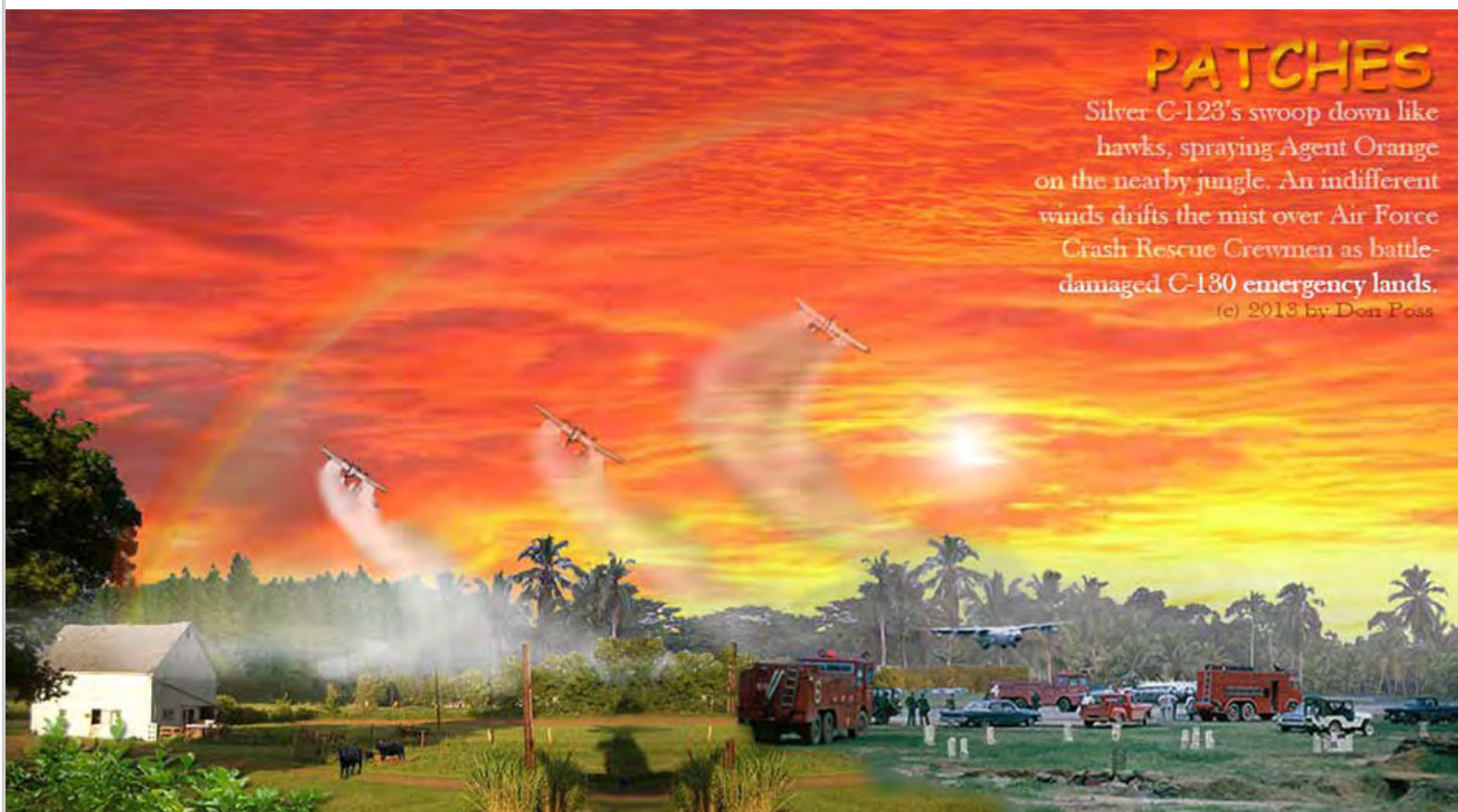


VIETNAM PATCHES

(Silver C-123s)
Cam Ranh Bay Air Base, SVN
1969-1970

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Unit Civil Engineer Squadron "A" Shift Crash Rescue



PATCHES

Silver C-123's swoop down like hawks, spraying Agent Orange on the nearby jungle. An indifferent winds drifts the mist over Air Force Crash Rescue Crewmen as battle-damaged C-130 emergency lands.

