

They say the moonrise in Vietnam is the same as in Pennsylvania...

Albert Farkas

by Denis Cook (RIP: 21 May 2017),

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In the mid 60's during the Vietnam War build up I met Al Farkas. I worked for a local wholesale CO in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and every day at 11:00 a.m. I went to the Buchanan Hotel for lunch. It was the local eatery where everybody knew your name; a place where you could escape from the daily pressures to relax and eat.

I met Al one day at the Buchanan. He often sat next to me, passing the time of day by reading the paper, eating lunch, engaging in small talk. He introduced himself, modestly, as Al. Okay with me, easy going, nice to have a friend at lunch. After he left, the guy sitting next to me said, "Do you know who Al is? he's the Chief of Police, buddy." Hum, well he seemed like an okay down-to-earth guy, and I really didn't think much about his role in life.

Al and I became lunch friends. Al seemed to have been the kind of man that realized war can bring peace to a nation, but only Law and Order can bring peace to a village... and his efforts were more at the basic level of one-on-one and helping do what he knew best at home, and later in Vietnam. We would listen to everyone's tall tales, and laugh. When Al talked, I felt he never bragged or stretched the truth. He didn't have to. Born in Coneaut, Ohio, he came to Lancaster and attended Franklin and Marshall College. He played tackle on the football team, forward on the basketball team, and was a member of the Golf Team. The men would nod acknowledging his athletic achievements.

With a little prying, Al would talk about his police and military service. He'd joined the Lancaster Pennsylvania Police Department in 1937, was given a leave of absence in 1943 to join the Navy to serve in the Seabees during World War II. After the war, he returned to the police force in 1946, and was made Chief of Police in 1962.

Everyone joined in on the talk of the day, local news, and often, the growing war in Vietnam. We shared some good times at the Buchanan. Christmas was always neat, Bob, the owner numbered all the seats. Every 15 minutes he spun a wheel and if your number came up, a free lunch. Always a joke across the room about today's special, any one know what it is?

The troop build up in South East Asia put me in a very vulnerable position for the draft. It was just a matter of time until I got my notice, and of course that day came. When I received my draft notice, I enlisted in the Air Force and suddenly became the center of attention at the Buchanan Restaurant. Al in particular treated me as though I were of great importance.

My lunch was free for the two weeks before I reported for duty. My money was worthless to Bob and the lunch crowd, and of course, Al would always be the first to offer. Al told me that when I was discharged, I should look him up and he would have a job for me in the Police Department.

The day came to report to boot camp. Al shook my hand and gave me a good luck piece---a silver dollar to keep for protection. I carried that silver dollar all through the military; never went anywhere without it in my left front pants pocket.

Not wanting to go to Vietnam, I had enlisted in the Air Force, thinking I would be spared from combat duty. Not so. My job classification was Air Police; the Air Force combat, light infantry, unit. Some of my friends were drafted at the same time, and lucked out and became cooks and went to Germany for two years. As for me, after the Air Police Academy I went to Otis AFB on Cape Cod, and shortly thereafter received orders for Vietnam.

Whether on main-gate duty at Otis, or on the wire late at night on Tân Sơn Nhứt, Al's good-luck gift was always with me. I could easily reach in my pocket and roll the dollar around in my fingers. A piece of home, a thought to remember, a gift to protect me. "Good luck, Den" Al had said that last day we said goodbye. A firm handshake and strong eye contact, I knew he really meant it.

I survived my four years enlistment, returned to the states and received my discharge in February 1969. My first stop when I got home was to find a job with the Police Department. Should be a piece of cake. My Military Police training and combat experience would make it a shoe in. And after all, Al had a job waiting for me.

I stopped at the Police Station, went directly to the desk sergeant with a lot of confidence and expectation, and told him I was applying for a job. The desk Sergeant took a long look at me. I hadn't realized just how thin I had become. The war didn't provide the best nutritional needs of a growing boy. At the time I weighed less than 110 pounds. He said, "Son, you're way too small, don't even waste your time filling out the forms." I thought, 'screw you pal, Al has a job waiting for me'. I was not putting up with another diddle rank-pulling Sergeant. So I boldly told him I was a combat MP veteran and said, "I want to see Al Farkas, and now." The desk Sergeant thought for a second, then in a sarcastic fashion, started to give me directions---to a local cemetery.



Perplexed and stupefied I angrily said, "What's Al doing there?"

Again the Sergeant hesitated, his expression changed from a glaring SOB to a saddened expression of loss and dread, perhaps he first thought I was being a jerk by asking. He then said he needed to talk to me in private and took me to an interrogation room and started to explain. He told me Al had served four years as Chief, retired from the department in 1966 after 29 years of service with Lancaster Police Department. He then took an assignment as an advisor to an overseas Police Department. Assigned to Vinh Long Province of Vietnam, Al was shot and wounded while commanding a force of Native Police in the area of the Mekong Delta. Al had died from a Pulmonary Embolism and was survived by one brother.

I was at Tân Sơn Nhứt, and not far from Al when he was killed in action, on February 14, 1968, Valentine's Day. I now suffered another loss to the Tet offensive.

I never did fill out the police application, but it had nothing to do with my stature. My heart just was not in it anymore. I lost Al, a friend, who cared in his own way for me. A friend who knew how to support me at a time when I had no choices in life. A friend who believed in the war, and bringing Law and Order to the people of South Vietnam. I never had the chance to really say goodbye to Al. I've never been able to thank him for the good luck dollar, words of encouragement, or the faith he had in me.

Al was a civilian so his name will not appear on The Wall. But this tough but gentle man, who sat next to me at lunch for over 360 days, will be remembered.

They say the moonrise in Vietnam is the same as in Pennsylvania. Fields of grass swept by shimmering moonlight and a warm summer night's breeze... like a dark ocean half way around the world. Thank You Al, and goodbye my friend.

Denis Cook (RIP: 21 May 2017)

ALBERT FARKAS

Civilian

3/31/13 - 2/14/68

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