



Merkel returns home. (AI image generated by Charlotte Richter, *Military Review*)

How and When It Hit Me

Charles Merkel

It didn't hit me right away; not at the semihostile airports, not at mom's classroom, not the first few days back home—only relief. Thirty days' leave, back in Louisville, Kentucky, back in *America* and savoring the simple grandness of it all. I had been whisked away from the horror, the peril, and suddenly felt so alive, and grateful.

After dad took me to mom's school, where she introduced me to the fourth graders with whom she'd had praying for me over the months and the emotion that evoked, it was on to the car dealership. Striding through the showroom without so much as glancing

at anything else, I stood wide-eyed over the stunning beauty of the grandest car. Then, after gently fondling the steering wheel and much of the interior, I put down half my war money on a 1968 Honolulu Blue Mustang.

Four days passed; I told myself I was ready. A little over a year before, I had called Jean, not someone with whom I had gone to school but a girl a year older, whose grandparents had lived next to us a dozen years prior. We had played together for many weekends when we were six and seven.

We'd moved right after that, three blocks away. Still in different schools, I only saw her once again

before my dad took a job in Indianapolis. That last occasion happened at the Iroquois Manor Shopping Center; we were both on bikes. I was in seventh grade and she the eighth.

Shocked, I yelled, "Hi, Jeannie."

"Well, hi, Charlie," she said, and I was overjoyed that she still recognized me.

Our conversation was short—she confirmed that her grandparents were still at their old house, and she was still going to Saint John Vianney School and soon to Holy Rosary Academy. "Well, be good and keep studying," she said, and rode off. "And don't get your kites stuck in any more trees," she yelled, looking over her shoulder.

Six years later, with Louisville days a wistful memory, I enlisted in the Army after high school, intending to avoid the Vietnam War by joining and hopefully rewarded with a noncombat job and an assignment stateside. That reasoning failed for well over a million of us; five months later, I was in the war. Having only a two-week leave before my departure, I wasted many days semidepressed and filled with angst. I craved solitude. Now in yet another strange city, with no transportation, I whiled away my time reading and thinking about what lay ahead.

On my last night at my parents' home, for some unfathomable reason, I called Jean Becker. I mean I just pulled it out of air. There was no rhyme or reasoning behind it; I had not seen her since the chance one-minute meeting at the shopping center seven years ago. Of course, this too was a nerve-wracking thing. As the phone rang to her parents' house, my hands were sweating, and I was afraid my voice might crack.

"Hello," came a soft voice.

I took a deep breath. "Hi, I'm trying to get a hold of Jeannie Becker. I'm an old friend from way back."

There was a hesitation. "This is she; who is my old friend?"

"Jean, I thought you'd be away at college, and I was calling for your number. Ahh, this is Charlie Engel. From like Alger Avenue in '54 and '55. Do you remember me?"

With a slight chuckle, she said, "Well, yes, I do. Little blond-headed Charlie; I think you were in kindergarten when we first met."

"Yeah, remember all the stuff we did back then?"



Calling Jean. (AI image generated by Charlotte Richter, *Military Review*)

"I recall we played with your plastic soldiers, your little cowboys and Indians and cars. I tried to teach you how to hopscotch," she said with a tiny giggle.

"Yes, I'm still not good at that. Anyway, do you still live at home?"

"I do," she said. "I'm a sophomore at Catherine Spalding University downtown. I still get along great with my parents. So, it saves a ton of money. I can take the bus on Third Street; it's only a twenty-minute ride, plus I sometimes drive mom's Corvair. I'm studying education, I might teach grade school or high school, don't know for sure yet. Are you still living in Louisville?"

"No, we moved to Indy in '63, I went to high school there. I'm in the Army now. While I was in basic, my parents moved back to the Louisville

Charles Merkel served in a variety of jobs with the 103rd Engineer Company (CS) while deployed to Vietnam from February 1967 to February 1968 including as a driver, an armed guard on truck convoys, a laborer, assistant to the company clerk, a temporary mail clerk, and a fill-in as an officer's driver. He was in Vietnam during the first twenty-two days of the Tet Offensive. He holds degrees in journalism and U.S. history from Indiana University, and he has had a novel and twelve short stories published.



Jean answering the call. (AI image generated by Charlotte Richter, *Military Review*)

area, maybe trying to lose me, actually to Jeffersonville across the river in Indiana. So, well, this is my last night on leave before I leave for Vietnam tomorrow.”

There was a long silence, and I suddenly couldn’t think of anything to say. I was pretty sure I’d lost her when she said, “Oh, no, Charlie, that’s terribly sad. I am so sorry for you.”

“Oh, yeah, well thank you. I-I’m not in the infantry but stuff goes on throughout the whole country, they told us. I really don’t know what to expect, but it’s only a year, not like our dads in World War II, where they were in for the whole duration.”

“It’s bad, one of my best girlfriends from John Vianney lost her brother last fall. He had joined the Marines a couple years back.”

