

**Subject:** My lengthy VHPA Reunion recap

**Date:** Fri, 9 Jul 1999 00:07:29 EDT

**From:** [REDACTED]

**To:** [REDACTED]

Hi Everyone,

Lots of feelings have been going through my mind since getting home from the VHPA reunion Monday night. I promised a recap to some people, so this is it, but I warn those who don't know me, delete now. As the saying goes, I didn't have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead.

The Family Contacts Committee was well represented with six of our 10 members present (Chair Gary Thewlis, Jim McLaughlin, Jack Taber, Jim Schueckler, Susan Blaker, and me). Our table was in a great spot across from Gary Roush with the VHPA database/KIA & MIA info. and Mike Sloniker, the VHPA historian, taking down the history. I don't think these two men had more than five minutes during the entire reunion that there were not people two or three deep waiting to talk to them. This tells me the history of your war is important to you, as it is to me.

The reunions provide a forum for personal, one to one remembering but also a means to take personal remembrance one step further and ensure it isn't lost to aging brain cells. (To quote a Slonikerism, if you don't, who will?) Not a one of you did your job alone, without impacting someone else, in Vietnam. What was your unit involved in? Your personal actions and memories are part of a much larger scheme that needs to be documented and preserved.

Several times over, I heard the same story from different people who stopped by the Family Contacts Committee table. "I looked for his family for 20 years . . . ." I can't believe the extent to which some of you went to find the family of a deceased buddy. Your persistence sets a shining example for me. Lots of folks took a long look at our lists of cases, and even if they didn't recognize any names, expressed a willingness to help fill in the gaps for family members of their fallen friends, should the families ever contact us for help. As a committee, we welcome this because it gives us a starting

point for future contacts. All it takes is to drop a note to our chair, Gary Thewlis, explaining that should friends or family of so-and-so ever come forward seeking his friends, you would be willing to share your memories with them. I'm very grateful for the chance to have the Family Contacts Committee represented at this and future reunions.

The VHPA Mid-South Chapter did a fantastic job with arrangements for the more than 2300 people who were there. I was still hearing the "life member" bell rung in the registration room as late as 4 p.m. Sunday. Of course the Charlie Troopers had to have dinner at Hooters (who let Walker Jones choose restaurants?). The 1/9th reunion and C Troop 1/9th reunion were highlighted by awesome slide shows by Nate Shaffer (who always includes a photo of my brother David), Rudy Ribbeck and Ross Rainwater. The highlight of the Grand Ole Opry was when Jan Howard told the audience, "You Vietnam Vets are special to me. I had two sons who served in Vietnam." She sang Wing Beneath My Wings. The tears welled up for me and lots of my "heroes" who were there. I kept thinking of Susan Blaker and Lisa Vad, a few rows ahead of me. I know they are heroes to their fallen.

The banquet was memorable, not only because Good Morning Vietnam's Adrian Cronauer touched my "hot buttons" near the end of his speech (he talked about the media stereotype of the Vietnam Vet, a stereotype that affected me personally for many years) - but also because it was a great honor to see Gary Roush receive the long awaited Air Medals, presented by his daughter Gretchen. In another of those twists of fate, through a last minute seating change (Thanks, Ross!), I and my brother's friend from Vietnam wound up sitting at a table with a lady who went to junior high school with John Ernest Anderson, the pilot who was killed in my brother's LOH crash. She had tears in her eyes as I told her what actually happened in the crash. It truly is a small world. 1500 people in that room and she sat down next to us.

On July 5th, the morning of my birthday (shared with my "twin", Walker Jones), I had to roll out of bed early to meet the Family Contacts Committee and some of my Charlie Troopers for breakfast. By then my eyes were about shot but they tried to make me cry again by presenting me with the news they had purchased a brick for the National Vietnam War Museum in David's name. Whomever was in on this, I thank you. This means a great deal to me and gives me a special reason to visit the museum once it's completed. David would be proud of each of you for doing this, and honored his name will be there among so many others in this place of remembering.

Then, big brother Jim Schueckler (Polecat) and his wife Judy took me to the Smyrna Airport where they rented a 4-seater Cessna 172 and took me up! What a thrill it was to climb into the sky in an aircraft smaller than my car. Jim had me take the wheel (?) a few times and the first time I turned it ever so slightly and felt the plane tip because of something I did, my stomach came right up into my chest. We flew for an hour. It was just incredible and I would like to do it again. Driving my car is just not fun anymore.

I also saw Donny Kidd Jr., son of Donny Kidd, 173 Abn Bde KIA 3-4-68, and Donny's mom. Donny showed me the photos of his dad's crash site. I met Jason Moreira, son of Ralph Moreira, C/158 Avn 101 Abn KIA 3-5-71, and Jim Doody, brother of Tom Doody, C/158 Avn 101 Abn KIA 2-8-71. Jim is working on a Vietnam Veterans memorial for Denver, Colorado. I briefly met Irene Frye, Rita Farias and Brittany Frye - there honoring a son and nephew, Kevin Frye, C/1/9 Cav KIA 7-28-70. Kevin was Randy Zahn's roommate. It was a pleasure to see their C Troop Commander, Bob Tredway, and Squadron Commander, Pete Booth, at the reunion. These two men are revered and respected by their men and by me.

I think it was Mike Haley, reunion chairman, who said at the banquet it was like throwing a party for 2000 of his closest friends, and having them all come "dutch." For me the VHPA reunions are exactly that - a chance to see the people who have become closest to my heart through a unique set of

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circumstances that brings us together.

