

Opinion

My Turn: John M. Boehnert: Jeff and the guys who didn't come home

By John M. Boehnert

Posted May 26, 2018 at 3:00 PM

Fifty years ago this month, I lay face down at one end of a dirt alley in Cholon, the Chinese section of Saigon, an AK-47 bullet in my right thigh.

Forty feet in front of me, in the center of the alley, another soldier lay face down, motionless. I had tried to reach him, but weapons fire from North Vietnamese soldiers securing the building at the other end of the alley was too intense. It was one of their bullets that was in my leg.

Jeff was probably gone by then, but you couldn't be sure. No longer ambulatory, I saw one other chance when an armored personnel carrier rolled down the street behind me. I directed the driver to go down the alley and straddle Jeff, while I crawled behind and dragged him out, sheltered by the vehicle.

Unfortunately, those North Vietnamese soldiers also had rockets. One squarely hit the personnel carrier just before we reached Jeff. The driver immediately threw it in reverse and was out of the alley. I crawled out without being further wounded.

Two other soldiers were also wounded trying to reach Jeff. At the end of the day, it was Jeff's body, and not Jeff, that was recovered.

I seldom think back on that day, but I often think of Jeff. He was from the Midwest, 21, handsome, smart, and witty, with a winning smile. He dropped out of college and was drafted. He was an excellent soldier.

Last year I Googled him and found tributes to him on a website honoring Vietnam veterans. One tribute, from May 2013, was from a woman named Judy, who said she was Jeff's fiancé and was to meet him in mid-May 1968 in Hawaii on his R-and-R: "but, alas, that never happened."

I remembered her picture, the one Jeff carried. She was a beautiful girl with long dark hair.

I Googled her and found she had died suddenly in 2015. She had married three years after Jeff was killed, had four sons, and was a paralegal.

Although I never met her, I felt a sense of sadness and loss.

As Memorial Day approaches, I will do what I have done for so many past Memorial Days. At day's end, I will have a drink and think about the guys who did not make it home, those I have known, and so many others I never met. All of them I salute. And I will likely cry a little.

Jeff is usually the Everyman I think about. I think about the contributions they could have made, the children they had or would have had, how they would have enjoyed their grandchildren, and all the other things that make life so worthwhile.

And I think about the tremendous sense of loss their families must have felt with their death.

For the past 15 years, I have celebrated those Memorial Days on my porch overlooking a beautiful saltwater cove. But no matter how beautiful the surroundings, each year it seems to get just a little sadder.

Still, as that day approaches, I think of Judy; perhaps my feelings should not be sadness and loss, but hope and optimism.

After all, she went from brokenhearted to falling in love again, marrying and raising four sons with her husband, all of whom grieved for her when she died over four decades later.

It just may be that this is what Jeff would have wanted for his sweetheart if he did not come home. I remember during my two tours in Vietnam praying that if something happened to me, God would help my parents deal with it.

Maybe that is how we should be honoring the memory of those who did not come home. Recognizing and honoring their sacrifice, never forgetting, but getting on with life as best we can, the way those we lost would have wanted.

As Judy wrote in that tribute 45 years to the month after Jeff died: "I will never forget you, Jeff. You will always have a special place in my heart."

Perhaps this year won't be quite as sad. At least I hope not.

John M. Boehnert, an occasional contributor, practices real estate and environmental law in Providence.