



# 2/503d **Vietnam** Newsletter



For the men, and their families, of the 2nd Battalion, 173d Airborne Brigade (Sep) ~ *We Try Harder!*

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See all issues: <http://www.firebase319.org/2bat/news.php>

June 2010 ~ Issue 16

## ~ 2/503d Photo of the Month ~

“Paratroopers of the U.S. 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 173d Airborne Brigade hold their automatic weapons above water as they cross a river in the rain during a search for Viet Cong positions in the jungle area of Ben Cat, South Vietnam, September 25, 1965. The paratroopers had been searching the area for 12 days.”

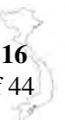


(AP Photo/Henri Huet)



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# SKY SOLDIERETT'S CORNER



Again an update is taking a turn that is totally unexpected. When I sit down to do these, I try to write what I think someone needs – what I feel should be out there this month. Sure didn't see this one coming. But someone out there needs the message.

These are excerpts from a book by Penny Coleman called "Flashback" - a study on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder – a book which deals almost entirely with the men who died from the war – not in the war. The hardest part was recognizing that one of the women in the book was married to a buddy of my husband – one we searched for for years – one I heard so much about.

*"Suicide is a selfish act, and (he) was not a selfish person. What finally put him over the edge twenty-six years after he came home from Vietnam, I will never know. He probably didn't even know himself.... We had an almost psychic connection. WE always seemed to know what the other one was thinking, but this time it failed me.... If I have any guilt, it is that I should have known.... He was under the care of professionals; he had a good marriage and a well-paying job. We were doing everything right. So I let my guard down. You can never let your guard down.*

*He had never heard of Posttraumatic Stress, he just thought he was going crazy.... When he found out there were so many others who shared his symptoms, he told me that knowledge literally saved his life.*

*(He) began to feel depressed, sad, and tearful for no apparent reason.,., He had to face the door; he had to have his back to the wall. He stockpiled food, survival gear and guns. He was having combat nightmares and told his doctor he felt certain he would have killed himself if I had not been for my support.*

*Four or five times a year, he would have what I called a spell. It was like he would turn into another person. He would get this edge to his voice and nothing we did would be right. He would retreat to his room.*

*He was under psychiatric care and on medication; I was in constant contact with his medical providers. I thought we were doing everything right. I thought we had everything under control.*

*I began to think I was married to a stranger. I believe he was finally coming to the realization that the Vietnam War was not going to leave him just because he left it.*

*It is nearing the anniversary of his death and I always feel it coming on. The rest of the year I can be strong, but February always feels so sad to me. He didn't die in honor with a bullet through his body shot by the enemy but was taken from his loved ones just as surely as if he were shot on the field of war. I did not lose my love for him; I did not lose my faith in him. I lost me. Why the hell didn't he take into consideration I might need him even more as the years passed?*

*Am I angry at him? Some days. Do I feel sorry for him? Some days. Do I wish my life had been different? Well, yeah, but if it was what kind of different person would I be? Someone told me God only gives you what you can handle. I've decided God maybe has a little bit of Alzheimer's and forgets, and he keeps giving me a little more."*

For God's sake, please consider us that you are leaving behind.

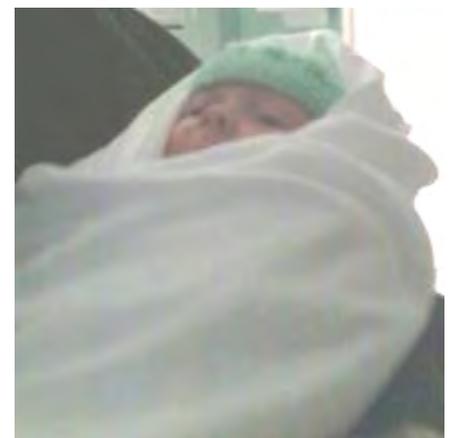
And just so you know – please check your medications and their interactions with one another. Do it yourself. Go to this site and do it yourself - [http://www.drugs.com/drug\\_interactions.html](http://www.drugs.com/drug_interactions.html). This site was given to me after we almost lost Wayne. Found that the medication that he was given by the VA could very well have caused the problem by the interactions caused between the different medications that weren't checked closely enough by the doctors and definitely not by the pharmacists at the VA hospital. Take some charge for yourself.

**Iva Tuttle**

**(Wife of Wayne Tuttle, C/2/503d)**

## Lil' Sky Soldierette Marley

Grandpa Wayne & Grandma Cathy, Papa Wayne & Grandma Iva are so proud of our new grand-daughter, **Marley Kate-Alice Tuttle** who arrived just before 8 pm on May 16, 2010, weighing 7 lb 11 oz and 20.5 inches long. She's an angel!!! Our children, David & BobbieAnn, have given us a miracle.



**Wayne & Iva Tuttle**



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# CHAPLAIN'S CORNER

## Does It Really Pay to Trust and Obey God?

**Dr. Ronald Reese Smith**  
1LT, FO, B/2/503d, 3/319<sup>th</sup>  
[ronaldreesesmith@gmail.com](mailto:ronaldreesesmith@gmail.com)

Although most of us do not admit it, all of us at sometime or another have considered turning away from God. Even priests, pastors and worship leaders have those moments when we get confused, lose our way and almost lose our faith. This is not a new phenomena. It is as old as our race. In fact, there is a whole Psalm written by a leading worship leader of the day describing just this situation:

In Psalm 73:1-2, Asaph, a temple choral leader and composer, begins with an affirmation of faith and then delivers a touching confession:

Surely God is good to Israel to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold.

