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Memorial Day, 2062

Catch The Wind...

The Last Vietnam War Veteran

For decades he annually returned to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The Wall... called to him...touched something in him. As a Vietnam War veteran, he felt he owed it to those who went before him. His flagging health and confinement to a wheelchair had prevented visits in recent years. But today was different—today was special. He had donned his old green floppy-hat, the only real keepsake from the Vietnam War he possessed, and on his birthday was going to The Wall—in a limousine!

There was no shortage of volunteers to wheel him wherever he wanted to go—where the heck were they ten years ago? And no shortage of reporters asking if he knew yesterday's passing of that-other-guy made him the last living Vietnam Veteran? Why can't they ever say Dead? Passing sounds like a good BM. Of course he knew, but still found it odd that somehow such circumstances could make him famous.

He knew also that if he hadn't fibbed about how he was feeling, they wouldn't have let him go to The Wall today of all days: Memorial Day. Being an aging veteran—and now the last Vietnam Veteran—was indeed bitter sweet, and all too impossible to fully grasp. I can't be the last...I just can't be...he thought. He also knew that no one knew the name of the last draft-dodging-deserter-sob to bite the dust—and frankly, no one cared. He smiled at God's joke permitting him to outlive all those losers...especially that famous shrew, what was her name, but for some reason took no pleasure when she, like a good BM, finally passed.

He was at The Wall and thrilled, and nothing could spoil this day, even though he still didn't know what the media wanted from him, or expected him to say. Maybe they want me to do something dramatic, like croak, in time for the five o'clock follies, he grinned. Screw'em...I'm gonna live forever—or maybe not, he thought. He didn't feel like he would live forever. He felt tired and exhausted from this gusty day, this week...this life...with its ever-present aches. He felt like a grumpy, gnarly, barkless old tangled tree too many bears had itched against. Can trees be grumpy? he shrugged, the answer not worth the puzzle. But he was mostly just grumpy-tired of being tired.

They wheeled him to the Vietnam Nurses Monument and he gestured for someone, whose name he should remember, to place his store-bought roses just-so, in the lap of the kneeling nurse, and between her hand and helmet—perhaps the roses might ease her grief...a grief he could relate to. The wounded, dying, dead warrior cradled in the nurses' arms...her grief and compassion frozen in recognition that his spirit had left the body, and were it possible by will alone, she would have brought him back.

He thought of Donovan's old song, "Catch The Wind" wishing he could recall its lyrics, and its unintended hope he thought it offered gravely-wounded...hoping to catch the dust off chopper riding on the wind.

"In chilly hours and minutes,
of uncertainty, I don't want to be...
For me to love you now,
would be the sweetest thing,

would make me sing...
we'll try and catch the wind...."

His eyes were drawn skyward, following a nurse's gaze ever searching for the dust-off chopper that would never come, and sighed in resignation that salvation was not upon the wind that day.

As he wheeled toward The Three Soldiers...Three Warriors...someone asked the question he was always asked at The Wall: Did you know my dad...but this time they said their dad had known him. He wanted to remember, wanted to offer some words that for a moment would make a connection for them...but the names had mostly faded generations ago.

He then wheeled left to better read the dedication plaque:

"In memory of the men and women who served
in the Vietnam War and later died as a result
of their service. We honor and remember
their sacrifice."

He honored and remembered the many friends who had suffered from Agent Orange or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Such a small plaque, he thought, to honor those countless thousands. Their deepest wounds unhealed—with pitiless fates impatiently lying in wait to savage minds and bodies and rot away their spirits. Indeed, too many had later died as a result of their service—a pain without measure. It didn't have to end like that, he thought.

His attention was drawn back to the three young warriors standing vigil. His old eyes recognized and felt the sheer exhaustion forever etched in their eyes...a shared memory of too many sleepless nights...too much pain from dust-off friends...and too certain of a very uncertain future. "Don't mean nothin'," he recalled was the phrase. Through the decades he realized it did mean something...a great deal of something, in fact: he was now the last man standing, and there was no one left he could really talk with. He shook his head in disbelief...they're...all...gone.

