

The Bonds of Friendship

“Never again will one generation of veterans abandon another.” This is the motto for the Vietnam Veterans of America. The Vietnam Veterans of America put this motto into action in a variety of ways; one is by sending a representative to meet and greet servicemen and women returning home from active duty at the airport. This small measure of welcome and support means a lot to the returning servicemen and women, but holds an even deeper meaning for the Vietnam Veterans. For most veterans and a veteran named Tom, it took a good 40 years to feel appreciated by the country they bravely and courageously served.

The night Tom was to fly out of Vietnam, his unit came under heavy fire. As shells flew around him, Tom’s thoughts were, “My God! I’ve been here so long and I’m going to die the last damn night!” Tom went out to help a wounded airman. The minutes he spent applying pressure to this man’s wounds felt much longer and with a soiled uniform, Tom boarded the plane for home. Twenty-four hours later, Tom was in California where he had his first encounter with the war protesters. Tom had been told of the protesters’ antagonism, but experiencing the negativity and cruelty first hand was something that no one could have been prepared for. The war protesters held signs that said things like ‘Baby Killer!’ and flung crap among other items at the bus that was transporting the servicemen. For Tom, this was the worst feeling in the world, to be crudely rejected by the people he was fighting to keep free and especially after life altering experiences such as those in Vietnam. That night Tom took a very long shower, his first real shower since serving in Vietnam, and went out to the bar for a beer. As he raised the glass to his lips, Tom noticed that he still had the dried airman’s blood under his fingernails and reflected, “No matter how long a shower you take, you can’t wash Vietnam away.”

Tom was raised in a patriotic family. He enlisted as a Seabee knowing that he would probably go to Vietnam, but figured it would be better to enlist and start out with rank versus being drafted. Through Tom’s entire experience in Vietnam, there was one man named Amin who never left his side and shared almost all of Tom’s experiences. Tom and Amin first met at the airport in Atlanta, Georgia on their way to boot camp. They went to the bar together to get a beer, started talking and became best of friends, “The kind of friend who you spend the worse days of your life with,” Tom said. Tom and Amin spent every moment of boot camp, infantry training, jungle warfare training, and Vietnam together save for the last three days when Amin was able to go home ahead of schedule. Tom and Amin sat back to back all night, guns ready, watching each other’s back because they had run out of ammunition and were preparing to defend each other.

On March 20, 1969, Tom and Amin’s unit came under rocket attack. Both dove in time, but Tom was knocked out and sandblasted. The last words Tom heard before up in the EVAC hospital were from his friend, “Hoffman, I’ll kill you if you die on me!” Tom recovered, but has not been able to hear out of his right ear since. Tom’s best friend Amin called each other after Vietnam whenever they needed someone to talk with to keep them from going nuts. Their shared experiences strengthened their friendship and created an unbreakable bond between them.

Tom’s biggest nightmare is of seeing his first casualty; it was a man who was wounded when a ten-year-old Vietnamese kid threw a grenade at the back of Tom’s truck and it exploded. This is an event Tom wishes he could forget, but never will. “The first of anything Vietnam is always the Worst,” Tom says. The worse part of active duty for him was seeing be killed and witnessing all the death and destruction around him. Tom had a very close friend named Ronald Sandel who died in Vietnam. This death was especially hard because Tom and Ron grew up in the same town a few blocks away from each other. Tom and Ron went to school together from grade school all the way up through high school and worked together in construction. Ronald’s death was a very deep and painful loss for Tom; even to this day, the emotions run deep.

When Tom was asked what the one thing was he would never forget about Vietnam, he replied with one word, friends. I have learned a lot about Vietnam, but the most important thing I have learned is that the friendships forged in Vietnam are the truest and strongest friendships an individual can ever have. These men laughed together, fought together, and many of them say each other die. Through all the painful memories, through all the

struggles during and after Vietnam, it is the friendships that are carried an and retold. No matter how much time passes or how torturing the memories of Vietnam are, the bonds of friendship cannot be washed away.

By Joleen Claire Wilhelm / Roncalli High