

Last Stand
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Our life's were never our own; not really our own.

Sons of the greatest generation...

Destined for a slice of the Vietnam War...365 days of up close and personal, etched in twisted-helix as something more.

Destined to hunt these woods and find your weathered plank cabin, held together with cob webs and settled dust that binds and welds all that happened here in layers of time, like pages of an unread book.

A sunken unmarked grave? Well not so with a shovel booted down at the head of the grave, its gray handle with nail scratched initials—JC. Not the big man in the sky unless he was born in 1943.

Broken down weathered-gray wooden cabin. What was a door, lay time tossed like a child's tiddlywinks; hand sawn planks scattered, yet mind's eye easily reassembles and joins it to torn leather strips--tough as petrified jerky--once greased with animal fat to keep it flexible as makeshift hinges.

Inside, a corner pile of what likely was long cured skins and hand woven quilts for winter's sharp biting nights. An old newspaper lay on a shelf with faded headline: Saigon Falls. Is that what pushed you to hermit-ville? A leather binder, opened to invite reading, drew my attention ...

"While hunting I found him dead on the floor...decayed to bones and strands of skin and hair. No mail or name or anything but a diary written in fair hand, every page then turned upside down and written throughout between lines. He was there—Tet '68. I read his words—I wish I hadn't—reflecting a steady fall into darkness. I buried his too personal journal with him. He had signed his diary, JC.

I will never hunt this forest again. I will never tell anyone about this and hope you will recognize a patriot marked by a never ending war, who coped, until not, now in solitude...and leave him be at rest.

If you are a veteran you will understand...if not, then wonder about what good would serve a better ending than JC's own choice of forest solitude to saue howling beasts and lingering night-wanders of unresolved moments that lingered unanswered through the decades? And yes, I meant patriot. His words. His flag war-worn by life's battles, hanging on the wall as witness--a patriot.

At first I felt my civic duty was to notify authorities; perhaps he—JC—had relatives...although they've done a great job not-looking for him. Suppose I did report this; the sheriff would show up...probably exhume the body, check for foul play; though he need look no further than Vietnam. Then what? Post a notice somewhere inviting 'anyone' to come and pay for a funeral? If no takers, cremate him and bury his ashes in some potters grave never to be thought of again? How would that serve a purpose, or be considered the right thing to do? No one to mouth shallow platitudes—He's in a better place...Rest In Peace. Really? Potter's Field vs. swaying forest roots' gentle rocking of earth's final cradle?

Eyes drawn once more to faded tattered flag still hung and dropping on outside cabin's wall. A fitting symbol, overlooking his final repose. Weathered times of war that marked him then, and others still; cascading torrential-burdens upon soldier's heart that wilt the soul and bleed out life's spirit to darkness.

Even now...even now, cool earth of a cool forest soothes the bones of this another casualty of war, far removed from home, missing, and alone.

Quiet, sighing winds combed by pine-tree's needles rustle moments of solitude. Did they provide a peace in his graying-out final moments?

I close the diary: Unspoken last words of shadowed scars and unhealing wounds quilled and unread by the many.

What should I do?

At morning the air was awash with the scent of pine. I fixed coffee and pondered the peaceful silence, except the forest really isn't completely silent, nor is the sleepless mind. Did I do the right thing? I had to look close to find where the grave was. Pleased by my good job of smoothing the gravesite with a branch that brushed away evidence of a grave at all, and a scattering of deadfall leaf-quilt.

JC had carried unbearable dreams to the limits of his strength; who runs that gauntlet still...awaiting end of life's baton? The count at 21 and waiting the day's last soul to drop.

I would honor the written message of the veteran who buried him.

JC's flag would stay. Cabin door left unhinged to the wild. His words, silenced beneath him, as the dark-witness and testament to his Spirit's last stand; life freely given—life freely abandoned.

I turned away, melancholy, heel-toe into the promised light, away from weathered cabin, and uncertain if there were an empty mind-box left to lock that darkness away.

Thank you,

Don Poss
Sent from my iPhone