(c) 2013 by Don Poss

Graphic Art © 2013 by Don Poss (Vietnam jungle on the right, and American pines and farm on left).

Air Force Crash Rescue Crewmen await a battle-damaged C-130 emergency landing. From 1962-1971, the U.S. military sprayed more than 23,000,000 gallons of chemicals and Agent Orange over Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos. For now, USAF Fairchild C-123 Provider's provide more than their namesake, spraying the air base perimeter jungle nearby. An indifferent wind carries the spray drifting over rescuers, across the giant base, and even out to sea...and ironically, across the ocean back to America. Symbolic tombstones near most of the crashcrew rescuers represents potential fate for many, as they eventually return home to farms and cities. Agent Orange has followed Vietnam Veterans home, endangering families and children, and even now hovers like a fog over their homes ... waiting ... for the moment when Vietnam may threaten them once more...and add new names to the countless thousands of veterans taken by this lingering threat.

*Patches is the story of one Vietnam veteran's survival struggle, for health and family.
Like thousands before him...thousands are yet to follow.*

Larry Eley served in Vietnam in 1969 to early 1970. This is a story about him, and his family's survival experience from Non Hodgkin's Lymphoma many years after his service years were over, the probable cause for the cancer is exposure to Agent Orange when he was in Vietnam. He has a letter from the United States Government that says so.

January 1999

Thirty years after I left Vietnam: "I watched as the nurse prepared the needles and bags of clear fluid... I made a joke ...this is like being in the pen waiting for a lethal injection. No one laughed."

Dedicated to my wife Vikki.

Patches

"Larry you are not going to try and go to work are you? You don't look well and it's supposed to snow, call the Whites and tell them you're not feeling well."

My wife Vikki was attempting to keep me home from work. We had a small construction company. We were a *his-her's-and-ours*



family. We also had a small 52 acre hobby farm in the hills of eastern Knox County Ohio. I had been a contractor since 1973. Three years after I got out of the service I formed *Larry Eley Custom Builders*. We built homes and did additions. I also had a passion for hobby farming and Angus Cattle. We joked that we raised Kids and Cattle. Vikki's boys, Brendan and Kevin, lived with us -- I considered them mine. They were in high school. The *ours* of the family, young Matthew, was seven and he was home schooled. Our older kids, Melinda and Daniel, mine, and Vikki's daughter, Ginger, had their own families and we were new grandparents several times over.

"Promise me while I am gone to the grocery, you won't go to work."

"Well I've got to get ready for the dry wall guys and we are behind in the schedule there," I replied half-heartedly. I did not feel good, so I told her I would just go out and feed the cows and take a shower and rest that day.

When I went out I noticed that the firewood racks I kept stacked for sale, for the local camp ground resort, were empty. It was a good source of income and most small contractors had a sideline, mine was wood and the farm. People would stop by on their way to the campgrounds year around and buy wood for the weekend. After I fed the cows I got an ax and began to split some of the Cherry Wood that our *Best of Both Farm* was famous for.

I had not felt well for several weeks, today I had a fever, lately I had been lethargic, and I had some swelling under my arms and in my groin area. My answer to all sickness was to *work it off*. Vikki and I had joined our lives in marriage eight years prior. We had sold our individual properties and moved from my small farm in Delaware County to the home we lived in Knox County -- *Best of Both Farms*. We had purchased some rental properties and with my knowledge of construction and Vikki's business and management skills we were doing okay financially.

As a family we were not the *Brady Bunch*, but both of us had come out of bad previous situations and we were doing our best to make a go of it. Vikki was a small vivacious blonde who liked people and had an infectious laugh. She bore a striking resemblance to the actress *Diane Keaton*. My friends kiddingly told me I was out of my league with her.

My movements at the wood pile were getting slower and slower. I looked up to see Vikki pulling in the driveway. She lowered the window in the swirling snow and said, "What are you doing? get inside, now!"