He savored a quiet melancholy moment as his helpers chatted with media covering his birthday visit to The Wall. Being over a hundred years old, he had discovered people wanted to talk to him, especially now; everyone knowing well his time was near.

They rolled him the few yards to see nearby old glory...and she was glorious, catching the cool breeze, rippling gently, as only such beauty could with dazzling colors perfectly backlit by the sun. He thought, if only you could talk...what stories you could tell. The flag always brought joy, and sometimes a lump to his throat, as it waved-to, ever so slowly, then-fro with a crisp snap. At another time...another place...we flew old glory and oh how we cheered to see her fly...but they made us take her down.

They paused briefly at the southwest entrance, and he could see The Wall in enfilade and just make out the black granite of the monument's center where it V'd and pointed toward the Washington Monument. Only a decade ago there were still a few misty eyed old men looking for a buddy's names...but no longer.

With a nod, they rolled him forward slowly down the pathway, and in his wake he listened to the trailing sounds of shuffling feet, like a herd of recruits rote-stepping across a bridge. How once we marched like giants down trails of darkness...and like brothers fought till there was light. He felt like a pointman leading a squad as he followed the list of flowing names like markers along the road of life. Moving closer to The Wall, he could feel the cobble stones beneath his wheels, and reached out with finger tips and touched the flickering stone-etched letters as they tapped a Braille Morse Code...like playing cards pinned to a child's bicycle wheels, strumming spokes.

How quickly The Wall grew in height with names overwhelming and never ending, until suddenly his chair was swiveled facing center. The Wall somehow seemed taller than he remembered. They waited as he knew they would, while his eyes found the name that was more than just a name to him. He thought, You're still here...in my place...just as you have been all these many decades. He bowed his head slightly and they eased him back to lawn's edge. The name blurred with an old man's vision as he remembered that day for the countless time and wondered anew why he made it home, and they had not. Dreams of Home... that's all we ever had.

He could just see the length of The Wall, from the beginning to end of the war. Without realizing it, he sat at

attention...as some forgotten sergeant had instilled in him eons ago, and with a start was momentarily angered when someone broke his thoughts and stuck a tissue in his hand. He instantly resented their assumption he would once more blubber like a woman. Maybe it would be different this time—but they knew him too well. And then he sat alone at the edge of the grass in the park-like setting...his eyes brushing The Wall's black granite...feeling the presence...drawing strength and a comforting peace that it always gave so freely.

His makeshift entourage stood back...giving him space, as they called it, and for the moment grew quiet, each slipping into private thoughts of what The Wall and all those names represented. He knew some would smile as his eyes closed, thinking him drifting into another nap. But truthfully he found that sometimes, some places, he could actually see better, see further, with his eyes closed. Even now he could see the miles-long curve of Da Nang's China Beach, feel the burning heat of the golden sands, taste the salt of ocean spray—and there they were...he could see his sun baked friends waist deep in bluest-blue water riding each other's shoulders in horseplay and laughter. He was twenty again...they all were so young...and each celebrating another day of life. Old reminiscences gave life to youthful memories and wandering fraternal shadows of his soul. I would give it all just to be there with them...one more time. His joy faded as thoughts morphed into night black as the deepest black-hole...his eyes following as a drifting pearl string of flares were consumed by the void.

Perhaps he had dozed, he thought to himself...but they were all so alive, so real! He had never returned to Vietnam, as many veterans had, and thought...truth is...I've never felt closer to it all than right here at The Wall. For him, Vietnam was only an eyes-rest away. Another moment and he envisioned parked F-4 Phantoms, wing tip to wing tip, for more than a mile, and a string of Hueys thumping overhead like enraged geese...a door-gunner waved in passing. Air crews scurried about the flight line, and he could feel the ground quake with a distant B-52 strike. Men were joking and laughing as they boarded the Freedom Bird home...as silver canisters were silently loaded by forklift into a cargo bay. And then he could feel his muscles straining in calisthenics amidst thousands of others at boot camp. Mind drifting...his friend was suddenly dead and flown away into the night...tape across a locker...and another scar across his own heart. His eyes swept the sky in denial, searching for shadows of aircraft numerous as stars, and trying to paint the memory with a face. B-57s ...C-47 Gooney Birds, Hueys...fighter planes, war ships at sea, they were all there...thousands of fellow warriors...reflections of my life...when I lived and was alive because I was not dead...and how we drank toasts to everything we missed back in the world...and prayed our Whys? to Jesus.

