

The Two Faces of Roman Martinez

Excerpts from the installation

Roman Martinez: I enlisted in the army in January 1969 to be a chaplain's assistant. I was an altar boy and a choirboy and believed in "Thou shall not kill".

So I joined the army to do my service to my country in the shortest possible time, which would be a two-year enlistment.

Unfortunately my enlistment officer didn't tell me that he put me in for infantry rather than as a chaplain's assistant.

So after four months of training I ended up in Vietnam in June 1969. I informed my officers that I was a conscientious objector and that I had enlisted to be a chaplain's assistant... so they volunteered me for a re-con platoon which was totally contradictory to my beliefs.

The time that really got me... I was very new in-country and new in the re-con platoon. We met the enemy. He fired on us and we fired back. There was a saying: "Cho Hoi" which means, "Open arms – I surrender". We hollered out to them "Cho Hoi" and when they surrendered we killed them. That was my first experience how things were done.

I went to see the chaplain and I told him I was a conscientious objector. I believed in "Thou shall not kill". And the chaplain told me that... "We need you as an infantryman. God is not going to hold it against you for killing people. God bless you" ...and it just totally blew me away that the priest was going to go ahead and exonerate me for killing people...

After that I had a burial ceremony for myself. I actually got an M-16 and a bayonet and I had a funeral service for Roman Martinez. I buried him

and my God so that the altar boy and God could not see what I was doing.

My alter ego, the one who was stronger than the altar boy, took over and Hopper came out. That was what they called me in Vietnam. He took over the responsibility for the carnage that was going to happen. Death and having to die was all taken care of by my alter ego. I was already dead. I considered myself dead, so if I came back it would be good, if I didn't I was already gone, checked out.

The first infantry division was very much into bodycount. We got sure we got credit for every body. We would line up the bodies and take photographs and the more the better, the more people you killed the more recognition you got...

Before Christmas of '69 we had a big kill and we had a stack of bodies and me and a partner of mine, we put our feet on top of the dead guys. You know how you see lion hunters showing off their trophies, putting their feet on top of the lion, holding their rifle up. Me and this black guy had this big stack of bodies and we had our feet up like this, and we took a picture of that. I wanted to make a Christmas card that said "Peace on earth and good will toward men". (*Laughter*) That's really sick. I'm glad we didn't do it. But that's the mentality we had. They were the enemy. It didn't matter. They were soulless creatures. If it's your brother you can't kill him. If it's a human being it's hard. If they have no soul it's no problem.

They showed us pictures of the enemy, blown up, extinguished... It's no problem... I killed people that had no soul. I was Hopper. I didn't have to

deal with all that human stuff. I had a job to do. You didn't let it bother you. Even if you got hit you still continued on with your job. The adrenaline is going. You can continue on.

All the memories of the horrors of war were buried when I came home. I didn't think about them. I grew my hair long and put on the hippie beads and pretended like I never went.

After the time went by things started to happen. The old time bomb of the Vietnam vet... You can't hide the horrors of war forever... Either you deal with it. Or it comes back and bites you in the ass. And it bit me really good.

Miriam Martinez: The first morning I woke up in his bed he brought me all his photographs. From when he was a little boy and onwards... He said: "Can you find me in these pictures?" I always found him. Every time... I guess he was testing me. He showed me all the different sides of Roman and I found him in every one of the pictures.

Roman: I tried to scare you off.

Miriam: Yes he did. He tried to frighten me. He wasn't very successful... He struggled so hard with the

conflict of wanting to protect his family from the outrage of war, of his experience, by not talking about it. By holding it down inside.

I'm not sure what the occasion was but we had a barbecue. I found his hands around my neck and I was slammed against the refrigerator.

I always had safety plans. That was part of the children being raised. And one of the foremost safety issues was fire, another one was earthquakes. Daddy was the third safety issue. So we would have escape routes and places

where we would meet if daddy would get out of hand. That's how I handled my fear.

