

Storytelling at the Vietnam Women's Memorial

A speech by Julie Kink. November 11, 2000

"I've only seen one aviator killed since I've been here," my brother wrote in his last letter home, July 14, 1969. He had been in Vietnam for 3 weeks, and was trying to reassure mom. "You see, you're never alone on a mission. There's always somebody to protect you and get you out even before you hit the ground. I just don't want you to get upset because if you go down, you're only on the ground for about 3 minutes before they get you out of the area."

We have what they call a downed bird alarm in all of the hootches. Whenever a bird goes down every bird here is airborne and enroute to provide assistance in less than 2 minutes. So you see there's really nothing to worry about."

A week after he wrote that, David was flying as observer in a light observation helicopter that was brought down by a secondary explosion. The pilot, John Anderson, and gunner, Edward Dennell, were killed. David died 12 days later on August 3. He was 19.

I was seven the day Mom, Dad and I saw David off at Truax field in Madison, Wisconsin on the way to Vietnam. I remember it being one of those days when cameras are hauled out reluctantly and clicked only once or twice, because of the wind or the sun or the awkwardness of the moment. One black and white Polaroid survived from that day: my mom smiling, heroically grasping two of her kids, me resentful of her hand clamping my shoulder . . . and my brother David, tall and proud in his "dress" tans, with a mustache that looked pasted on, but still gave him that slightly older look he was after.

I had just turned 8 a month later, the night my teenage sister called my oldest brother over to the house, and they talked in hushed voices in the dining room about a telegram until Mom got home from work. What followed changed my family and my life.

My mom cried and fought hard to get more details from the Army, Dad grieved silently, and

my older brother and sister never talked about it. I learned that the Vietnam War was a subject that brought out strong and frightening emotions, a subject better left alone.

So the years went by, and the name "David" came to mean a marker in a cemetery; an insignia and some medals; the musty, overseas smell I will never forget, associated forever with the strange words, "personal effects"; a box of military letters and papers; and a few photos. Each time I stared into the face in those photos, I tried so hard to remember the tone of his voice, how long his fingers were, how his jacket felt. But I couldn't.

For many years, I wondered what it would be like to be 19 and piloting a helicopter, 19 and fighting a war, 19 and dying. No one talked about David, and in fact most of my best friends never knew I lost a brother in Vietnam. I longed to find out more about him. I just didn't know how.

After years of wanting to find people who knew David, in 1993 I wrote a letter to the President of the United States, asking for help obtaining information. The response was a form letter and a fee schedule for records search; so I chose a different path.

That September, I visited "The Moving Wall" and registered with the Friends of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial's "In Touch" program. The following February, I received my first response.

Chris McGorman wrote that he may have known my brother. I knew I had to call him but I was nervous, partly because I was afraid he hadn't known David, and partly due to the stereotype of Vietnam veterans I had inherited from Hollywood.

Chris had not known my brother, but talking with him opened up a whole new world. A few days later, I received another letter from him, with advice on where to continue my search, a

membership directory of the First Cav Division Association, and a First Cav pin.

Chris wrote in part, "Your brother was in one of the finest outfits in the finest Army division during that war. I know he was proud to be in C Troop 1st Squadron 9th Cavalry, and you should be proud of that fact as well. I feel confident you'll find your brother's friends . . . David would be proud to have a sister like you."

I spent hours going through the 1st Cav directory, and came up with the names of eight men who would have been in David's unit during the time he served. I sent letters, hoping at least one would write back. Two came back with no forwarding address. One of the men called, two wrote back with additional sources of information and encouragement. But none of them had known David.

In 1996, I found the Vietnam Helicopter Crew Members Association and Pilots Association, and the Vietnam Helicopter Flight Crew Network, an internet group of 350 former helicopter crew members. It brought tears to my eyes when one of them wrote, "Your brother was our brother."

That man is standing back there. Jim Schueckler . . . thank you.