When I went in she took my temperature and it was approaching 104. I went to bed the rest of the day. Kevin feed the cows after school. In the morning I was worse. I was so bad I did not resist Vikki taking me to the emergency room. Several hours later, after a multitude of tests, a doctor said, "Mr. Eley we would like to keep you here for a few days of observation just as a precaution."

Vikki had spoken to them privately and she nodded to me and said, "Please honey it will be okay."

Later that night Vikki and the boys were there at my bedside. Brendan brought me a big Wendy's Cheeseburger. I was eating when my daughter Melinda arrived with her husband Jimmy, and everyone just stood around the bed in a U-shape. I was beginning to be suspicious ... I said to Vikki, "I don't have the flu, do I?"

She asked everyone to leave the room. Brendan took young Matt's hand and said, "Come on little guy let's go eat ... mom and dad need to talk."

I looked at Vikki and she said, "Larry you have got a 55,000-plus white cell count. They are not sure why--it could be your fever or it could be the flu ... we just don't know. I asked what else it could be (Normal count for a man my age 6500+). She bit her lip and said, "Maybe a blood disorder ... maybe ..." then her voice trailed off.

In a few days I was released from the hospital and had an appointment with an oncologist. He wanted to do a biopsy of my spine. When he interviewed me after the procedure he asked, "Mr Eley you say you are a hobby farmer, do you use chemicals?"

"No we are pretty much organic."

"Were you ever exposed to chemicals in your construction business?"

"Not that I remember."

"Were you in the service Mr. Eley."

Yes I was."

"Where?"

"Oh the high desert in California--also Vietnam--and a SAC Air Force base in Massachusetts."

"Ever around Agent Orange in Vietnam?"

"Sure--most of us were, "I said. "Why?"

He drew a long breath and said, "Larry, I think you have *Leukemia*, but I can't be sure 'till I send the results of my test to the *James Cancer Center*."

I was stunned. "How long will that take?" I asked.

Maybe a week or ten days was his response. I walked out in the hall where Vikki was waiting and said numbly, "I may have Leukemia." After that, a week or so later, I had to have a lymph node removed from my groin in a minor operation for proof positive and to be sent to the *James Research Center* in Columbus.

After the operation, when we went home, the phone rang and Vikki told me it was our young apprentice carpenter who worked for us. I had not been able to work for a while and he wanted to tell me he had another job offer and because he was getting married he was going to take it. I wished him well. Before the afternoon was over I got a call from one of our clients wanting to know when his project would be finished. I explained that I was ill but expected to be back to his home in a few days. He was unsympathetic and said he would get someone else if I could not get it done. I felt like the world was caving in on me.

Ten days can be a long time; they didn't actually say *in ten days*, they just said in *seven to ten days*. This of course caused me to live and die by each phone call that came in. In the meantime, I went back to work. I had several jobs going and when the weather was bad I was working inside on the basement remodel project. Every contractor figures out real quick which one of the clients you want to deal with. In the case of the basement job it was the lady. The guy was not unpleasant but he was impatient and tended to want to be pushy and wanted me out because of my illness.

When I showed back up to work his wife told me, "Uh, Dick will call you today or he may stop in." I told her okay, and she said she hoped I felt well enough to work. I had told them I was dealing with something as yet to be determined.

About 9:30 a.m. the phone in the basement rang. I did not have a cellphone then so Vikki and I had a code--*two rings and a hang up* and it was her. So when it rang again I answered.

"Larry?"

"Yes honey?"

"Larry, the *James Center* called with your results."

"Yes?"

"What is it Vikki, what am I dealing with?"

"Larry ... *you have Cancer*."

"Wwwwhat?"

"Vikki paused to gain strength. "Larry you have *stage-four* Non-Hodgkin's."

I was stunned, floored, this was a death sentence. "What can they do for me?" I asked.

"Okay," she said, "I called the hospital and we have to go in on Wednesday to meet the oncologist." Vikki told me she was putting me on every church prayer-list, and she wanted me know that she knew it was going to be okay.

I said, "Sure ... you can say that--I am the one dealing with this." She replied that *God* had assured her I was going to make it, and

then He also told her that was what I would say.

