

THE AMERICAN VETERAN

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SEGMENT TITLE: WHEELCHAIR CHAPLAIN

JENNIFER BRADEN, HOST: AFTER SERVING AS CHAPLAIN FOR U.S. COMBAT FORCES IN VIETNAM, CORBIN CHERRY BECAME VA'S CHIEF OF CHAPLAINS AND THEN VA CHAPLAIN IN SAN FRANCISCO. NOW HE'S FOUND A NEW CALLING – TO HEAL THE RIFT BETWEEN OUR VIETNAM VETERANS AND OUR FORMER ENEMIES IN VIETNAM. SCOTT WALLACE REPORTS FROM MILL VALLEY, CALIFORNIA.

CORBIN CHERRY, VIETNAM VETERAN, VA CHAPLAIN 1978-2003: SO WE'RE GONNA BE FLYING FROM HANOI DOWN TO HERE, TO HUE, AND THEN WE'LL BE TAKING HIGHWAY 1 UP TO QUANG TRI.

JIMMY THOMPSON, VIETNAM VETERAN, WHEELCHAIR PROJECT VOLUNTEER: THAT'S NOT VERY FAR.

SCOTT WALLACE, REPORTER: FOR COMBAT VETERAN AND FORMER VA CHAPLAIN CORBIN CHERRY, VIETNAM IS NO LONGER JUST A DISTANT MEMORY.

CHERRY: I HAVE A HARD TIME CALLING IT HO CHI MINH CITY, BUT SAIGON. WE'LL TAKE THIRTEEN.

WALLACE: WOUNDED THREE TIMES ON VIETNAM'S BATTLEFIELDS, HE'S ON HIS WAY BACK TONIGHT ON A MISSION OF MERCY. FRIEND AND FELLOW VETERAN JIMMY THOMPSON IS GOING WITH HIM. BOTH ARE ACTIVE IN A GROUP CHERRY FOUNDED THREE YEARS AGO TO BRING HOPE – AND WHEELCHAIRS – TO VIETNAMESE CHILDREN WHO HAVE LOST LIMBS TO LANDMINES OR HAVE SUFFERED BIRTH DEFECTS FROM AGENT ORANGE. THE MISSION GREW OUT OF CHERRY'S OWN STRUGGLE WITH THE WOUNDS OF WAR. HE TOO LOST A LEG IN VIETNAM NEARLY THIRTY YEARS AGO.

CHERRY: I GOT UP AND RAN UP TO GET THE OTHER MAN, THREW HIM ON MY SHOULDER AND COMING BACK DOWN THE HILL, I STEPPED ON A LANDMINE. AS YOU CAN SEE THESE ARE PURPLE HEARTS WHICH I HAD THREE DIFFERENT WOUNDS TO RECEIVE.

WALLACE: DESPITE ALL OF HIS COMBAT DECORATIONS, CHERRY NEVER FIRED A SINGLE SHOT IN ACTION. HE WAS AN ARMY CHAPLAIN WHO VOLUNTEERED FOR COMBAT DUTY WITH THE 82ND AND 101ST AIRBORNE DIVISIONS. FAITH WAS HIS ONLY WEAPON.

CHERRY: I NEEDED TO BE THERE, WHEN THERE WAS A CRISIS. AND THAT'S WHY I DID IT THE WAY I DID IT.

WALLACE: THAT SAME NEED TO BE THERE IS WHAT DRIVES CHERRY BACK TO THE OLD BATTLEFIELDS.

CHERRY: IT'S A HEALING PROCESS TO GO THERE, TO BE INVOLVED IN THIS PROJECT, AND TO GO PLACES WHERE YOU OPERATED OUT OF, AND YOU KNOW WHAT YOUR HISTORY WAS THERE.

WALLACE: THE WHEELCHAIRS BRING JOY TO KIDS SUFFERING THE EFFECTS OF A WAR FOUGHT LONG BEFORE THEY WERE EVER BORN. BUT THE VETERANS DISCOVER SOMETHING FAR GREATER: THE REDEMPTIVE POWER OF FORGIVENESS.

CHERRY: THE TRIP IS ABOUT HEALING THERE AND HERE. HEALING OVER THERE FOR PEOPLE THAT DIDN'T EVEN KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THE WAR AND HEALING FOR US WHO DID.

WALLACE: (LOOKING AT PHOTOGRAPH OF VIETNAMESE CHILD) HOW OLD IS HE? WOULD YOU SAY? TEN? MAYBE?

THOMPSON: 7, 8 MAYBE – VERY YOUNG. AND AFTER I TOOK THE PHOTOGRAPH, HE JUMPED UP AND RUSHED OVER AND THREW HIS ARMS AROUND ME, AND I JUST TOTALLY LOST IT.

WALLACE: LIKE MANY VETERANS WHO RETURNED HOME FROM VIETNAM IN THE LATE 1960S, JIMMY THOMPSON RECEIVED ANYTHING BUT A HERO'S WELCOME.

THOMPSON: WHEN SHE LOOKED UP AT ME AND SAW ME IN UNIFORM, AND SHE TOOK HER COKE AND THREW IT AT ME. AND, AFTER THAT, I JUST WANTED TO FORGET.

WALLACE: FOR THIRTY YEARS, THOMPSON DID HIS BEST TO FORGET. BUT LAST YEAR CHERRY CONVINCED HIM TO GO BACK. IT WAS NOTHING SHORT OF A SPIRITUAL AWAKENING.

THOMPSON: I'VE NEVER FELT THIS WAY ABOUT ANYTHING ELSE I'VE DONE. I'M SO ANXIOUS TO GET BACK THERE AND HELP THEM OUT MORE.

WALLACE: IRONICALLY, THOMPSON SAYS HE'S RECEIVED A WARMER WELCOME BACK IN VIETNAM THAN HE EVER DID HERE IN THE COUNTRY THAT HE SERVED.

THOMPSON: AND THEY'RE THE ONES THAT SHOULD HAVE ALL THE ANIMOSITY. OUR BOMBS ARE STILL THERE BLOWING UP THE KIDS. BUT THEY WELCOME US THERE.

WALLACE: IT'S A FEELING NEITHER THOMPSON NOR CHERRY CAN SEEM TO GET ENOUGH OF. THOMPSON PLANS TO RETIRE IN A FEW MONTHS – AND MOVE TO VIETNAM. IN A FEW HOURS, THEY'LL BE ON A NIGHT FLIGHT BOUND FOR HANOI. FOR CORBIN CHERRY THESE TRIPS HAVE BECOME A KIND OF PILGRIMAGE – A JOURNEY TO THE FAR SIDE OF THE WORLD, BACK IN TIME, AND INTO THE MOST MYSTERIOUS REALM OF ALL – THE HUMAN HEART.

CHERRY: I WANT TO KNOW WHO SITS IN THAT WHEELCHAIR. AND I WANT TO LOOK AT HIM, FACE TO FACE, LIKE I'M LOOKING AT YOU AND I WANT TO REMEMBER THAT. BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT, ONE-TO-ONE. AND LOOK AT THIS PERSON BACK, LIKE YOU'RE LOOKING AT ME, AND SAY, "THIS PERSON IS FROM AMERICA." THAT'S WHAT IT'S ABOUT.

BRADEN: IF YOU'D LIKE TO KNOW MORE ABOUT WORKING ON THE WHEELCHAIRS PROJECT OR MAKING A DONATION, PLEASE SEND AN EMAIL TO CORBIN AT: C O R B I N 4 6 1 3 AT M S N DOT COM

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