I almost wanted to cry. For a few seconds, I wished I hadn’t called. “Well, we all got to do our part,” I managed.

“A war is so terrible. Everyone thought what, twenty-two years ago, there would be no more after what the world went through in the thirties and forties. But we’re in our second one after that already. I sometimes think I understand both points of view, pro and con, about why we are there but really, I don’t quite

comprehend the whole picture,” she said.

“I don’t either.” Long seconds again passed, and I blurted, “Well, Jean, look, I know this is weird, but do you think we could write back and forth, I mean just a little?”

“Sure, I’ll write you, if you want me to,” she said.

“Yes, it would mean a lot. I mean, I don’t wanna take a bunch of your time. When we moved to Indy, I went to an all-boys school, and I didn’t have a car. Our neighborhood was mostly old people. So, I never met many girls my age.”

“I’ll write to you and pray for you.”

“Well, I am happy I called, I felt kinda down. When I get home in exactly one year, I mean, if you’re not engaged or anything, maybe we can get together,” I said, squeezing

the phone cord and grimacing.

“Sure. I’d have seen you now if you hadn’t waited ‘til your last night, which is okay; you have a lot on your mind. Be very careful. Just don’t take any chances; life is too precious.” Now, it was her voice that seemed to almost crack. We said goodbye.

That was it. I sat a long time in my parents’ dark kitchen, “That was a good thing,” I said, several times.

I left the next day; Standiford Field in Louisville to LaGuardia in New York, and a cab to Fort Dix, New Jersey. Gray, cold, bleak. Then four days with thousands of us waiting to appear on a manifest to board C-141 cargo jets and fly to Nam. When we finally did get a flight, we were stunned, taking seats crammed together and facing to the rear of the behemoth craft; there were no windows. “I can’t say I ever felt more insignificant,” said the guy to my right. “Or worthless,” came from my left. That about summed it up.

While overseas, my experiences were varied, but day by day, time passed, and I was lucky. Jean and I exchanged several letters, and I realized I liked her a great deal. She was quite consoling with her contagious optimism, and she seemed so uniquely genuine. Plus, from her pictures, I found her quite attractive.

My experiences were up and down, more sweltering than unsafe, though I found myself in a few tight spots. Then, the Tet Offensive came in late January 1968. It was the largest concentrated effort by our foes of the entire war, and we were hit night after night. Eleven months and one week down, and now I would likely die. Stress-filled numbers on my calendar passed, then on February 23, my stint was up—I made it back.

Within a week, nervous as I was, I called Jean. Our first date came on a snowy evening in late February 1968. I was pretty shaky as I drove my new car on the slushy expressway to her house and I realized Mustangs, despite the status, were not the best snow cars ever designed.

Nervous again, I rang the bell. A petite, incredibly pretty girl answered the door. “Well hello, Charles,” she said, “Come in; my, look how you’ve grown, you must be over six feet.” Jean, whom I had always remembered as tall and slender, was now maybe 5’1” and slender but astonishing. Filled with excitement, I entered the forest green living room where Mr. and Mrs. Becker greeted me.

“You know, Charles, the last time I remember seeing you, you were dressed in a navy-blue suit with a white shirt and tie and about to make your first communion. Your mom and I talked a lot back then and I’ll never forget how proud she was of you,” said Mrs. Becker. She gave me a big smile and a tiny hug.

Mr. Becker, a World War II veteran who’d stormed the islands in the Pacific, was solidly built and grasped my hand strongly. “Glad you made it, Charles. You’re one of us now, an American who served your country in a war.”

“Thank you, sir.”

On our way downtown, I detected Jean’s thoughtful way of not bringing anything up that might be stressful. She described Catherine Spalding University, and little tidbits about her perceptions. “Have you ever noticed this?” she asked, “Like, even though I’ve had my license for nearly five years, I haven’t gotten

used to the optical illusion that the car seems larger than the road when I drive.”

I laughed. “Sure, I had to drive jeeps and small Army trucks over there a lot, and I’ve noticed that. But after a while it seems to go away, even though it doesn’t.”

“Do you still have your little plastic men?” she asked.

“Well, maybe they’re in a box somewhere, or my sisters stole them. All but that one, which for sure is gone. That one you talked me into tying to our balloons.”

“What?”

“Remember they had this special at Winn Dixie and with any purchase of twenty dollars, they gave away a beach ball-sized helium balloon. We each had one. You said if we tied our strings to one of my soldiers, he would fly ten thousand feet high and probably a thousand miles and just maybe, according to legend, some poor kid with no toys might find him.”

“Oh, no, did I do that to you? I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. I never forgot it. We watched the two orange balloons turn into tiny dots in the sky blowing toward the east. We both thought it was a great adventure for the soldier and for us,” I said.

What a lovely half of an evening. We saw *The Graduate* at the famed Rialto, one of Louisville’s oldest movie houses. The place was packed, and the wonderful smell of popcorn permeated the air. The movie was great, and the place shook with laughter.



