: I was heading for the war at whose protests I used to meet women and sell dope. Three hops later we landed in Danang. MPs brought a dog on board to sniff for dope. Then the ramp on the C-130 opened and the heat and light of Asia poured in.

Lt. Hearn, a newly minted Annapolis grad in starched fatigues, led us to an aircraft hangar. Tall fans pushed hot air around the room. The lieutenant stepped on an ammunition crate and read a letter from the President, who thanked us in behalf of the American people. Hearn then turned us over to Gunnery Sergeant Sparks.

Even by Marine standards, with instructors who ran circles around us while shouting orders or climbed a 20-foot rope hand over hand in seconds, Sparks stood out. He looked tall, but was average. He was just so solid, as if the flak vest that we wore was unnecessary for him. The inside of his arms were barked, right up to his softball-sized biceps, from skin grafts, I guessed, and his face and neck had a few scalloped scars.

With one bounce of his thick legs, he stood on the ammunition crate. His voice was so low that we leaned forward: "Thank you, Lieutenant Hearn. Welcome to I Corps, Republic of Vietnam. If ever was a time to listen good, this is it. I can hear, I can see that you're scared. You wish you were somewhere else, anywhere else. History has put you in its crosshairs and squeezed – not pulled – the trigger. It demands that we do our duty. If you're wondering about the enemy: Do not underestimate him. He is tough. On a handful of maggoty rice, he will march many miles. He will endure many hardships. But, above all, he is not and never will be a match for you. Do not underestimate yourself. There is no force in the world that can defeat you, the United States Marines. Sir?"

The lieutenant threw a sharp salute, and the Gunny Sparks pulled his T-shirt up to his sternum. We saw, in the solid power of his torso, the pucker of a bullet hole, the scar around his waist a foot long and thick as a thumb. "They couldn't kill me and they won't kill you."

"Sir, yes, sir! Semper Fi!" we yelled. If I had to borrow courage from the Gunny, well, that was fine. You have to get it somewhere.

With urgency, the Gunny trained us hard in small unit infantry tactics. Sparks created strong points around the machine gun, the mortar, and grenade launcher. Every man carried a belt for the M-60 machine gun, nicknamed the Hog. We took turns carrying extra nine-pound shells for the 81 mm mortar, along with ten 30-round magazines for our M-16s. We chewed salt tablets like candy. For the first two weeks, we sagged under the weight, but the Gunny believed it was worth it. One day, the packs and gear just felt lighter. In rifle practice, we heard over and over again: Squeeze, don't pull. A pull of the trigger ruined accuracy. Squeezing, I realized, was deliberate, an act of discipline and will. Off duty, I missed my rifle like another arm.

The Gunny extended our patrols to three days in the field. We looked for the North Vietnamese regulars who probed for our weaknesses. Sometimes Marine F-4s dropped their bombs at the edges of the Danang runway. At night in our slatted, screened hooches, I heard the pock-pock of small arms on our perimeter and saw the lightning flashes of flares. We pursued enemy forces through villages and hamlets in the countryside. The Gunny had an instinct about ambushes, what the enemy called grabbing hold of our belt buckles, to cancel our firepower. He had the

mortar crew drop rounds ahead of us on the trails. If we were too close, the grenadier fired into patches of jungle. Secondary explosions were mines meant for us.

On one patrol, we had a firefight that lasted all day into the night. The Gunny walked along our firing line to calm us. We felt enemy bullets drill through the air. I went through half my clips at figures that darted among trees and bushes. Later when we found a half-dozen dead North Vietnamese, I did not look at their faces.

We guessed that our luck -- six men in sickbay with twisted ankles, diarrhea, and heat exhaustion – had to end. A battle was growing like a summer storm, about 30 miles from our base. South Vietnamese units were trying to root out an NVA regiment, maybe a thousand men, and needed help. We trucked to a local provincial capital and walked six miles into the bush. It was rough, hot going and took until late afternoon, but safer than the main road that was mined or under mortar attack.

Lt. Hearn took half the men and set up a roadblock a few miles from us on Highway 5. The Gunny took the rest of us to the village at the crossroads. A kid and his father lead a buffalo out of the village. The kid didn't ask us for candy like most: the Gunny always had sweets in his pack. We followed their worn trail back into the village center, with a dozen buildings and huts, a few of them cinder block.

The Gunny salted the buildings and huts with three platoons. He found sacks of rice and spices and even American cement bags. With these, he set up firing positions in the shape of an L. The bottom of the L could move left or right to protect the shaft of the letter. He had us dig a firing pit for the 81 mm mortar near the well and set up the fields of fire for the M-60. We were out of range of our own artillery, and with the low clouds and showers off-and-on we could not count on air support. Every couple of hours the clouds let go of rain too heavy to hold.