In Hebrew, the word translated “foot” or “feet” includes from the knee down. The picture is this: I almost buckled; my steps nearly slipped out from under me. “My steps” in scripture always is a metaphor for ethical behavior, living our lives in conformity to Jesus Christ. In effect, Asaph is writing about a “faith crisis.” “*I was about to remove the Lord from the throne of my life, to take my life into my own hands,*” he is saying.

Frankly, this is always a natural thing to do. If you take your view of life from what you see around you—beautiful people, prosperous people, successful people—then your old nature, your sinful nature, your flesh, your natural self that wants what you want, when you want, where you want it, how you want it and with whom you want it ... well, you want to emulate that.

As your eyes run down the articulate, well chosen words of Psalm 73, you see a downward movement from taking a view of life from God to judging life from what is going on around you.

vs 3 He envies the arrogant.

vs 4 The wicked seem to prosper; they don't seem to have any struggles or health problems. (Asaph overstates the case in order to make his point).

vs 5-6 As a result they are proud.

vs 7-9 They exploit people and seem to get away with it.

vs 11 They say there is no God.

vs 13-14 Therefore, it doesn't seem to pay to serve God and be righteous.

vs 15 He doesn't feel he can say what he really thinks and feels because he is a spiritual leader and he does not want to adversely effect those less mature in the faith.



There is something wrong with a philosophy of life that is empty, even if it looks appealing for the moment. Asaph does not want to propagate the dictum that materialism should be god. Material prosperity can put food on the table but it will never give fellowship around that table. Money can put jewels on a woman, but it can never give her love. Mammon can buy a beautiful house, but it can never buy a home. No, there is something wrong with a philosophy of life that can give food without fellowship, pearls and diamonds without love, a house without warmth and contentment.

If we take our view of life from what we read in the newspaper, see on television, or our computer screen and in the movies we too, we may conclude there is no moral governor of the universe. The non-Christian world, with its pomp and prosperity, has no place for God, for servanthood, for surrender and submission to the Creator of universe in its thinking. Especially for those among us who are scrimping and trying to get by under financial duress and distress, quite honestly, it can be tempting to take that first step downward. It is easy to look at the wicked, the selfish and those who are evil and be envious and even consider chucking the whole thing and behaving unethically—going for the gusto, living for the moment, doing it your way. Envy, after all, is a sin.

In verse 16, Asaph tried to understand everything. It was hard, laborious, painful work to try and think his way through it all. The New International Version uses the word “oppressive.” This same Hebrew word translated oppressive is used for the travail of a woman in labor giving birth and of a man digging the ground. Hard labor!

Finally in verse 17, we find a breakthrough! ***Till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.***

(continued...)



There in church, in the sacred space with God, in the sanctuary—he begins to get the big picture. He gains a larger perspective. He catches an insight, an eternal perspective, a correct perspective, God’s perspective.

There sitting in a pew, he sees the eternal moral law giver. He learns that our moral God transcends all time. And, when time is finished, then moral justice will be realized on earth.

Life does not always seem fair because it is not fair. (My mother use to tell me that life is not fair. Do not expect life to be fair. The fair only comes once a year and usually for two weeks in the Fall). But God is good and in His time He will bring justice to all. It is way to easy in the rush of life to fall prey to the thinking that because God does not do my bidding, does not seem to be working my side of the street, well, I just don’t think it pays to serve God.

This view is understandable, if we live with the myth that God is supposed to be some cosmic genie to give us all our wishes. A more thoughtful approach yields this bit of wisdom, however. *“All of God’s accounts are not due and payable on a certain Friday afternoon at 4 p.m.”* That perspective was gained in the sanctuary for Asaph. Spending sometime with God may just yield similar wisdom for us.

*“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.”* (James 1:5).

An object of His grace,

Ron

### ~ 2/503d BUDDY PICS ~



**Good Buddies**



**The Buddy System**



**Giving a Buddy a Hand...or a Foot**



**Bad Guy Buddies**



# Richard E. Eckert (Retired)

EVANS, Ga. -

*Augusta Chronicle*

Friday, May 14, 2010



Dr. Richard Everett Eckert, age 69, a prominent physician and a resident of Evans, Georgia, died May 12th at the Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville, Florida after a long illness. Visitation will be from 6:00 pm to 8:00 pm, Monday, May 17th at Platt's Funeral Home at 337 North Belair Road, Evans Georgia 30809. On Tuesday will be the Memorial Service at the same location at 2pm. Born May 2, 1941 in Phillipsburg, Pennsylvania, he was the only son of four children to the late Harold E. Eckert and the late Viola (Phillips) Eckert. Dick Eckert was raised in Carlisle, Pennsylvania and would graduate in 1959 from Carlisle High School as the valedictorian of his class and a three letter athlete in football, basketball, baseball, the captain of each of his teams. He was considered the finest athlete in the Harrisburg area quarterbacking his football team to three titles, playing point guard for his championship basketball team, catcher on his championship baseball team. The final tally on his efforts is impressive and extensive: All Penn Conference in football, basketball and baseball; All State in football and basketball; American Legion Baseball All Star, the Thom McCann Award given to the outstanding area football player in 1958; The Harrisburg Area Old Timers Award for football in 1958 and The Ken Millen Award presented to the male or female member of the senior class for athleticism and all around leadership.