After I said goodbye and hung up, I went back to the basement and set down on a stack of plywood and started to cry. When it seemed I had no more tears I felt that someone was in the basement. I assumed it was the home owner and he was being discreet and leaving me alone. So I said, "Uh Dick ... is that you?" There was no answer.

In the basement a huge arch separated the different parts of the basement. I was only finishing one side and the other side was to remain a utility area. I was sure there was someone in the room; perhaps one of his kids had come home from school and found me crying and did not want to show themselves.

"Hello ... whose there?" I asked. I felt a strong presence of something above the arch as if something or someone was standing above it. I felt as if a strong pair of arms was reaching out as if to gather me in. There was no sound or visual presence, but there *was* someone there. "Is that you *Lord* ... are you here for me ... is it my time?" I asked.

The feeling of being gathered in was overpowering. Finally I sensed whatever it was was leaving, not leaving me--just the basement. I was frightened but not in a way that I could describe--I was not sure what I had just experienced (*John 14:16*). I suddenly understood that I was about to begin my journey fighting cancer that had begun many years prior with exposure from Agent Orange. Non- Hodgkin's can and does lay dormant, it did in me and now my time had come. As time would go on, I would realize the *Holy Spirit* had visited me at the beginning of my trial.

Several weeks later found me in the cancer ward of the hospital preparing for my first round of CHOP chemotherapy. I watched as the nurse prepared the needles and bags of clear fluid. When her supervisor came in to authorize her to go forward I made a joke: "*Uh ... this is like being in the pen waiting for a lethal injection.*" No one laughed.

The joke was not funny to them and it did not go over real well. The supervisor said, "There are some cancers that respond to what we call the *silver bullet*--others do not."

"Is mine one of them that will respond?" I asked hopefully. She told me *no*, and that my best hope was to get into remission. Realistically--I *was* stage-4.

Three hours later I was done and went home expecting to get sick, but I didn't. I just got the hiccups. My regimen was chemo, then nine days of Prednisone, a week of rest, and then start over again.

I tried working in between all of this, and got the basement job done. I had no employees now so my father, who was seventy-five, was working with me a couple days a week. We would work then talk for a while.

"Dad, if something happens to me, please make sure Matt knows about me ... he is only seven. I know Brendan and Kevin well look out for him but"

I asked him to stay in touch with Daniel and Melinda. He had lost his wife (my step-mother) a year earlier to cancer. Vikki had lost her mother, also recently to complications of health after surviving cancer. My father paused and said, "The hardest thing in the world for a parent is to loose a child, even a 51 year old one." He had that he had lost his only brother when they were children. He remembered the effect on his parents. Then He said, "I would trade places with you if I could."

Small companies like mine were usually booked a year in advance. I only had two more jobs on the books. The phone had stopped ringing as word spread about my situation. One night someone even called and told Vikki they were sorry I had died. I wasn't dead but my business was dying. Unbeknown to me we were falling behind because I couldn't keep up my usual pace unless I was on maximum prednisone. Also, I had no regular help, although Dad tried and Brendan and Kevin helped. We were falling behind in our debts both business and personal. Vikki kept these things to herself so as not to burden me further. She had been encouraging me to go to the VA for help but I was proud and didn't realize how bad how financial situation was getting.

One day during my third blood test of the week at the hospital I picked up a copy of Time or Newsweek magazine. It had a picture of some soldiers in Vietnam looking up at a C-123 spraying Agent Orange. Of course since it was about Vietnam I read it. The article said that if you are a Vietnam veteran and dealing with any of the included diseases or illnesses you should contact your local VA office for help. Well we had minimal insurance and were trying to pay for some of my costs. We were really beginning to sink. Our insurance was around a thousand a month and they were making noise like it was going to go up.

Because I found the article, I took it home and told Vikki We should contact the VA for help. She patiently said, "Larry I have been telling you that."

We made an VA appointment and meet Sarah Moxley. She was a former Marine and was a wonderful lady. We explained our situation and she said she would check out my story and file the paper work for me. Something about her made me believe what she was saying, she was sweet but had the look of someone who could be a bulldog if she wanted to.