The Gunny checked each man, inspected each weapon and ordered a dozen men to clean theirs. Then he called, "Brine, get your pack and follow me." We walked to a small building on a hill whose windows opened on the village. The Buddhist temple was thatched with seven teak steps leading to its open door; a dim bulb lit the inside. We heard someone. The Gunny shouldered his weapon and folded his palms together in front of his nose. A priest in a saffron robe came out and bowed to the Gunny. They exchanged a few words, the priest shrugged, and padded away from the village.

"What'd he say?" I asked.

"They don't talk direct. But we got trouble."

Inside, we could see through the open windows the one path back to the village, surrounded by flooded rice paddies and intersecting dikes. The village looked far away, too far. South of us was a long tree line, a smudge of green in the graying light. The building was empty except for a Buddha, carved by an artisan of some talent, with the hint of a smile on its face. The villagers had attached gold leaf to the head to gain merit. As an offering, they left fruit in a bowl, which smelled sweet as it spoiled in a cloud of flies.

The Gunny motioned to sit. We took our packs off and leaned against the Buddha. It was our first chance to rest in hours. Sweat rolled down the groove of my back. I lit up.

"You smoke Salems, menthols," he said. "Just like the leader of North Vietnam, Ho-Chi Minh."

"You know that?'

“I study history, in college, like you, Brine. Part-time. When I retire, I’ll teach history, maybe high school.”

“Gunny, why we are here?”

“Ask him,” he said pointing to the Buddha. “He knows everything; that’s why he’s smiling.” The Gunny waited as if he expected an answer.

“He’d say, ‘Visitor, you are here because you are here’. Something like that. Brine, I know your secret.”

I thought the Gunny meant Judge Sullivan and my quashed drug record.

“You’re a crack rifleman,” the Gunny continued. “Your file says you got eyes like a .400 hitter. I’m betting you haven’t hit anything since you got here.”

“Gunny, I run through ammo.”

“Yeah, you shoot, Brine, but no kills. If you have, it’s been luck. American taxpayers have armed us,“ he said pointing to my clips, “to kill the enemies of the United States or accept their surrender. Don’t you know this enemy is not doing his 365 days, but until victory or death?”

He stood up and unscrewed the light bulb until it went dark. He bent down.

“Brine, you’re here because we can’t see around this hill. The NVA could come up through the paddies and outflank us. I doubt it with the flooding, but I need everyone I can get for the village. You see that line of trees? If NVA come out of there, fire a few rounds and hightail it to the village. Lt. Hearn will put up flares every half hour or so and we’ll get some of that light. Otherwise around midnight I’ll try to get someone to replace you. Now I better get back.”

He stopped in the doorway. “Phil, you can do it.”

I watched him walk slowly back to village, no doubt counting his steps to gauge distance for the mortar. He didn’t seem to care that he made himself a target. When Gunny Sparks disappeared into the village, I realized how alone I felt. I also understood why he picked me: if I would not shoot the enemy, I was the most expendable man in his unit. He didn’t like the choice – it was just the calculus of war. He left me two of his grenades, an extra canteen and a candy bar.

Swallows flew low over the paddies picking insects out of the air. My eyes strained in the dusk to catch any movement at the tree line. During a squall, a puff of wind blew back his cover, and then I saw him. He stepped out trying to catch last of the light so he could climb over the dikes without slipping. My mouth tasted like a plywood board. I thought about climbing out the back of the temple and crawling down the path to the village.

Setting the M-16 for 3-shot bursts, I lay down in the entrance to the temple and followed him with the iron sight on his chest. He stopped, waiting. Then with a gentle motion like waving a fly from his face, he signaled for his comrades to come forward. A half dozen other NVA in floppy hats and camouflage moved up to him. They too waited and then the five-man crew of a heavy machine gun emerged.

It took two men alone to carry a Chinese .51 caliber. With this weapon, the NVA and Viet Cong knocked down helicopters and planes or shredded armored personnel carriers. Up near the

temple, a few hundred rounds into the village would cut through wood, rice sacks, cinder blocks and Marines.

I squeezed the trigger twice and sent six bullets at the soldier on point. The NVA often carried AK-47 magazines across their chests. My bullets scattered cartridges to reach his chest. He threw up his hands, while the punch of the bullets tossed him back.

The temple with the Buddha gave me comfort, but if I stayed, I'd die for sure. I grabbed one canteen and my ammunition. I came down the stairs of the temple and fired 24 more rounds on either side of the man I dropped. I hit the ground hard. I wanted the gravel to hurt, to keep me from denying where I was. Part of me nagged how unfair that I was in this place at this time; that I hadn't let my parents get me out of the Marines; that the Gunny chose me; that I got caught selling dope in the first place – I could have spent the rest of my life adding to this list of complaints. But I was fighting now for my tattered life and the lives of the other Marines.