Dr. Richard Eckert at the Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville, Florida after a long illness. Visitation will be from 6:00 pm to 8:00 pm, Monday, May 17th at Platt's Funeral Home at 337 North Belair Road, Evans Georgia 30809. On Tuesday will be the Memorial Service at the same location at 2pm. Born May 2, 1941 in Phillipsburg, Pennsylvania, he was the only son of four children to the late Harold E. Eckert and the late Viola (Phillips) Eckert. Dick Eckert was raised in Carlisle, Pennsylvania and would graduate in 1959 from Carlisle High School as the valedictorian of his class and a three letter athlete in football, basketball, baseball, the captain of each of his teams. He was considered the finest athlete in the Harrisburg area quarterbacking his football team to three titles, playing point guard for his championship basketball team, catcher on his championship baseball team. The final tally on his efforts is impressive and extensive: All Penn Conference in football, basketball and baseball; All State in football and basketball; American Legion Baseball All Star, the Thom McCann Award given to the outstanding area football player in 1958; The Harrisburg Area Old Timers Award for football in 1958 and The Ken Millen Award presented to the male or female member of the senior class for athleticism and all around leadership.

In 1980, Dick was awarded the Carlisle High School Distinguished Alumnus Award and in 1996 became a member of the Pennsylvania Sports Hall of Fame, South Central Chapter. He was also an Eagle Scout, the recipient of Scouting's God and Country Award. He graduated from United States Military Academy in 1963. While there he was an all around athlete, quarterbacking

the Army Football Team and playing baseball and basketball. Academically he was consistently in the top 25% of his class and would be appointed to lead the Corps of cadets as First Captain, the highest ranking senior cadet at the Academy. He was also the recipient of the Knox Award, presented to the graduating senior cadet with the highest rating for military efficiency. Upon graduating, he began his 22 years as an officer in the Army and serving his country proudly.

He was an airborne ranger with two tours in Vietnam in 1965-1966 and 1968-1969, serving with the 173rd Airborne Brigade, his first tour and the 25th Infantry Division during his second. He received two purple hearts, 3 bronze stars, and 2 silver stars. Dick switched gears in 1972 and became a physician, graduating in 1976 from Emory University School of Medicine,.



***“Here is a newspaper article photo that I found of Dad. From left to right, Captain Dick Buckner, Captain Tom Blanda, and 1st Lt. Dick Eckert. The article was about former West Point football players in Vietnam. It states under the photo that they are relaxing at Bien Hoa Air Base. Dad was in command of a weapons platoon, just getting back from being wounded. Blanda and Buckner are battery artillery commanders.”***

Provided by David Eckert, Dick's son.

(continued...)



He would retire from the army in 1985 at Fort Gordon in Augusta, Georgia with a rank of Colonel. Upon his retirement from the military he specialized in pediatrics and emergency medicine. Dick started working at University Hospital in Augusta as the Director of the Emergency Room until 2007.

One of his finest accomplishments was starting the first Pediatric Emergency Department in the Augusta area and redesigning the Emergency Department at the University. Duty, Honor, Country: Dick took that motto to his heart the day he entered the United States Military Academy. He lived by it until the day he died.

But his story can best be told through the many people he touched in his life and the memories they all have of him doing his duties as a soldier, a doctor, a father, a husband, a son, a brother....as a true leader among us all. He always led by example even to the end. When the going gets tough, the tough gets going. He was a true leader in any endeavour he followed and a man with true virtues. He was sincere and generous, and he inspired the admiration of all who knew him. Surviving are his loving wife of 42 years, Jane (Rogers); 2 sons; David H. Eckert (Angela) of Melbourne, Australia; Dr. Michael B. Eckert (Helen) of Evans, Georgia; 4 daughters; Mrs. Carolyn E. Rodriguez (Juan) of Martinez, Georgia; Mrs. Amanda S. Schneider (Russell) of Evans, Georgia; Mrs. Megan M. Onate (Tony) of Evans, Georgia; Mrs. Mary-Kathryn M. Espinoza (Gabriel) of Grovetown, Georgia; 31 grandchildren; 2 great-grandchildren. He is also survived by his three sisters; Dr. Jayne Coover (Clark) of Camp Hill, Pennsylvania; Mrs. Mildred E. Norris (Jerry) of Cheyenne, Wyoming and Mrs. Beverly E. Bishop of Dillsburg, Pennsylvania.



**Dick sharing C-Rats with kids, Vietnam.**

And so it is, for after death comes only peace and happiness. And now it is for us, whom he loved so much and spoke about so often, not to mar his happiness by too much sadness, for most surely he is watching over all us for his dying has awakened eternal life for him where hopefully we may all see him again.