After my second round of chemo I lost all my hair and I began to wear biker scarves to cover my head. At Brendan's graduation, after the third chemo round, I wore my dark suit with a long draped red scarf and Indian beads in the back. A lady who was at the graduation ceremony came up to me and asked in halting broken English, because she assumed I was a foreigner, "Who you?" Then she held her camera up and said, "*Me take picture you--Welcome America.*"

I looked at her and replied with as much patience as I could, "I am dealing with Cancer."

Back at work I went through some part-time workers. The first one spent most of his time explaining to me why it was difficult to get to work before noon and that with me in my situation he did not feel like there was any future with my company. I eventually worked by myself. Dad and Brendan would come in to help lift or set heavy items and I would do what I could the rest of the day.

As the summer progressed I went through my chemo. Things were kind of okay when I was on maximum prednisone, but at the low end I was miserable and horrible to be around. Once Vikki came out to tell me it was supper time, and for no reason I said, "When I am *gone* there will be a line of guys here all the way out to the road after you."

She started to cry and at the lowest point in the entire cancer experience ... I spit at her, although I do not remember it to this day. Vikki swears it happened. Vikki was carrying the weight of the world; she had always handled the business and personal finances. I was beginning to have delusions: I would see people in crowds that I swore were someone from long ago. All I thought about was *cancer*.

One morning we got a call from Sarah Moxley at the VA office. "Larry, this is Sarah--I got your claim back. They denied it--get in here today so we can file again." I was pissed.

"Okay Sarah, what are we going to do."

"I want you to try and remember all you can about Vietnam and anything that happened with Agent Orange--but get in here now!"

"Yes *Sergeant* Moxley!"

On the way to Mount Vernon I remembered that at Cam Ranh they used Agent Orange, it was also stored there, and there was always the rumor that empty canisters or containers were dumped off shore in the South China Sea. Also I remembered once being on the ground and *Patches* the silver C-123 came over us ready to spray. I had been told that Agent Orange had seeped into the water in the ground and even somehow recycled in the rain. They told us it was safe and there were no worries and no concerns.

My friend Kevin Paddock used to tell us that we were kids--and believed it all. He was right. Kevin would ask us, "Guys ... why do you think there is no vegetation around Cam Ranh? We're in a jungle--does it look like a jungle to you--why do you think that is? It's the Agent Orange--that's why it's in everything."

Sarah filled out the paper work again and we sent it in. Fall was approaching and I was down to my last job. We had gotten nothing since the beginning of the year, and in construction if its fall you better know what you're going to be doing in the winter time, we had nothing planned.

It was at this time Vikki and I determined we had to close down our business and look for a job with insurance and benefits. So with no hair, all swollen up with prednisone and still dealing with chemo treatment, I went job hunting. Usually I was treated politely and told they would get back to me. We tried six or seven ads in the *Columbus Dispatch* that wanted superintendents. I was qualified for most of them but we had no luck.

At the hospital I had completed the chemo treatments, however the doctor told me, "We have not completely killed the cancer, so you will have to take two more rounds. But because it might weaken your heart, you must submit to some heart stress tests, or the additional chemo may cause you to have a heart attack and you will die."

I wanted to say, *well--duh*. But I submitted to the tests and we went on with the Chemo. At about that time Sarah Moxley called from the VA office again.

"Larry I have got good news--they have accepted your claim--you will start receiving disability payments in December!"

I replied, "Thank you so much Sarah for all you have done. Thank you--I can't tell you what that will mean to us." She went on to explain what I would receive, and said that the VA Hospital would now assume my health care also. Our happy moment was to be short-lived though.

On the day before Thanksgiving 1999, we had our regular Oncology visit with the hospital doctor. Vikki and I sat waiting, when he came in he said, "Well you're done with your chemo."

I happily said, "I made it didn't I--I beat it!"

He looked at me and said, "No ... you still are a stage-4 cancer patient ... we just killed the cells in you now. You didn't beat it."

"But I did *everything* you asked of me. I--."

He interrupted me. "At best ... you have a few years to live ... at best."

Vikki was sitting opposite me and she was trying to be brave and not to sob.