Most of you know that at this reunion, I was to meet for the first time a man who was pretty much my brother David's best friend in Vietnam. They went to flight school together and for that one month they roomed together in C Troop 1st of the 9th at Phouc Vinh. I could hardly wait to meet Steve Karas. I had no idea what he looked like. Neither did anybody else in Charlie Troop. He had never been to a reunion before and didn't even know about VHPA until my new big brothers "found" him for me (Rocket, Walker).

I watched nametags all day Friday - he was in the building but hadn't been sighted. Then as the 1/9th mini melted into the C Troop mini, big brother Randy Zahn came to me and said, "It's time." Here was a big guy in a red shirt, with thick white hair and "Steve Karas" on his nametag. A name I had searched for for as long as I can remember. Steve brought me some photos of the hootch he and David had been building in Vietnam, their Ft. Wolters graduation program. . . and had his delightful and polite 14-year-old son, Kevin, with him.

We sat in the mini reunion, and he told me he remembers David a lot. He told me about the memorial service they had for him in Vietnam. He told me David was so proud of his flight jacket that he managed to get his warrant officer bars sewn on before leaving for Vietnam when nobody else seemed to be able to do that. Of course, in the photo some of you have seen of David, mom and me at the airport when he left for Vietnam, there is proof of this fixation. He couldn't have needed that jacket for warmth, since it was June in Madison, Wisconsin. But he wore it to the airport. 30 years later I take the same pride in the only other flight jacket to bear the same name, Kink, which was given to me by the Vietnam Helicopter Flight Crew Network in July 1997.

I watched Steve pretty closely during the slide show. It gave me so much joy to see the recognition on his face. Perhaps he was finally coming home in some small way. I asked his son Kevin, "Are you bored with all this yet?" and I will never forget the insightful answer of this 14-year-old. "No, no," he told me quite honestly with his eyes wide. "I never heard about all this before." And then, he told me, after knowing me for all of an hour, "I'm proud of my Dad, I'm proud of David, and I'm proud of you." Talk about understanding. This wasn't the only time that Kevin told me this. He is a fine young man eager to hear about his dad's personal history.

I was so proud to have been able to introduce Steve to my other new big brothers and to have spent time getting to know him, his kind and gracious wife Janet, and son Kevin. It brought me peace to know he has done well in life, is healthy, happy and loved. It also made me feel like a mother duck with all in order, finally, after 30 years. My need to meet Steve never hinged on any burning unanswered questions about David. I've just realized it was a strong need I had for many years to know that he was OK, was protected and had done well in life since Vietnam.

Jerry Montoya posed a question that made me think. What do you get out of this? I felt a responsibility to have an answer to that question in my heart not just for Jerry but for other people who may be understandably curious about the feelings of a family member "survivor" at such a gathering of warriors.

My answer, always evolving, is that it allows David to grow up. For all those years before I ever knew what a Vietnam helicopter pilot looked like, talked like, felt like, my only reference point was a piss-n-vinegar 19-year-old - a 19-year-old flying, and dying, in Vietnam. Now my new big brothers have shown me what David might be like today. There is no other way to fill in the blanks, for somebody like me, like Susan Blaker (sister of Pink Panther Mark Clotfelter, 361 Avn, KIA 6-16-69) or Lisa Vad (daughter of Darkhorse Joe Vad, D/1/4 Cav KIA 11-6-69). Lisa told me the reunions give her a chance to talk about things - and listen to stories - that aren't a part of her everyday

interactions. She said, "It's like spending a whole weekend with my Dad."

Being at reunions, for us, draws a parallel between then and now. Only through you guys can the lost ones grow up. They cannot do it themselves anymore. But on the backs of their friends, as surely as their arms were slung over your shoulders in another time and place, they can be carried forward. You are the bridge.

I have to admit, I never knew what I was searching for, although for six years now I've been seeking David's friends. I had no questions. I simply took what all of you gave me, what you did and what you gained and lost, and put it where my memories should be. You showed me what he was like, in the memories of yourselves that you shared with me. What did I want to know about David? I still don't know. What I needed came from another direction outside myself. I needed to know, to the base of my being, that certain people were okay. Chief among them, the name so familiar to me, Steve Karas.

I can't help but think of the words in the film Saving Private Ryan, spoken by a dying Capt. Miller: Earn this. I don't mean to say David's death had to be earned in any way. He wouldn't want that burden placed on anyone, I know it, and I'm certain he would feel as I do that war is war and not some kind of scale that must balance. I also feel he would not want me to focus my attention on him, and in a way I have complied with that unspoken request.

It's more than memories of my brother that I get from going to a reunion. It's the knowledge that something - a spirit, a person, a bond - that was part of David in that intense and incredible place emerged, and endured. Perhaps the best tribute is to be able to say to those fallen, if they were here, what Ryan said at the gravestone of Capt. Miller in the film, "I've tried to live my life the best that I could. I hope that was enough. I hope that at least in your eyes, I've earned what all of you have done for me."

And if I could articulate the message from the other side of the equation, I'm certain he would say, "I could not fulfill my dreams, but by God, I want to know that you have at least had a chance to fulfill yours."

Well, I apologize for the length of this, but I wanted to get it all down before I forgot it. Whether you were in Nashville or not, you are all very special to me. Thanks for being "there."

Little sister,  
Julie Kink

sister of WO1 David R. Kink C Trp 1st Sqn. 9th Cav. June to July 1969  
Killed in Action 8-3-69

<http://www.vvmf.org/vvmf/programs/rem-them/kink.htm>

Member of VHFCN Family Contacts Committee

<http://www.virtualwall.org/contacts/>

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