Dick epitomized the true essence of a gentleman, a husband, a father, a patriot and above all a man. He shall be missed by those lives he touched. And as his course on earth has ended it may truly be said of Dick: *"Well done, be thou at peace."* Should friends desire, the family suggest contributions in memory of Dr. Richard E. Eckert may be sent to the Mayo Clinic Lung Transplant Team, 4500 San Pablo Road, Jacksonville, Florida 32224.

Please sign the guestbook and send condolences at [www.plattsfuneralhome.com](http://www.plattsfuneralhome.com) Platts Funeral Home, 337 North Belair Road Evans Georgia 30809. 706-860-6166. Sign the guestbook at [AugustaChronicle.com](http://AugustaChronicle.com)

**[A letter from LTC Roy Lombardo to the Eckert family]**

*Dear Jane and family,*

*I am writing to extend my and Carol's condolences, as well as those of the Bravo Bull veterans to you and your family at this time of grief. May God grant you and yours peace and acceptance.*

*Dick was a Rifle Platoon Leader in my company on Okinawa and when we deployed to Vietnam in May 1965. He was the most erudite officer in the company and used his intellect to its best advantage. Because of his athletic background at USMA, he was selected to be the Captain of the Brigade football team, which challenged his time as Platoon Leader. He led the team to victory against the Marine opponents and saw that his platoon was ready for every challenge.*

*He was wounded in June of 1965 but healed quickly and returned to duty with a vengeance. Because of his exceptional record in school, he was programmed to attain a Master's. This higher education was set aside when he was accepted into the Medical Program, where he made his major mark in the military. His medical skill positively affected thousands of patients.*

*The Bravo Bulls have made a donation to the Brigade Education Program in his name and a donated tree will be planted in Israel, as well. He will be sorely missed but remembered with fondness as one of the original members of the Bravo Bulls. We elect not to be overwhelmed by his loss but to give thanks that such a man lived among us and was our friend and comrade.*

*Sincerely,*

*BDQ Roy*



# ~ THE HILL OF PURPLE HEARTS ~

by **Bill Nicholls**  
A/2/503d



**Bill Nicholls**

After Hill 1338 on June 22, 1967, "The Hill of Purple Hearts," with 82 KIA, 34 WIA, I was astounded that I survived. I was scheduled for R&R to Hawaii on June 28 to meet my high school sweetheart, Dale, and sister Lyn. In the past, when we had casualties, R&R was postponed until troop strength was increased. So I was okay with that as I did not think I could go and be "normal." I was not sure what normal was at that particular time as I was reassembling my emotions.

**First Sgt. Mike Deeb** said *"Sgt. Nicholls, you're going."* It will take a couple of weeks for the replacements to come in. As I prepared, I wondered if I could pull this off. On June 28, I left Saigon for Hawaii and spent the entire time trying to get my state of mind to the level of where I could be socially acceptable. By the time I landed, I felt I had accomplished the mission.

My sweetheart and sister met me and off we went to the hotel. I hardly spoke for the first twenty minutes. Finally, I "bitch slapped" myself and snapped out of it. At the hotel I had a surprise - my parents! They had read about June 22 in the New York paper, which included my interview by an UPI reporter. Not until I returned home at the end of my tour did they tell me that they went to Hawaii because they thought it might be the last time they would ever see me alive.

I actually began to relax. After all, enough Mai Tai's will even bring a bull elephant to his knees. On my third day, having lunch poolside, I spotted **General Westmoreland** with his family. I contemplated going over and thanking him for coming up to Dak To on June

23 to speak to the survivors of A Company. I decided it was not a good idea as we were both trying to put some distance between the Nam and us. As I was leaving, I whipped a sharp salute and "Airborne Sir" which he acknowledged.



**General Westmoreland at Dak To**

Before I knew it, I was on my way back to Saigon and back at Dak To with the company at the laager site. After the first day of humping, I was gripped with total dismay. It was like humping with a herd of water buffalo. I remember my first couple of weeks as an FNG ...80 pounds of gear in 100-degree heat with matching humidity. But this was different; the whole company was green except for about 10 vets. What made matters more intense is that we were operating about 2-3 clicks from the June 22 location where we ran into a reinforced Bn. of NVA, estimated at 600-800 men. These FNG's represented the cream of the crop, they were Airborne.

Nevertheless, there was no doubt in my mind that if we had a repeat of June 22 with this group, there would be no survivors.

On day two, it was worse. Some of the guys were dumping gear so they would not have to hump it up and down the mountains. After six months of surviving, I believed you are not "dialed in" until your first "baptism of blood."



**Joe Gray**

Toward the end of the day, I realized we needed vets up in front leading this group to even have a chance of making it out alive. Had I lost my mind? I am thinking permanent point squad! Volunteering to jump out of planes is one thing, but this? My mind raced...could I even find four guys who would pull point every day in the NVA-rich Central Highlands? So, it was time for my sanity check.

(continued...)





### Larry Golf through the barrel of his M79.

At the end of the day at our laager site, I went on my mission. There were about 10 survivors from June 22, with the company – if that. My first contact was with **Joe Gray**. He said, “*count me in.*” Next contact was **Wambi Cook** – again, “*count me in.*” Then, **Les Fuller** – same thing.