"I don't accept this--*I don't*," Vikki said.

The doctor got up and went and got a heavy text book and came back, and pointed to a particular page: "This is what you have--*this is the prognoses*--and facts ... don't ... lie. Now--I will see you three days after Christmas, and then I understand the VA is taking over, so if there is nothing else, I am going home for the holiday. Try and enjoy the season."

When we left the hospital and got to the parking lot Vikki said, "I'll drive." It was understood that I was in no shape to take us home, and she graciously spared me having to say it. I looked at her small hand on the steering wheel, a hand so small I could put it in my palm like a derringer.

As we wound through the hills and valleys on State Route 36 back to the farm a million thoughts went through my mind. I saw myself in a casket with my family and friends looking down at me saying the obligatory things people say at funerals. I wondered what the end would be like. I had seen people at the clinic who were terminal, lying comatose in a bed, pale, unconscious with their mouth open, unaware of family members crying around the bedside. I thought of Matt at the funeral, only seven years old, probably hanging on to Brendan for support. I tried but could not help but think that after time, men, either available, divorced or widowed, would come into my Vikki's life.

It was a quiet ride back to the farm.

As we turned into the drive the cows were lined up in the lane ready to eat, they had come down from the upper pasture and I saw Kevin walking out in my Carhartts going to the barn to feed them. I knew he would try and work the farm, but in the end I knew it would have to be sold.

When Vikki turned the car off I just sat there not moving. She reached over and put her hand on my shoulder and in a voice full of faith said, "It is *GOD* that numbers our days, not an illness, not doctors, not the *James Cancer Clinic*."

After a moment of our just sitting there, Vikki said, "I have been reading a book by Reverend George Malkmus ... he advocates a vegetarian-diet and life style changes for cancer patients. We are going to shock your system--from this day on you are a vegetarian and I have some other changes for you too!" I began a strict life style of vegetables, juicing carrots, eating almonds, drinking some horrid stuff called Barley Green and exercising and increasing my physical activity and ... prayer!



We went through the holidays the best we could and had a frontier Christmas, very plain and simple, and told the older kids the truth of the situation--*kind of*. To our youngest son Matt we told him Daddy is fine and he will get better.

It was a hard holiday. I was beginning to relive Vietnam in my mind and dreams. My strength was starting to return since I was off chemo, but we still had no work. Fortunately the VA benefits started to arrive just in the nick of time like a Huey gunship!

My anxiety was off the charts. I was short-tempered and snapped at everyone. At home, people stayed away from me if they could. I could not help it at all. I wished I could have had Vikki's faith. However I did keep trying as hard as I could, and would not give up!

On the 28th of December we went to our last regular hospital visit to see Dr. Stanick. When we went to the assigned room he was there with his arms folded. He was without a doubt the bluntest matter of fact person I had ever met, but he knew his business! He started right in ... "Did you have a good Christmas?"

I wanted to say who wouldn't have had a *good Christmas* with what I am dealing with, but before I could he said, "I may have a late Christmas present for you. Your biopsies and your blood work show enough inconsistencies that I have sent them on to the *James Center*. They have one of the world's leading experts on Lymphomas. Now ... don't get your hopes too high, but *I think this may not be as bad as we thought initially*."

I said, "*So I beat it?*"

He replied wistfully, "No ... *but you may be able to live with it*."

January the 6th, 2000, on my fifty second birthday, we went to the *James Center* (below photo) in Columbus, Ohio and met with Dr. Por'qu. He came into the waiting room and looked at us and said point blank-- "You have lymphoma--but there are thirty types, and I believe yours is a chronic type that you can live with for the remainder of a hopefully long time."

I just looked at the floor ... nobody said a thing ... not even Vikki. He then remarked, "People usually jump up and down at this news."

I thought about all that had happened the last year, and in my mind I saw Patches the C123 flying over, in Vietnam. I saw my Wife looking at me--that was what was really important. It had *happened to me* but Vikki had carried the load for a very long time. I was amazed she had held together.