After maybe three years of this outrageous behavior I said: Did you ever kill any woman or children? Because it seemed to be a repeated pattern that he would terrorize me and the children. And he said NO! NO! And that got me thinking. I think that was the first inkling that he had, that perhaps the little boy that he was, was the first child that he had killed over there. I think that was the very first time that it dawned on him that maybe he had killed a child.

Roman: I had been in therapy for a year by that time. She thought that maybe I should stop being in therapy.

Miriam: Yes, because he was so frightening.

Roman: Doors would break, tables would break. Horrible things would happen. I would go from Mr. Peace to thermo-nuclear meltdown in a matter of seconds, milliseconds, and bad things would happen. It took a year of me being in the horrors of war to make me what I am.

Miriam: He wasn't under any medication. He wasn't seen by a psychiatrist. He didn't think he fit the parameters of having any problems. He didn't even know what posttraumatic stress was.

I got to the point that I locked him out of the house when he became enraged. I would protect (*our daughters*) Ambrosia and Nadia... because I couldn't handle it.

We had a rental property in the back. Unfortunately a Navy Seal and a Marine occupied it and they would drink with him and physically torture him instead of him physically torturing us. We made lots of trips to the veteran hospital with injuries.

Roman: No matter what they were. Old, young, pretty, ugly. It doesn't matter. If they are trying to kill you they are bad and you try to terminate them. I didn't do this for patriotism. I did it because I love my brothers who were fighting with me and I wanted to do whatever I could to keep them alive.

Miriam: He would go from mild irritation to uncontrollable rage just like that. We are learning as times goes by that there are triggers, and as I was saying before one of them is smell.

Roman: This one operation we went looking for a downed helicopter. I thought we were going after survivors but it ended up being this body recovery. We had to go out through a very steep jungle. We marched half a day to get to them. It was kind of unsettling. I was hungry and I smelled the smell of a hamburger stand. It smelled like McDonald's down the road. It was confusing to me because we were in the middle of the jungle. When we finally reached the crash site we found it was their charred bodies that we smelled. That was a bit unsettling to know that I was salivating over the smells of my fallen comrades.

The smell of burning flesh would trigger me. I didn't realize that the smell would bring back these haunting memories of my friends' charred bodies. It wasn't until I came to grips with those things that I realized that these things really trigger me off.

My wife used to make tortillas. A hot skillet, just the smell of the hot steel used to set me off. It was just something that would trigger in my mind and it would set off something through my whole body...

Miriam: The whole experience of loss and impotence would come back to him in a flash. It seemed to be in our backyard at the barbecue too often... and I would get hurt. I would be concerned about our little girls. I hauled them up in their bedroom and told them, if you have to, get out the window and run to a neighbor...

This went on for years. I would try to talk to him about different occurrences. I always would feel that he had made a choice. Somehow I thought that he choose to allow this monster to come out and terrorize me. But through time I came to understand that he was just as much a victim of the monster as I was. Our wedding vows said "with God on our side how can we fail?" and as long as we continued to pray together and put each other's best interest first and we could talk about it, I had the faith that we could make it. But when he would not talk or he would close me out. Or he would have the attitude that it was something in my voice

that ticked him off. Or I was behaving badly and that was why he was behaving badly. Or he would try to put the blame on me as being fully responsible for his behavior then I wouldn't have so much faith that we would work it out. Because I got the feeling that he wasn't facing what was going on if he was going to accuse me of being the cause of his behavior.

Roman: A great adrenaline rush would cause me to try to overcome the feelings and usually the feeling I was having was unknown to me... The smell of burning metal would trigger something in my subconscious. I'm not aware of it. But it would make me hyper-agitated and unfortunately anybody close to me would feel this. And if they got too close they would feel it very painfully.