Wambi Cook

None of these guys blinked an eye at the idea, just a cool confident, “*I’m in.*” These guys all started with me in February. Although I was not in their platoon, having been on close to 75 ambushes, I was familiar with their abilities and confidence. After all, they had survived five months and were well seasoned.

Now, we needed M79 support. The only problem is we did not have any M79 vets. So I approached **Larry Golf (aka Babyson)**. Larry looked to be about 16 years old, but was confident and ready to deal with adversity. No surprise, after all, he was Airborne.

**Capt. Dave Milton** had been seriously wounded just before I returned from R&R. He was replaced with **Capt. Ken Smith**, whom I did not know. I approached him and this is how it went down. “*Sir, I am Sgt. Nicholls. I have a proposal for you. I have four men and myself who will pull permanent point squad.*” His reply would be indicative of the grave nature of our position. He said, “*Sgt. Nicholls, let me make one thing perfectly clear. If you get pinned down and we can’t reach you, I will call artillery in on your location.*” My reply... “*Sir, with all due respect, I have been Company Forward Observer for five months and as long as I am still breathing, before you can reach for your handset, I will have the rounds on the way as that is my MO.*” Then, as if that wasn’t enough, I turned and said... “*And one more thing. If my men are blazing the trail every day, I want them inside the perimeter every night.*” Capt. Smith agreed, and we had a deal.

(continued...)





**Les Fuller**

The next day we started. We would start out twenty to thirty minutes before the rest of the company. From the start we were in locked step. We all realized we increased our odds by at least 75% of having direct enemy contact. We realized we were fodder and accepted the challenge.

Thirty-nine years later, I would hook up with Joe, Wambi and Les at the Fort Bragg reunion. I had been in contact with Joe a few months before the reunion. I spotted Joe and walked up to greet him. Standing beside Joe were Wambi and Les. Joe said, "you remember Wambi and Les, they were in our unit." Thinking Joe was referring to the Company, I asked "what platoon were you in?" They all looked at me perplexed and Joe said, "they were in Recon Squad with us." Words cannot describe the mix of emotions that raced through my head. In a little over four months of being with these guys 24/7, at best I can only remember four days. So many times they have told me of events, but nothing registers. I once asked them "Did I screw up or embarrass myself or anyone else?" They all said "no." (I really like these guys).

***Of the original five, we all made it out alive. We did have one KIA and one WIA.***

I still have no memories of that time. Not only did I become a master of putting my emotions on lock-down; I did the same with my memories. Getting together

with these guys is special, especially at reunions. Reunions are a comfort zone for us that can't be explained.

After all these years, I am so full of gratitude and pride to be a member of the 173d Airborne Brigade. Considering that we were an all volunteer Airborne unit, it just doesn't get any better than that - AIRBORNE!

***"Nothing is as strong as the heart of a volunteer."***

LTC Jimmy Doolittle  
WWII

***"I don't mind being called tough, because in this racket, it's the tough guys who lead the survivors."***

Gen. Curtis LeMay  
USAF



**This more recent photograph is of Bill and his wife Judy in front of his favorite WWII Fighter, the P47 Thunderbolt; of course, he still has an affinity for the "Skyraider."**

**A SAD OLD GIRL.**  
This Navy A-1 Skyraider is on display in Saigon (HCM) at the Vietnamese War Museum.



# REMEMBERING JOHN WILLS A BRAVO BULL

by Larry Paladino  
B/2/503d, '64-'66



When John Wills had part of his esophagus removed due to cancer a year or so ago he seemed a little down. He was weak, but still climbed into his pickup truck to drive himself to the V.A. Hospital in Reno, Nevada. Months later, doctors said the cancer wasn't completely removed and he'd

need to undergo chemotherapy treatments and his survival rate was 20 percent.

"Hey, it could be zero per cent," he said one day over the phone. "Twenty per cent. Hey, that means I could be OK."

John was a very positive guy, a very laid-back kind of guy, with the demeanor of a California surfer with a heavy dose of cynicism about lots of things. He was determined to beat cancer and the countless other afflictions that ravaged his 6-foot-4 frame, everything from diabetes to emphysema. That damned Agent Orange.

He struggled with his ailments for years, still managing to do many of the things he enjoyed, like fishing. But even such a mountain of a man, as his former company commander on Okinawa and Vietnam, Roy Lombardo, called him, couldn't fight off so many physical enemies. He died May 4 at Renown Hospital in Reno, with his daughter, Sara, at his bedside, along with her friend Jeff, John's longtime friend Bob Beetle, and me, whose friendship with him began in Jump School, continued on the ship to Okinawa, to M-60 machine gun crews in the weapons squad of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon of Company B of the 2nd Battalion, 503<sup>rd</sup> Infantry of the new 173d Airborne Brigade.

We all, of course, went to Vietnam with the rest of the brigade on May 5, 1965, and later, John and I even went to Hong Kong on R&R at the same time. I was told John died a day before the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his Vietnam deployment, Sara said, "*He would have wanted his own day, anyway.*"

Wills' parents, Jack and Ann, moved from Port Huron, Michigan, to Arizona when John was 2 or 3. When John left Vietnam he spent much of his time in California and eventually moved to Truckee, California, outside Reno,

where he took care of an ailing senior, Ray Haas, until Haas' death. John moved to a Reno apartment and began working towards getting the disability compensation he deserved from the V.A. It was a struggle, as it is with many ex-GIs, but he finally got his 100 percent.

