



Pat's Gourmet Coffee Shop

166 North Main Street, Mooresville, NC

The Most Patriotic Coffee Shop in the USA

Volume 02, Issue 09

September, 2006

September 11, 2001

Less We Forget!



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I Was Just There Last Night

by Robert Clark

A couple of years ago someone asked me if I still thought about Vietnam. I nearly laughed in their face. How do you stop thinking about it? Every day for the last twenty-four years, I wake up with it, and go to bed with it. But this is what I said. "Yea, I think about it. I can't quit thinking about it. I never will. But, I've also learned to live with it. I'm comfortable with the memories. I've learned to stop trying to forget and learned instead to embrace it. It just doesn't scare me anymore."

A psychologist once told me that NOT being affected by the experience over there would be abnormal. When he told me that, it was like he'd just given me a pardon. It was as if he said, "Go ahead and feel something about the place, Bob, it ain't going no where; you're gonna wear it for the rest of your life, might as well get to know it."

A lot of my "brothers" haven't been so lucky. For them the memories are too painful, their sense of loss too great. My sister told me of a friend she has whose husband was in the Nam. She asks this guy when he was there. Here's what he said, "Just last night." It took my sister a while to figure out what he was talking about. JUST LAST NIGHT. Yeah I was in the Nam. When? JUST LAST NIGHT, on my way to work this morning. Over my lunch hour. Yeah, I was there. My sister says I'm not the same brother that went to Vietnam. My wife says I won't let people get close to me, not even her. They are probably both right.

Ask a vet about making friends in Nam. It was risky. Why? Because we were in the business of death, and death was with us all the time. It wasn't the death of, "If I die before I wake." This was the real thing. The kind where boys scream for their mothers. The kind that lingers in your mind and becomes more real each time you cheat it. You don't want to make a lot of friends when the possibility of dying is that real, that close. When you do, friends become a liability.

A guy named Bob Flanigan was my friend. Bob Flanigan is dead. I put him in a body bag one sunny day, April 29, 1969. We'd been talking, only a few minutes before he was shot, about what we were going to do when we got back in the world. Now, this was a guy who had come in country the same time as myself. A guy who was loveable and generous. He had blue eyes and sandy blond hair. When he talked, it was with a soft drawl. Flanigan was a hick and he knew it. That was part of his charm. He didn't care. Man, I loved this guy like the brother I never had. But, I screwed up. I got too close to him. Maybe I didn't know any better. But I broke one of the unwritten rules of war. DON'T GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE WHO ARE GOING TO DIE. Sometimes you can't help it.

You hear vets use the term "buddy" when they refer to a guy they spent the war with. "Me and this buddy a mine . . ." "Friend" sounds too intimate, doesn't it. "Friend" calls up images of being close. If he's a friend, then you are going to be hurt if he dies, and war hurts enough without adding to the pain. Get close; get hurt. It's as simple as that. In war you learn to keep people at that distance my wife talks about. You become so good at it, that twenty years after the war, you still do it without thinking. You won't allow yourself to be vulnerable again.

My wife knows two people who can get into the soft spots inside me. My daughters I know it probably bothers her that they can do this. It's not that I don't love my wife, I do. She's put up with a lot from me. She'll tell you that when she signed on for better or worse she had no idea there was going to be so much of the latter. But with my daughters it's different. My girls are mine. They'll always be my kids. Not marriage, not distance, not even death can change that. They are something on this earth that can never be taken away from me. I belong to them. Nothing can change that. I can have an ex-wife; but my girls can never have an ex-father. There's the difference.

I can still see the faces, though they all seem to have the same eyes. When I think of us I always see a line of "dirty grunts" sitting on a paddy dike. We're caught in the first gray silver between darkness and light.





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That first moment when we know we've survived another night, and the business of staying alive for one more day is about to begin. There was so much hope in that brief space of time. It's what we used to pray for. "One more day, God. One more day." And I can hear our conversations as if they'd only just been spoken I still hear the way we sounded, the hard cynical jokes, our morbid senses of humor. We were scared to death of dying, and trying our best not to show it.

I recall the smells, too. Like the way cordite hangs on the air after a fire-fight. Or the pungent odor of rice paddy mud. So different from the black dirt of Iowa. The mud of Nam smells ancient, somehow. Like it's always been there. And I'll never forget the way blood smells, stick and drying on my hands. I spent a long night that way once. That memory isn't going anywhere. I remember how the night jungle appears almost dream like as the pilot of a Cessna buzzes overhead, dropping parachute flares until morning. That artificial sun would flicker and make shadows run through the jungle. It was worse than not being able to see what was out there sometimes. I remember once looking at the man next to me as a flare floated overhead. The shadows around his eyes were so deep that it looked like his eyes were gone. I reached over and touched him on the arm; without looking at me he touched my hand. "I know man. I know." That's what he said. It was a human moment. Two guys a long way from home and scared shitless. "I know man" and at that moment he did.