I had survived Cancer by the grace of the Lord. It was Him that had visited me in that basement so long ago. However, our trials were not over. In the years to come we struggled with the debt load that had accrued during my illness. As time went on we would eventually sell all the rental properties, and many times we sold cherished possessions. Eventually our prized and cherished herd of Angus cattle had to go. My father-in-law gave us financial help as did my step-father many times. They both could not have been kinder than my own father who had passed away shortly after the cancer scare. The day came when we eventually had to sell a small part of our farm, *Best of Both*. But we hung on to each other and enough of the farm to still call it home

Some one told me once, "You may survive cancer but you will not survive the financial woes that go with it." But by the grace of the *Lord* we did both!

We terminated our business in 2002, and I was fortunate enough to acquire a position as a state and county building inspector with Delaware County in central Ohio. I do commercial, residential, and fire protection inspections and have acquired my State Class Three License. It has been a great opportunity for me, but with occasional job related dangers.

In late 2006, I fell through a building after stepping backwards and through a hole in the floor. I was badly injured and took six months to recover from multiple injuries. Although medical expenses were paid it only compounded the already tight financial situation for us. Still, we never gave up. Today I am fully recovered and work full time and also enjoy the farm as time allows. We replaced the cattle with an unusual breed of endangered sheep (Jacobs). We enjoy the flock, and farm our 45 acres for fun. Making hay is the best time of the year for me.

Almost fourteen years after our fight with cancer I can see the fruits of our determination. Things are better now but the long road we have journeyed on took its toll. I still have periods of anxiety and a habit of thinking that everything has to be done *now*, as if there is no tomorrow. I am also impatient and it is hard for me to relax. I always feel like I must complete the next task. I am working on all these things, and know there are not many women who would have stayed through this difficult time, but Vikki has. I need to always be mindful and careful to show her I know that.

Recently I have come back in contact with five guys from my unit. We had a mini-reunion with at least three of the six of us. Turns out that five of the six of us are dealing with Agent Orange issues. Harpo (Kevin Paddock) deals with Diabetes as does Ray Kastner and Granny Becker. Lester Rheume deals with Heart issues.

I talk frequently to Ray and Kevin and I know their stories mimic mine as far as stress over debt and health issues. All of us are getting older so some of it is complicated with age related issues, and Ray was injured in his job as a professional fire-fighter. Kevin would still like to be working, but diabetes keeps him somewhat restricted. Nevertheless, he is always positive, as is Ray. When we talk we always talk of our days as Air Force crash rescue crewmen, and to a man we all would do it again. All of us are proud of our service and what we did.

As I sit her tonight on a cold February evening finishing this story, I look out the window and see a new building going up here at *Best of Both Farms*. We are in a recovery stage from bad storms last summer. In the old barn is our award winning flock of Jacob Sheep. Lambing has started early this year.

Our son Matt is here tonight, he is a junior in College. Vikki is sitting at the table getting ready to go on a trip with some of her girlfriends. The other children are scattered about the immediate area with their families. By the hand of the Lord we have come through all this, and are grateful. I am healthy and active; I am still a vegetarian. I hike a lot and do a regular schedule of exercises daily. Matt is a martial arts expert and I serve as his punching bag most of the time; seldom do I get the best of him. Hopefully, this story will be an inspiration to others who are facing or going through trials of their own.

By the way, out front of the farm tonight the wood-racks are full of *Best of Both Farms'* famous Cherry Wood.



Thank you *LORD*.



Vikki is the photographer sadly most of those photos of the land were taken when we thought we were going to have to sell everything. I can't emphasize what the Lord has done for us here. I did not want to over do how bad it got. We have had nothing less than a miracle here in our lives.

Ah, I allowed *no* photos of myself when I was sick. That's why the part about the lady who thought I was a foreigner was included, she would have the only photo and I don't know her. I would not even set for the standard Christmas pictures, although with the biker scarves and swollen up look I was pretty *Bad Ass*, ha.

Yes, the story is dedicated to Vikki and to Jesus,

Larry,
or as I sign off to my Viet buddies
Crash 2 Out

My Photos







[Check out Don Poss' Book Review of Larry Eley's new Book](#)

[I Never Learned to Dance](#)



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