(AI image generated by Charlotte Richter, *Military Review*)



Concept of flashbacks from the Tet Offensive. (AI image generated by Charlotte Richter, *Military Review*)

But afterwards, in the crammed, plush lobby, amidst a kaleidoscope of blissful faces, things started to con-tort. I couldn't fathom how this throng, so well-dressed and splendid in their properness and so incredibly cheerful and light-hearted could even exist.

I suddenly felt as if I were in an episode of the *Twilight Zone* and just as Jean said, "Back in a sec," with a little pinch on my arm, the surroundings seemed to close in on me; this *misplaced calmness*, how did it exist? Only days before, my last night with my unit—the Offensive in its peak rampage—I had struggled to stay alive. With mortars devastating our motor pool and demolishing our stick-and-tin barracks, we lay firing from bunkers and ditches. Booming artillery answered our frantic calls, roaring over our heads from five miles away. Terror de-voured us. The attacks continued for my remaining days. Bobby Cress was killed. Cliff Rice and Stan Stojanowski were badly wounded. Over and over each night, I sprinted under fire as courier from our captain's bunker to the battalion command bunker and back confirming radioed messages. Each dawn brought pause, then tension mounted until dark when it began again.

Then so eerily, I had been magically plucked out and dropped back stateside. I stood in a theater with a wonderful girl, with chuckling, carefree people everywhere,

but my comrades were still *back there*, trying just to exist. My year was up. I could've extended for six months, but everyone said, no, go home, you made it. So, I did. But now, it wasn't right. The popcorn machine sounded like distant machine gun fire. Voices grew louder. Someone yelled "Mary!" but it sounded like "Medic!" I slipped back into near panic, but then, just as I had nights before, I found myself in a more controlled, survival mode. Unconsciously, I was somehow scanning the theater for Viet Cong or North Vietnamese



Merkel in thought at the theater. (AI image generated by Charlotte Richter, *Military Review*)

soldiers. There was no rifle in my hands now and feeling naked without it, I began to tremble and felt faint and so out of place.

Jean appeared, and without either of us saying anything, she pulled me gently outside into the cold. We walked along Fourth Street, Louisville's colorful main drag. As we passed a myriad of closed department stores, offices, restaurants, and shops on our way to the river and back, I said, "I don't feel like I belong here, it's too different of a world, and it's like I cheated and magically got dropped back here while everyone else had to stay."

"Of course, you belong here. It's over for you, Charlie, you made it. Guilty spells and nightmares may come and go, my dad still has them sometimes, but from now on, it's your time to move on with your life and never feel shame about being happy." Squeezing my hand, it was as if we had never left our long-ago hierarchy with her still holding some tiny edge in logical perspective.

"I don't know, it's not just a different thing, it's a different hell-packed world and it doesn't seem right that you just walk out of it while it's going on. I—"

We dodged another couple, obviously a bit tipsy, coming the other way, just outside the Seelbach Hotel. She said, "Isn't it great to be alive and our age and to live in a city, a country, like this. Just think how much you are going to love going to college in a few months, and everything else that lies ahead for you." She, with a year to go, would graduate from Catherine Spalding, three months before I would even start university life, if ever.

Jean had just turned twenty-one ten days prior. I was still nineteen, but I had a fake military ID proclaiming that I was of age. We discovered a little bar on the way home and had a couple of drinks. The place was cozy with soft instrumental music. I sipped a Johnny Walker Black and soda and eventually my spirits recovered.

"Don't get me wrong, I am grateful. And I apologize for being creepy," I said, "I just felt so weird, and I wasn't prepared for that to happen. Part of it was how much everyone including me laughed and laughed during the movie. While I, deep down, knew what was going on back there. It seemed irrelevant, not really appropriate—"

"What are you supposed to do? You owe it to yourself and, for that matter, everyone else that knows

you or ever will, to be the best you can be. I can't know what you feel, and I am no psychiatrist, but to me, it kind of seems like you have to transcend the bad memories of the war as well as you can. I'm thinking it's a form of *battle fatigue*? And I bet everyone has some of it that went over to any war and came back. Think about this, what you gained in wisdom, mental strength, and perspective will be a great asset to you forever," she said softly, looking straight into my eyes.

I nodded, "You wanna know something, Jean? Our eighth-grade teacher told us that every so often we'd meet someone who knew exactly what to say and do during trying times. Someone who seemed to have *angelic* traits, and that sort of describes you, at least tonight. I hope that doesn't sound too stupid."

She glanced down at her hands, seemingly studying her class ring then with a playful grin responded, "What do you think was the funniest part of the movie?"

We made a date for two nights hence and I felt a strong anticipation of what might develop between us. The evening ended on her porch, and it felt especially nice to hug her tiny frame and her lips felt wonderfully soft.

For all the beauty and wonder of that evening there was the other, the darker, and it would come back scores of times over the years.

And *that* was how, and when, it first hit me. ■



Merkel and Jean. (AI image generated by Michael Lopez, *Military Review*)