



Faith Through the Storm

*A Memoir by Major James Capers, Jr.,
United States Marine Corps Veteran*

As Told to Lilian Duval



Dedication

This book of my life is for Dorothy Lee Capers, a quintessential Marine wife.

We celebrated our fiftieth wedding anniversary at Onslow Memorial Hospital a week before her death in 2009.

This is a testament to all those deployments I made and all those lonely nights she endured and all those days when I was lost in my post-traumatic delirium and didn't know where I was, when I'd been shot up and banged up and lay there all those months in Bethesda... and she came and drove a hundred and some miles to come and visit. When they said I wouldn't walk again, she was the one who said I would walk again, and I did walk.

Those, and more, are things that I'm grateful for. I got the credit for them, but I always thought that if someone deserved the credit, it was Dottie.

And this book is for our cherished only son, Gary Wayne Capers, whose untimely death preceded his mother's by six years in 2003. His blindness never stopped him from excelling in music and editing a newsletter. He shone in the North Carolina Special Olympics. Best of all, his gentle nature, caring spirit, sense of humor, thirst for knowledge, and love of life graced all those who loved him. And there were many.

Both are buried together in Arlington National Cemetery, where I will join them when the time comes. Until then, these pages are for them. Through every minute of every long day, they were always in my heart, where they remain forevermore.

With all of my love and dedication,

[Your signature]

[Date and place]

An American Story

Courage is what you see when you look back. In the moment of attack, at the instant of decision, when there is no way out but the way ahead, courage is an abstraction. You do what you were trained so well to do, and you do it immediately, instinctively. Only later can you look back and observe yourself in action, reviewing your past as if watching a movie about your own life.

I'm seventy-six years old now, in the sunset of my life, and I've concluded that the measure of a man is in what he does when he has no time to think.

At first, I did think, and the path that I chose when I was eighteen years old was irrevocable. It defined me. It shaped me as a man. It blessed me with impossible challenges, and it provided me with the tools to withstand them. I would not have done it any other way.

In 1956, I had just graduated from Carver Vocational Technical High School when my guardian angel circled above my head and perched on my shoulder, and I enlisted in the United States Marine Corps. It was only two years after the Supreme Court had reversed its "separate but equal" decision in the notorious 1896 case, *Plessy v. Ferguson*. That decision codified the Jim Crow laws of segregation that had been in effect since the 1870s. But in 1954, the Court rejected that opinion in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*.

As an African-American child in the Deep South, I grew up under those harsh laws. Born on a farm in tiny Bishopville, South Carolina, I was a son of sharecroppers. Our family worked and struggled against insurmountable odds and moved to Baltimore, Maryland, where I attended segregated schools and dreamed of a bigger world.

Learning to read, write, do my math, and master a trade, I could not have imagined that in 1967, in a remote jungle on the other side of the world, only eleven years after graduating from high school, I would perform sufficiently bravely under duress to be recommended for the Congressional Medal of Honor. I was one of the first African-American officers in the Marine Corps to receive this recommendation, and it came forty-three years after the events.

I could never have predicted that I would be wounded nineteen times during my tour in Vietnam with 3rd Force Reconnaissance Company. I was hit once at Phu Bai, which General Westmoreland ordered the Marines to establish as the second Marine Corps camp in Vietnam. I was hit twice at Khe Sahn during a full-scale siege by the North Vietnamese Army. During Operation Double Talk, while my patrol attempted to rescue American POWs, I was hit again. At Phu Loc, I was hit on the second day of the mission. And on the last day of my last mission, I was hit fourteen times.

Like many officers, I refused to report most of my wounds. The last thing I wanted was to be shipped home, leaving my men to fight—and possibly to die—without me. I knew that I'd receive only three Purple Hearts. But my fellow Marines and the success of our mission were more important than telling the truth about my injuries. I was proud of the five Bronze Stars that I received then, each bearing the Combat "V" Device, a miniature gold-colored letter "V" that appears on certain medals awarded to members of the armed services.

We never worried about the reception we'd receive when we finally returned home. Homecoming should have been the easy part, but the anti-war culture prevailing at the time shocked us on our arrival. There were no yellow ribbons. There was no music playing, no bands. It seemed as if we were being blamed for an unpopular war. Most of us came home on ambulance planes, grievously damaged and suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, which nobody understood. For me, it was an affliction that commandeered my mind as my body healed, ever so slowly.

And this healing was a test that would take months and years to pass. Lying broken in my hospital bed on the fourteenth floor of Bethesda, now known as Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, I slipped in and out of reality. I'd longed to return home to my wife and our teenage son, but once there, what I wanted most was to go back to the jungle and lead my men, support them, be with them where I was needed. I was home and I was free, yet I was imprisoned by my crippling pain and terrifying hallucinations. In my waking nightmare, I resented the sights and sounds of civilization: the flashing lights, traffic sounds, and bustle of an American city would give away our position and threaten my men.

During periods of lucidity, my hands shook as I anxiously thumbed the list of casualties from the previous day, painfully recognizing the names of my departed brothers, more and more each day. And then I would return to that dark place in my mind, planning and scheming for a way out. I had to get back to my men, to lead them, to penetrate the overwhelming morning fog of the jungle and emerge safe and victorious.

One day I almost did escape, clumsily maneuvering my wheelchair to the hospital exit. We were taking fire, and no one was doing anything about it. But suddenly the door opened, and there stood my Dottie, her silhouette framed by the harsh, uncaring sun that shone down relentlessly on this place of suffering.

"Jim, where are you, dear?" Dottie asked as she gently covered my rough hand with her soft one. She alone finally penetrated the fog that tormented me all those days and nights through all those months and years. I was home. The rest of my life was still ahead of me. I would have to start again.

If my reminiscences and my honest assessments can help just one wounded veteran to find hope and optimism, my effort will have been worthwhile. Our veterans are more than the cornerstone of our democracy. They are the living force behind all that we stand for as a free nation. My goal is to reach them, to inspire them, and to give them reason to believe in themselves. They have waited far too long.