"Now I can start doing a few things I've always wanted to do," he said.

And his first big purchase was a big-screen TV. Next came the "sleep number" bed he so long desired. But his diseases didn't allow

for him to continue to finally reward himself with more things, including the souvenir 173d M-16 he saw advertised in the 173d Association newsletter. John had an off-the-wall sense of humor and liked cartoons like 'The Far Side.' He once had a softball team nicknamed, "The Vermin."

On Okinawa and in Vietnam, John, or 'Wills' and we called him, was a tall, skinny, lanky guy, probably the tallest among the Bravo Bulls of B/2/503. After the Army, though, he put on a lot of weight and grew a beard, making him look like the proverbial veteran biker guy. But he really was too much of an individualist to fit into any kind of mold. Maybe he inherited that individualism from his grandfather, C. Harold Wills (1878-1940), who founded the Wills Automobile Company and eventually sold out to Ford Motor Co. He was Henry Ford's draftsman in 1902 and is credited with designing many engineering components for the Model T. When Ford Motor Co. was organized in 1903, John's grandfather was its chief designer and metallurgist and even designed the Ford script logo which still is in use today. He was president of the company in those early days.



**Sky Soldier John Wills**

(continued....)





**John in Vietnam, 1965.**

In 1919, John's grandfather became restless (as John often was) and wanted to update the Model T. But Henry Ford refused and Wills decided, with \$1.5 million in severance pay, to leave the company and build his own cars in Marysville, Michigan. In 1921 the C.H. Wills Co. produced its first overhead-cam V-8, the Wills-Sainte Claire.

To prove the quality, C. Harold Wills made a record run from Detroit to New York City, 689 miles in 20 hours, 26 minutes. Poor national economy, however, left the company \$8 million in debt in 1922. It reorganized, but finally went out of business November 23, 1926, and Wills joined Chrysler Corp. as a metallurgical consultant.

John pined over what might have been, but never really seemed to care too much that he didn't inherit a fortune as all the family might have under the right circumstances.

John was married for 10 years to the former Susan Whitaker and they had two daughters, Sara (Polzine) and Heather. Sara is an emergency room nurse in Redding, California, and Heather is manager of a Super Cuts salon and lives in Studio City, California. John also had a daughter, Fantasia, with former girlfriend Jill Stensland. Fantasia lives in Sacramento. John's sister, Mary, owns

a kaleidoscope store in Jerome, Arizona. His brother, Dan, is a battalion fire chief in Sedona, California, and his other brother, Mark, is a refrigeration company supervisor in Phoenix. His brother Mark earned a Silver Star and Combat Medics Badge while with the 199<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry Brigade in Vietnam.

John Wills has two grandchildren, Courtney Mitchell and Justin Werner.

John earned a Purple Heart, Combat Infantrymen's Badge, and various other medals while serving with the elite 173d. He just threw them all in a drawer and never was one to spout off about such things. He did attend a few 173d reunions, though, including the one in Reno in 2003, one in Santa Rosa, California, and a B Company reunion in Palm Springs, California. John was a life member of the Purple Heart Association, Veterans of Foreign Wars, AMVETS, and a member of E Clampus Vitus Monterey-Viejo chapter.

John Wills, a Sky Soldier and a good man was buried with full military honors at Memorial Cemetery in Fernley, Nevada on May 14, 2010. John, it was my honor to have known you as my friend and as my brother.



Good buddy **Dave Glick, B/2/503**, sent in this clipping from a Long Island newspaper. We asked our brothers to share their thoughts about it. Ed

## Overcoming Shame

*"What I long to forget, but cannot, is the vilification of those that served. What I long to forget, but cannot, was the media desire to promote this vilification. What I long to forget, but cannot, is being ashamed to say I was a Vietnam vet. What I find ironic is that it took another war for the American people to finally recognize the contribution its service people give to them. What I find ironic is the American people finally recognize what the Vietnam vet sacrificed, not in Vietnam, but here at home....Our dignity. What I found, 40 years later, was the courage to display my service medals for my duty in Vietnam. What I hope is that my fellow Vietnam vets can do the same."*



*"When I read that, chills came over me. I thought I was the only one who thought that. I've never read anything that so clearly describes my feelings of that period of my life. If I didn't know better, I would think I wrote it. Just reading it makes me a little emotional."*

**Wayne Bowers, A/2/503d**

*"When I processed through Camp Alpha in '66 and boarded a bus to take me to Camp Zinn with the 173d, I noted the bus had steel grating welded over the windows to prevent grenades from being tossed inside. When I came back to the World in early '67 and left Travis AFB, I left in a similar bus, except this time the grating was to prevent bottles and rocks from being tossed in by protesters. It didn't take a returning Vet long to know the best course was to remain silent on their service. Interesting, that today, well over ten million claim to have served in-country, when the real figure is 2.7 million with another 700,000 having served off shore. This is more than the 9 million that served in all branches everywhere during the war. Go figure."*