I began receiving email from pilots sharing memories of their time with the 1st Cav and other units that were tightly organized and dedicated to each other. Doug Ashworth wrote, "Yes, Julie, there is a great deal of camaraderie and a sense of brotherhood among the helicopter pilots who flew in Vietnam. But there is an even stronger tie between the pilots who flew in the 1st of the 9th. We all knew, if we went down, every single crew member back at the hootch had only one mission in life, and that was to get to us as quickly as possible. What your brother was a part of gives you much to be proud of. Being a LOH pilot in Charlie troop makes him my brother too."

At last, after searching for three years for someone who knew David, I was contacted by a buddy of his from flight school. Jon Harris told me about learning to fly, teasing on the bus on the way to the flight line, and the jokes they played on each other. At last I was hearing the stories I never got a chance to hear.

Then, the day after Christmas, 1996, I received a letter from the first person from David's unit and time period to contact me. John Powell wrote, "It's difficult to lose friends because the guys in C troop were closer than that, the bonds formed in combat are in many ways stronger than family. The day your brother went down, I was flying Cobra cover and was there until he was recovered. I never knew what happened to him until now." John Powell . . . thank you.

On August 3, 1997, 28 years to the day after David died, I received my first phone call from Bob Tredway, his troop commander who had the humbling task of writing my family condolences back in 1969. Bob Tredway . . . thank you. I've met Luther Russell, who flew to the crash site and helped put David on the medevac. And I've finally met David's best friend from flight school and Charlie Troop, Steve Karas, whose name I have known since I was eight years old.

I've been given many opportunities to help other family members trying to find people who knew their loved one who died in Vietnam. In 1997, I was allowed to join the internet flight crew network, and the Family Contacts Committee was formed to help bring family members and friends of helicopter casualties together. As a committee, the 8 of us have helped with more than 250 cases. We draw on the VHPA, VHCMA, internet groups and other resources to find veterans willing to share their memories with the families and friends of the fallen.

The clarity, insight and depth of emotion in nearly every veteran who crosses my path

astounds me. And I have been told, over and over again, that the connection brings a welcome kind of peace to the veterans, too.

One former pilot wrote to a brother of a KIA, "I have never forgotten your brother - he died for me. Milt freely took my place as a favor in an aircraft that had five more minutes left before it took good men to their graves. At the time, I was a married man with a 6-month old son. That boy grew up with a father thanks to Milt; he is now a Captain in the Army (soon to be Major). I am glad to finally be able to tell someone about how I was spared because another stepped up to take my place," he wrote.

A veteran once posed a question that made me think. What do you get out of these connections, going to the reunions, being at the Wall? 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 was a brother I never really knew . . . and what movies and the media told me. Now, my "new big brothers" have shown me what David might be like today.

How many of you are Vietnam Veterans? You are the only ones who can fill in the blanks, for people like me. Being with veterans, 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. Only on the backs of their friends, as surely as their arms were slung over your shoulders in another time and place, can they be carried forward. You are the bridge. Please remember that. Don't let a day go by without having a little bit of fun, for them. And stand proud, because you are a Vietnam Veteran.

Thinking about my search and the extraordinary people it has brought into my life, I remember sitting in a tenth grade history classroom and realizing for the first time ever that I was part of a generation that was dying, as all

generations are, really, from the moment they are born. Perhaps some of you had that feeling a long time ago in Vietnam. I realize that someday, the reunions will end, the hugs and tears and laughter and closeness that is celebrated among you guys, will be gone.

But what was shared here, with each other and with family members of our fallen brothers, will not be forgotten. By your presence here today, you have brought a part of our brothers, uncles, sons, husbands, dads back to us. Perhaps the greatest gift we families can give you, in return, is to say, "Welcome Home." The fact that each of you is here today is a miracle, and an indication of the larger pattern that we can only glimpse.

I see reflections of that "larger pattern" in the scribbblings of a 19-year-old kid who already knew, after just 3 weeks in The Cav, "You're never alone on a mission."

In closing I want to share a quote attributed to Maj. Michael David O'Donnell at Dak To, January 1, 1970. "If you are able, save for them a place inside of you and save one backward glance when you are leaving for the places they can no longer go. Be not ashamed to say you loved them though you may or may not have always. Take what they have left and what they have taught you with their dying, and keep it with your own, and in that time when men decide and feel safe to call the

war insane, take one moment to embrace those gentle heroes you left behind."

Thank you.

Julie Kink

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