

MEMORIES OF YOUNG FACES

From Scott Hancock

Those rare days when the newsletter arrives are never easy ones. When I find one in my mail box, my mood always shifts. Upon the sight of my old unit crest upon folded paper, I find my inner me is suddenly stilled. From what ever busy hurly-burly pace of got-things-to-do-places-to-go mood I had been in, transitions immediately into a much more somber, quiet and reflective place, and I carry the thing back into my home unopened, a true mix of emotions churning inside.

It may not be right away that I open and read it, that newsletter. I usually wait till bed that night, when things are quiet and I will be undisturbed. It is the best time, the best way I can handle reading it.

Every year I think, this next time I will make the Unit Reunion, and yet, when it comes time to schedule such things, I find reasons not to go. I think I am afraid it will be too hard. Too hard to see faces of men grown older, faces whom I had only known as young, made harder to see by the remembering of faces of friends who never got the chance to grow older. Each year I tell myself, next year I will go, and wonder secretly if I lie to myself yet again.

It was but one year. One year in Nam. But filled with moments seared indelible into the soul and psyche, dressed now in a burnished patina only years of tears can create.

Don't get me wrong, most days are spent never giving that one year in Nam a thought, but then, - but then, it is Memorial Day, Veterans Day, or a day like today when the newsletter comes, and I am there again, hearing the throbbing beat of an incoming Huey come to save our butts in an emergency extraction, feeling my heart pound in rhythm with the whirling blades, my nose filled with the pungency of cordite, and then come memories of my teammates faces and the knowing smiles we gave each other as we feel the bird lift us heavenward out and up from a green hill filled with death.

The newsletter came to my mailbox today. Telling me of all those things it does. Of the reunion missed again, reminding me of promises I made myself and broke, of the chances missed not only to see living smiles of friends once known, but to see again the smiles of those Donut Dollies, whose presence out there was a touchstone to all that which lay back-home and which was worth fighting and dying for. I missed the Reunion again, another opportunity lost.

I read in the newsletter Bill Carpenter's call for history, for accounts and so on.

One year, one year in Nam. The memories covered in a burnished patina. Forty years of tears, forty years of raising the flag and saluting, and remembering those faces. How can I write of that time, forty years past, and dare think I got it right?

How many things might I write of and be writing only things as I can see them through that patina? How dare I even try?

I know of those who have done so, written of events of their service, and they were able to capture each truth, each date and event, so precisely, as to leave no doubt as to historical accuracy. But I, I with my patina, my off colored glasses, dare I try to recount what happened, what I think happened, and why?

I only know of hushed conversations while on patrol, of discussions of life and loves, of children and parents, of trials and fears. I only know the feelings that turn within me, within my teammates, as Tet unfolded and we watched and listened as the world went mad, the calls on the radio matching the gunfire that came from all the LZs in every direction around us, until the radio fell silent by command order. But the gunfire and explosions went on.

And I remember standing outside our HQ tent, in the dark one night, tears streaming down my face, listening as one of our teams, on the side of some hill, were being hit. I heard them calling for help. I heard them giving sitreps as the battle they were engaged in progressed. And in the background as they reported each time, was the crackle of gunfire, and the explosions of grenades. I stood there listening to it all, the sitreps coming in, the responses being made. And I wept, because I could not help, because I was not there, standing with them. I listened to the recounting of the wounds received, of the grenades coming in, of the damages taken, the movements of the enemy. And then the reports stopped coming.

I stood there in the darkness, only canvas between me and the radio inside, and listened to those standing at the microphone calling again and again for a response, till it became quite clear, there would be no more reports received from that team. Ever. And then I went back to my cot, in my own tent just down the hill, and lay there staring up into the darkness, until dawn came.

I know of some changes in procedures that were made while I was there, changes that many said were the root causes of some teams running into trouble. I remember discussions about the numbers of greenies being introduced into teams, about how it had once been that they would only put only one new man on a team at a time, and would not count that new man "experienced" until either the team said he was, or ten missions had passed. Only changes were made while my year passed, and experienced teams were broken up and made up of half newbies or so, and team members swapped around without care as to the working relationship of a veteran group. You team with a group, and like them or love them at first, if you come to trust each other, and come to know each other, then you will not be second guessing your team mates possible actions when the shit hits the fan. Second guessing and uncertainties lead to take too much time, lead to too many mistakes. And in battle with rounds incoming, you have no time and can make no mistakes. Constantly mixing teams, treating men as if fully interchangeable parts, only works as long as they have time to learn each other. But my memories could be bad, or off the mark, I was but one guy in a Tiger suit.

Not all memories be bad. Being among the first into Ashua Valley and standing watch as dawn came my first morning there, the light, the mist in the trees, will always be one of my most beautiful memories, and the coming to know the values of and giving full respect to the Montenyard scouts I came to know..., but not the least and the most treasured, are the memories I have of smiling faces of the men I served with, when I too wore a younger man's face.