**Jerry Hassler, HHC/Recon/2/503d**

*"Hand Salute to you. There is no shame connected to Honorable Service to your country. Some are called to serve in harms way, some are not. The real shame should be placed squarely on the shoulders of those who did not "SERVE," they are the ones who should hide, and be "ASHAMED". For those who scorned our Brothers in Arms they will never know truly the value of Patriotism, Camaraderie, and what the Star Spangled Banner stands for."*

**Steve Goodman, B/2/503d**

*"I spent 45 years hiding from VN. When asked, I could say I was there, but it was only words. I agree with our the author of the clipping about the ironies of history. What I find really ironic is that, although the American people recognize us and what we've done, none of it serves to loosen up the VA and the US government to properly compensate us. To be a combat soldier all we need do is sign up. To get VA compensation for disabilities, we must prove we were in, were there, and that something happened to us, etc. Not a new process for the govt. The Indian People of this continent can give up millions of acres of their homeland and all of their culture by the signatures of three drunken illiterate "chiefs," but can only regain it by proving their lineage back seven generations. Even Pope John Paul's apology, though sincere, was of little help. Hecetu welo, Howa."*

**Russ Webb, HHC/2/503d**

*"I had shame, not at first. But it came soon enough. I remember being told at the replacement center, 'Don't wear your Dress uniform in the city' (Oakland Cal), but that's all I had to wear. My personal gear hadn't caught up to me yet. On the bus ride over the Oak/Sanfran bridge a black guy gets in my face and says 'Vietnam?' Yes. 'So, your just a pretty Blue eyed Baby killer!' I FUBAR'ed his ass & the bus driver put me off the bus in the middle of the Bridge. A month later, sitting in a living room talking with my date's dad as she finished getting ready for our date, he says, 'What do you do for a living?' Typical father question. I'm a Carpenter! 'How long have you done that?' Again, typical! 'About a month. 'What did you do before that?' I was a Paratrooper! The color drained from his face! 'Vietnam?' Yes. He stood up walked to the front door opened it and said. 'Get out of my home and don't come near my daughter again!' What a shame cause she was 'HOT.' Yeah, I learned real quick. When to let it known. Saved my ass a lot of times as would be opponents found out I was a Nam 'Crazy!'"*

**Butch Clark, HHC/2/503d**





*"I guess that must make me unique in a way. I NEVER denied or hid the fact that I was a Vietnam Vet, hell, I proudly boasted about it. Ashamed, hell NO, never was and never will be. In my youthful days after Vietnam I cheerfully and willingly announced myself as a Vietnam Vet. Everyone I knew was aware of this and some of my peers from high school even joined up after I returned from Nam and spoke of it. I made a special trip to Ann Arbor, MI during the McGovern campaign to announce my complete disgust with him as a Vietnam Vet. If it were not for the news media with Cronkite leading the way the public would have realized that we were winning the war and perhaps would have been more likely to appreciate the returning veterans.*

**Terry "Woody" Davis, A/2/503d**

*"I know I'm preaching to choir when I say my post Vietnam experience was very similar to what is described in this article. Here is my story: I broke my foot on a parachute jump on active duty and x-rays did not reveal the hairline fracture. I was therefore treated as if it was a sprain. Since it did not heal properly the fracture has always given me trouble when standing for long periods, long walks, or running. About one year after my discharge my then father-in-law (an MP in the 101<sup>st</sup> during WW II) convinced me I should file a claim with the VA. What a joke that was, they denied my claim and sent me away. I felt that if valid claims are treated this way, the VA would be non-responsive and I therefore failed to appeal even if I had known I could. My VA claim along with the way many in our country treated returning Vietnam veterans allowed me to perceive our country and government as not very appreciative of my RA enlistment. I felt my duty was to shut up and appreciate I was still alive. I kept quiet about my service – not telling or talking about it. A few*

*years ago I was returning from a Vet Center with a friend who was in the Big Red One. We stopped at Sizzlers on the way home to have dinner. I was wearing a ball cap with a 173d patch on the front of it. While eating, a small boy about 9 or 10 years approached me from behind and said 'thank you for your service.' It caught me off guard and took me a moment to grasp what he had said. No one had ever said that to me before. I choked, held back tears and said thank you. It seems since that date my perception and treatment has changed. I had refiled my claim with the VA adding exposure to Agent Orange and other service connected disabilities. I was not told to appeal because I didn't have to as my claim was adjudicated favorably after a period of time. This along with mostly respectful treatment from the public has renewed my faith in our country's citizens and the VA. Over 35 years had passed, but was nonetheless, welcomed and appreciated by this former PFC."*

**James Jackson, B/2/503d**

*"Emotions ran really high in those years and I suspect that every Vietnam Vet had and still has a set of emotions that have influenced and continue to influence their lives. I never felt shame over my participation in the war. What I did feel and perhaps continue to feel was a lot of anger. Anger at the press, politicians, flag burners, those who chose to go to Canada, and those few among our ranks who failed to stand strong. When I was a commander at Fort Campbell well before the war ended, a young captain had the audacity to tell me that he felt really lucky that he had escaped the stigma of the war by not having to go. It was his opinion that the future leaders in the Army would be those who did not serve in Vietnam. I knew that attitude existed but did not give it much thought until it hit me in the face. No, I never felt shame, just a lot of anger."*

**Ralph Southard, A/2/503d**

*"I am now and always was a proud Vietnam Vet. I let everyone know that I served with one of the best units in the whole Army and was proud to do it. My son grew up honoring all the Vets and I even took him to Washington DC to show him the Wall so he would understand the sacrifices that were made so we could continue to live our lives free here at home. I feel very sorry for this man."*

**Frank Dukes, A/2/503d**

*(continued....)*



## **"I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-To-Die-Rag"**

Country Joe McDonald and the Fish, 1965

Well, Come On All Of You, Big Strong Men,  
Uncle Sam Needs Your Help Again.  
He's Got Himself In A Terrible Jam  
Way Down Yonder In Vietnam  
So Put Down Your Books And Pick Up A Gun,  
We're Gonna Have A Whole Lotta Fun.

