

Why Did You Leave Us That Way?

Poem, © 2022 by Don Poss

I'm at our Vietnam veterans' annual association reunion.

Someone has passed around an old photo album labeled, 'Casualties,' and I pull it across the table and flip the pages. Others drift over to check out what I'm looking at, but then move on.

I Turn the pages, and suddenly familiar laughing faces confront me. Were we that young to? Skinny as a stick. Knew everything—could never die— with ageless faces. But they did die. All of them. Rockets, Mortars, Artillery, Mines, Gunshot, RPGs, boobytraps, grenades, aircraft crashes, bleed-outs, accidents in the field; crushed between tracked vehicles, or trucks; drowning, weapons discharged accidentally, suicide, falls, diseases, and too many others to list. The many ways our brothers had died in the field; stirred to surface with the album. Uprooting unwritten pages, I could write for each recognized brother; fresh and tucked away in memory, somewhere as if it all happened yesterday.

Each album page presents a resurrected memory. *What was his name...* I puzzle—the years taking toll on my memories. Someone has penciled the name at the bottom. Another page, and the burst of the sound of one's voice, good or bad; weapons firing, and war leapt out at me. Photos with Vietnamese in the background, and the legend of kids swarming as they always did.

Then I saw your photo. Like all the others. Nothing amiss. No hints of distress. Nothing. And I try to understand, remembering that day, and once more try to figure it out; make sense of it—I can't.

Like all the others, you were suddenly gone. Medevaced out, or carted away in a Huey or truck. No feedback about what happened; never to be heard from again. And I wonder; was it a girl that wouldn't wait for you? Was it just Vietnam? but that couldn't be we saw everything you did—all of it— did everything you did; mourned our brothers, as you did.

I head home from the reunion, and can see the same night sky, unchanged these decades, just as it was in Vietnam. There were no answers above, either. So, tell me, perhaps in this night's dream in some way I can understand; why did you have left that way? Why add to the unanswered losses and questions we still carry? And—so senselessness? Was it really that unbearable and so personal you couldn't talk to your brothers?

Let me close the page... and put that memory back in the box you opened tonight.