Erik Pauser: *How come you feel good in a uniform when the "uniform" has brought you so much pain and so much shit? Tell me...*

Roman: It showed something. During that time... I was a hero (*laughter*) . I did heroic things. I fought with some very brave men. The beret looks nice, it means something to me. Re-Con. That's Recognizance. We did things above and beyond. We did it out there, by ourselves. It was an award for something, the highest kill of the battalion. That's a little touchy. But to know that I'm that good... To be part of the guys that did this kind of heroic job.

Miriam: I believe if a man is going to be physically abusive to a woman it's going to accelerate. It's going to compound itself. It's not going to get better. It wasn't one of those things that I was brought up to accept and I felt betrayed. I felt as though he had backed down on our marriage vows. That he wasn't doing his part because he had been physically violent and was not remorseful.

We went to confession together and after I confessed my sins I expressed my sorrow of having to leave a marriage that I really believed in. I didn't want to get a divorce and I was horrified of having to leave Ambrosia in that situation where she wouldn't have a mom present to protect her and to guide her. I felt a terrible remorse to having to give up on all the years that we had struggled so hard to make it work. But I wasn't going to let myself being hurt. And the priest suggested that I separate and with a very heavy heart I went to pray my penance. Then Roman went in after me and Father realized that this was the bum that beat her and gave him his penance. And we are praying side by side and by golly another conversion happened. We were really blessed that day. He went beyond remorse to a place where he was just wide open to whatever kind of love and healing was there. I could see him just shining. I knew right then and there I wasn't going to leave him.

That was the last time that kind of violence happened. Because whenever he has touched me in an aggressive manner like that he has always stopped himself.

Even when the monster got a hold of him. It's like he takes his own hand back.

One time he was so upset he was raging and I was fearful that he was going to hurt me. He came running towards me and he said "This is not for you!" And he continued to battle with the demons inside of himself and I didn't get hurt that time.

He first went to therapy without me and finally it got to the point where we needed to have therapy together if we were going to make it work. He would be telling me things and I wouldn't get it you know. So finally we started going together. There was a service arranged so that we could have counseling together. Through therapy we got to realize what some of these triggers might just be. He had to record some of his experiences on paper in order to make his claim for compensation. The first time he was able to put anything down on paper it was just a little drawing. Almost like a cartoon. And it was the pit and inside of it looked like a little angel boy. And that is as far as he could get to begin with. Through a couple of three weeks time he was able to express what that drawing was all about.

Every time he would probe into that horrible pit he would go into a rage. It was not anything he had any control over. It was a trigger. The trying to remember part was a trigger.

Roman: Just looking into the pit. Here is the little Romancito. (*Roman points on the drawing*). And the whole thing is... I couldn't figure out what was down there. This was the scary part. Even approaching the pit. And then I went down inside. Here is what I found down there. It was the little angel boy. That was left behind. And around it was the white glow of God. All the horror that I was worried about...

I was afraid of what I was going to find in there. Finding out that it was ME, my alter ego, the good side of me that was there. The combat

veteran also was there... he killed. And the angel-boy was nothing but good.

It was ten years ago that I came to this realization. After terrorizing my family, my daughter, my wife, two wives. The monster I was running from was ME.

Miriam: I remember one time, I said "I don't care what's there. Just leave it buried", because the torment we

went through, the agony, the tears, the rages, the lack of control, you know... Total grief, not knowing... There was nothing we could do about it. We didn't know. It was all locked up inside his poor fractured mind and it took a long time to find little Romancito. But the pit, that was the first step, and then we went on from there.

Roman: And it wasn't until I came home and made peace that I looked into the grave and found out that the altar boy and God was still there and that helped me to not feel the pain. Because being detached, being Hopper, I didn't have to feel the pain of killing, of the inhumanities that I was participating in. But after I made peace with God, and not just by going to confession but by making peace with God and all the people... I had... the experience of their death... I became... freed from that. And I have become in peace with myself as well as all of the warriors that died before me. My brothers, the American Vietnam veterans as well as the enemy. The enemy was my brothers too.