And It's One, Two, Three,  
What Are We Fighting For?  
Don't Ask Me, I Don't Give A Damn,  
Next Stop Is Vietnam;  
And It's Five, Six, Seven,  
Open Up The Pearly Gates,  
Well There Ain't No Time To Wonder Why,  
Whoopee! We're All Gonna Die.

Come On Wall Street, Don't Be Slow,  
Why Man, This Is War Au-Go-Go  
There's Plenty Good Money To Be Made  
By Supplying The Army With The Tools Of Its Trade,  
But Just Hope And Pray That If They Drop The Bomb,  
They Drop It On The Viet Cong.

And It's One, Two, Three,  
What Are We Fighting For ?  
Don't Ask Me, I Don't Give A Damn,  
Next Stop Is Vietnam.  
And It's Five, Six, Seven,  
Open Up The Pearly Gates,  
Well There Ain't No Time To Wonder Why  
Whoopee! We're All Gonna Die.

Well, Come On Generals, Let's Move Fast;  
Your Big Chance Has Come At Last.  
Now You Can Go Out And Get Those Reds  
'Cause The Only Good Commie Is The One That's Dead  
And You Know That Peace Can Only Be Won  
When We've Blown 'Em All To Kingdom Come.

And It's One, Two, Three,  
What Are We Fighting For?  
Don't Ask Me, I Don't Give A Damn,  
Next Stop Is Vietnam;  
And It's Five, Six, Seven,  
Open Up The Pearly Gates,  
Well There Ain't No Time To Wonder Why  
Whoopie! We're All Gonna Die.

Come On Mothers Throughout The Land,  
Pack Your Boys Off To Vietnam.  
Come On Fathers, And Don't Hesitate  
To Send Your Sons Off Before It's Too Late.  
And You Can Be The First Ones On Your Block  
To Have Your Boy Come Home In A Box.

And It's One, Two, Three  
What Are We Fighting For?  
Don't Ask Me, I Don't Give A Damn,  
Next Stop Is Vietnam.  
And It's Five, Six, Seven,  
Open Up The Pearly Gates,  
Well There Ain't No Time To Wonder Why,  
Whoopie! We're All Gonna Die.

*"I have to say honestly that I have never been ashamed of being a Veteran....and was a veteran only because of Vietnam; otherwise there would have been no need for me to have gone in. Unlike many others, I never hid that fact, but thousands of other VN Vets as well hid or was 'ashamed' of it. As many (almost all?) other VN Veterans, I too, never talked about what I did, saw, or heard about in the War, especially to my children who still have no idea what I did, other than just that they know I was there. For others, if they knew I was there, my only comment was...and still is today... 'ANY WAR IS HELL....BUT COMBAT IS A REAL MF' (fully spelled out and said aloud) to my non Veteran contemporaries that have asked me. I am (and not just lately, but from day one) very proud that my father served in WWII and that I also served during my 'time'... and that I did not use a deferment which I could have ....(I was 'the only son, of an only son' and therefore was not required to serve in the military, or at the very least, not in a combat zone) while many of my college and farmer (mid-west native of a small farming town) friends and classmates did. But never did I try to hide the fact that I not only served, but that I served in a war because I was sent. Did/Do I like war? HELL NO. But I also know that sometimes, wars are necessary and needed. Today (as then) there are those that feel if we never went to war, there would be no war....LOL....that all we have to do is to show everyone kindness, love, give them money and other help to improve their lives, and teach them how to live better and for us to become their friend, are sooooo very wrong. Before 9-11 we did nothing to the ones that attacked us...indeed man, if not every one of them, had lived in America, was schooled in America, and knew of all the benefits of being 'free' with all the advantages being an American can bring, i.e. good jobs, money, schools, plenty of food, etc. And yet they killed over 3000 other CIVILIAN people, many that were not even Americans, that had never done anything to them....what is it that the 'never go to war' people do not get about being nice does not work with everyone??? Sometimes the more educated the less common/street sense and 'real life' knowledge a person has, it seems like. I am sorry if I have gotten off subject somewhat, but the very word "ashamed" rubs me the wrong way, although I knew there are many that were and some that still feel that way. I am not, nor was I ever, ashamed of fighting for my own life or the lives of those great men beside me. The war was NOT my idea...hell like about everybody else, I was not old enough to vote or even drink a beer.... and so I never felt that I had anything to be ashamed about, I only felt that I had served with pride in myself and in the unit I was in... the 173d.*

(continued...)