Behind me the temple rocked with Kalishnakov fire. I had the advantage of height, so the NVA bullets went high, thunk-thunk into the wood and frame of the temple. Splinters of wood landed on me like snow. I loaded and fired at their flashes. An RPG – I had been expecting this – a rocket-propelled grenade sped up the hill and sliced and blew through the temple roof, which didn't catch fire, too wet from the monsoons. Thatch rained down. I ran forward to the first dike and fired again.

To my left, gun and mortar flashes lit the village under full and frantic attack. Incoming were RPGs with tails of fire. White tracers went out and green tracers came into the village. The mortar crew was dropping high explosives around the perimeter of the village, with a few in my direction. The Marines picked up their firing, like the end of a July 4th fireworks show, until it was a steady stream. Remnants of an NVA battalion were trying to punch through the village before daylight and air power would find them. Our mortar was going all out and the Hog's tracers stitched the darkness.

I crawled to another part of the dike, the mud kinder to my elbows and knees than the gravel, and waited for one of Hearn's flares. When they'd go up, I'd fire at the NVA slogging toward me. I threw all my grenades in high arcs down the hill and burrowed into the dirt. The sound and flashes startled me, but I still could hear and sometimes see the enemy. When I didn't expect any help from the village, I got it: the Gunny, I figured, directed the mortar crew to walk the last shells up toward the front of the temple. I hugged the ground. The air filled with shrapnel and muck.

In all the noise from the village, I heard the Gunny's shotgun firing, reloading, and firing again. The grenadier was also shooting as fast as he could load. At first light, the racket from the village slowed. The M-60 was firing textbook bursts of six rounds. There was only an occasional pop from one of our guys; the crack of AK-47s was less, and the sound was past the tree line, beyond our range.

The smell of burnt powder and spoiling meat was so strong that I breathed through my mouth. My fatigues were covered in mud, and my hands looked like gloves. When the mist lifted from the ground, down the hill was the crumpled soldier I killed for sure. I didn't count the others.

I loaded my last full magazine and locked the weapon. I went back into the temple to get my pack and extra canteens – the smiling Buddha was still there, chipped and covered with dust. I ate the candy bar that Sparks left me. I walked behind the temple and down toward the village.

Around the perimeter and inside were scattered enemy dead. A line of their bodies like breadcrumbs lead toward the tree line where they retreated. A few scorched huts had collapsed from RPG fire. Inside the village were three dead Marines under ponchos whipped by the wind. I

did not ask for their names. A half-dozen wounded waited for helicopters to go back to Danang. Lance Corporal Martinez called out, “Brine, hurry up. The Gunny.” I ran down the road.

Next to the mortar pit was Sparks surrounded by a dozen Marines. He was lying on his poncho, his knee covered with soaked red bandages. The corpsman was tightening a tourniquet. The Gunny’s face was grey and his leg from his knee down was pointed in the opposite direction. An NVA bullet had shattered his shinbone. When he saw me, the Gunny nodded. The corpsman administered the morphine. We waited until the helicopters arrived. I thought that the Gunny smiled as he lifted off.

The helicopters had brought a South Vietnamese civil action unit to prepare for the villagers’ return and bury the dead NVA. Exhausted, the rest of us Marines had to walk back to the provincial capital and our trucks. Lt. Hearn led. We took the faster main road back now that it was safe. We bounced and slept in the trucks all the way back to Danang. By then we heard that the Gunny was on his way to Hawaii for further treatment after the loss of his leg. That evening my buddies headed out to the bars and the clubs off base. I made an excuse and grabbed a local cab. The driver named Tran changed my dollars into piasters. He left room on the seat for the Buddha to help him as he drove his Citroen fast down crowded streets, leaning on his horn like an extra gear.

I found Monique’s. A refugee from the north, she lived down a side street on the edge of Danang. A fan with large blades spun on the high ceiling. She lay beside you on a tatami mat and gave you sweet tea. She lit the paste in the pipe – *the best*, she said, *beaucoup, far far from Laos*. Each time the customer puffed, she dropped a dried bean into a cup as brown as her skin. The charge was 50 piasters a bean. I waited my turn. She smiled like an angel and offered me the pipe. She was surprised when I shook my head and gave her all my piasters anyway. I left and never went back.

I continued to go on patrols. I was in a few more battles, although by then we were turning more of the fighting over to the South Vietnamese. I rose in rank to Lance Corporal while serving on float in the Mediterranean. I did another, shorter tour in Vietnam. When I was discharged from the Marine Corps, I used the GI Bill to help pay for college and grad school back in Boston. I met my wife at the library: that’s where I spent most of my time. My parents both came to the wedding and turned out to be stellar grandparents.

Gunny Sparks retired from the Marine Corps to Quantico, Virginia, and taught high school history there for many years. We talk often. At a scholarship fundraiser a few years ago, my wife and I met Judge Sullivan, long retired, standing straight as he could with two canes. He knew attorney Thomas Flaherty, who was in a nursing home in Naples, Florida, but the judge could not remember me.