God I loved those guys. I hurt every time one of them died. We all did. Despite our posturing. Despite our desire to stay disconnected, we couldn't help ourselves. I know why Tim O'Brien writes his stories. I know what gives Bruce Weigle the words to create poems so honest I cry at their horrible beauty. It's love. Love for those guys we shared the experience with. We did our jobs like good soldiers, and we tried our best not to become as hard as our surroundings. We touched each other and said, "I know." Like a mother holding a child in the middle of a nightmare, "It's going to be all right." We tried not to lose touch with our humanity. We tried to walk that line. To be

the good boys our parents had raised and not to give into that unnamed thing we knew was inside us all.

You want to know what frightening is? It's a nineteen-year-old-boy who's had a sip of that power over life and death that war gives you. It's a boy who, despite all the things he's been taught, knows that he likes it. It's a nineteen-year-old who's just lost a friend, and is angry and scared and, determined that, "Some *@#*s gonna pay". To this day, the thought of that boy can wake me from a sound sleep and leave me staring at the ceiling.

As I write this, I have a picture in front of me. It's of two young men. On their laps are tablets. One is smoking a cigarette. Both stare without expression at the camera. They're writing letters. Staying in touch with places they would rather be. Places and people they hope to see again. The picture shares space in a frame with one of my wife. She doesn't mind. She knows she's been included in special company. She knows I'll always love those guys who shared that part of my life, a part she never can. And she understands how I feel about the ones I know are out there yet. The ones who still answer the question, "When were you in Vietnam?"

"Hey, man. I was there just last night."

For more interesting reading visit the following site - <http://www.vietnam6bn31inf.com/newsletters.htm>





Gentle Giants

by Cheryl Ann Sept.7, 2006

It's a special Thursday and the sidewalks outside are being worked on so it's a little bit of a disaster outside the Coffee Shop.

Richard and I wait for the veterans to make their way in, you got to give these special veterans a lot of credit, they love their Thursdays and I believe they will find a way to get here some how. Richard says "the veterans have seen worse in the past, they can get through anything", and you know what, they do make it. We had about 40 veterans in here today. They were visiting as usual and Richard had gotten their attention for a moment to thank them for all they had done - because Sept 2, 1945 was when WW2 ended and this last week was the anniversary of the ending of WW2.

In showing them honor through thanking them, Carl Reid our WW2 China, Burma India campaign veteran said something about maybe it might be neat for anyone of the WW2 veterans to share where they had been when the war ended. First Carl had shared then Bob Lineberger, Ken Neff, Buck Cowan, Joe Keller, Tom Harrell, John Allen Knox, and Thomas Morse who is our oldest WW2 veteran at 95 years of age. Then there was Harry Naas, Len McCutcheon, Herb Knox, Dick Keenan and John Hinkley, a new veteran who had signed into the "Book of Honor" today.

All of the WW2 veterans were in different parts of the world during that time. Some were in training getting ready to invade Japan when they got the word the war had ended. So many shared what a happy day that was for them and their families. Some shared remembering the parades of celebration that went on but most of all remembering they could go home.

It was so special on my part to watch them share, to watch them smile. Some were already over seas fighting and got to come home.

After the WW2 veterans got through sharing they stood strong and proud as the rest of the veterans and I applauded them.

This morning John Hinkley, a WW2 veteran visiting from Oregon, come in and shared where he was when WW2 ended, Richard got the "Book of Honor" to get him signed in and found that John was on the same ship in WW2 as Jimmy Houston, but at different times.

Both John and Jimmy were on the U.S.S. California. Though Jimmy Houston has passed on, he still lives on in the hearts of the veterans who knew him. Richard got out a year book of WW1 and WW2 veterans here in Mooresville and let John see Jimmy's picture in the year book. It was so special to watch, to be able to see the face of someone who served on the same ship in the past yet at different times, still seemed to have such a deep meaning. Somehow always a connection is made in the heart here. This new veteran got signed in and welcomed home and did let us know this was a day he would never forget. After John had gotten signed in and welcomed home Richard had made sure he introduced John because he was from far away visiting, yet on the same ship but at a different time as Jimmy and that was also something so special to find out. What a special day as always when the veterans are here sharing themselves.

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September Birthdays

Ralph Dagenhardt – Sept 12

Leonard Ham – Sept 12

Tom Nicholson – Sept 12

Cheryl Ann Leiner – Sept 18

Carl Reid – Sept 18

Earl Brooks – Sept 23

Happy Birthday to anyone we missed.