Just as suddenly his mind's eye could see his old veterans' association of hundreds of members marching so long ago in the 25th Anniversary Parade of The Wall—curb to curb—waving and cheering in celebration...and then the last reunion, where the two surviving members decided to open the last-man-standing legacy bottle of liquor together—neither liked drinking alone, they said—and in tribute shared a toast with the young warriors from a nearby base. A final grand toast, and grand it was...tearful in memories of those who fought and died and fought and lived, and of the many lingering veterans through the years who fought desperately just to live...heart-tugging for the loss of so many friendships...wonderful in having shared the unbreakable bond of taking care of our own. So many things we all remembered...now I alone remember...of life...of death...of war. And in that wordless moment following the final toast honoring all Vietnam-Thailand comrades, he felt the brotherhood was complete. The connection—made...the bond—forever...the torch—safely passed to the young men and women from the base. He knew he was ready. It was time to say goodbye....

He whispered an old friend's oft said words, "I am forever honored for I have marched with heroes." Then thought of the ancient Hollies' song, He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother, and could hear it playing in his mind...nodding at the lyric's simple truth...

"The road is long
with many a winding turn
that leads us to who knows where
who knows when
but I'm strong,
strong enough to carry him
he ain't heavy, he's my brother...."

So true, he thought, once I was a warrior... so very long ago. I carry the pity of war still...it has never let go. A gentle breeze fluffed a lock of his frail white hair, like caressing fingertips of an angel. The same breeze caught the moist tissue in his hand and whisked it away to drift like an autumn leaf...and soared away with his spirit.

Astounded—there really was a white-light—he found himself standing before a multitude of young warriors

suddenly cheering and clapping and shouting Welcome Home over-and-over...his old buddies, all forever Vietnam-young, and grinning broadly suddenly surrounding him, pounding his back happily, hoisting him on their shoulders, whistling shrilly and tossing his hat all about like a Frisbee. And when they let him down his forever-young friend of so long ago clutched his shoulders...Welcome Home...we've been waiting a long time for you!

Several days later the presidential motorcade pulled to the curb along Constitution Avenue, and nearest The Wall. A bustle of activity darted about, but only one lone figure walked to The Wall's floodlit center. The president thought of his words spoken earlier that morning, at the last Vietnam Veteran's funeral at Arlington, and how sad it was that nothing he said was worthy of closing the chapter on a war nearly three million Americans had served in...all of them gone now.

The last Vietnam Veteran excitedly pointed, proclaiming, "That's the President!" Taking him by the elbow, his friend replied, "Yeah...isn't that great?...they all find their way here...but check this out...I've got some brothers I want you to meet...and then there are the Korean War guys, and World War II and World War I guys, and Civil War and Revolutionary War guys...and you won't believe all their stories!

The president had come to say goodbye and place a memory at The Wall. He stood reverently, filled with gratitude, reading a few names, touching one here and there. American names... American dead...each an American hero. We haven't forgotten the price that was paid...we will remember your sacrifice...the cost of freedom... as long as there is a United States of America. He paused for one last look at The Wall, and thought how fitting a place was this hallowed ground for the last man standing to have crossed-over from. His eyes swept the length of The Wall and filled with mist...I just want to thank you, one last time...welcome home sons... welcome home. At that moment he came to attention...old military habits taking hold...held a salute to The Wall...and felt goose bumps on his arms from a sudden whisper-breeze...like the fleeting wind from millions of returned hand salutes...and from a young veteran proud to be...the last man standing.

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The National Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Constitution Gardens, Washington, D.C.

Veterans Groups unanimously agreed on design, wording and location of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial addition.

In Memory Plaque to Honor Those Not Eligible for Inscription on The Wall; was Dedicated November 10, 2004.
The 24-inches tall by 36-inches wide plaque is placed within the N/E corner of The Three Servicemen Statue Plaza.



UTube Video: Donovan - [Catch The Wind](#)

UTube Video: The Hollies - [He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother](#)
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