THE REUNION

We gathered on an early June weekend in a small motel in rural Virginia, within easy driving range of Washington, D.C., but outside its high price range. It was the right setting for our reunion: the kind of motel that is a member of a national chain in name only -- where the local high school kids get their summer jobs and where the local families and older couples come for their weekly supper out. We were a mixed group of men from a variety of backgrounds and a variety of places. What we had in common was a rather intense experience with a particular organization some 20 years ago and our varying stages of middle age. None of us knew everyone there because we had been members of the organization at different times.

Such a gathering in June is not uncommon: it is a month for reunions. What made our group a bit different is the experience that we all had in common. We had all been in combat with the 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry of the 9th Infantry Division in Vietnam during the years 1966 to 1972. We had come together through the efforts of two of our number -- two partially disabled veterans -- to do what veterans of other wars have done so often, but what veterans of our war have done so rarely. We came together to remember the stories of our wins and losses, to celebrate our being alive to do it, and to remember those who would never be with us again.

We were 115 strong before the weekend was over and we came from Washington state, Wyoming, Idaho, Oklahoma, Nebraska,

Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio, New York, Maine, Florida, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Virginia. We gathered from across America as we had been gathered once before. We were primarily enlisted men who had been drafted, with a scattering of career noncommissioned officers and officers. With us were wives who had lived through the experience with us, wives who had come afterwards, and wives who had replaced those who had not survived the turmoil of the Vietnam years and their aftermath. The trip to Virginia was a weekend outing for some and the annual vacation for others; a suddenly added vacation for people who do not do such things lightly, but who had managed it somehow when they found out about the reunion. We were that cross section of America that it is not fashionable to talk about these days: not the ones that get written up for supporting this cause or that, but the ones who quietly do the day-to-day work of this country -- in peace or war.

Our current occupations provided sparse support for the Vietnam post-traumatic stress syndrome folks. We were iron workers and structural steel fabricators, construction managers and skilled mechanics, private and government administrators and managers, postmen and police detectives, stockbrokers and security guards, and power linemen and generator operators. Several were partially disabled and having trouble with steady employment, but they seemed to be coping with their problems. But what we all were, despite the 20 years and the differences that those years had brought, were Cavalrymen: drivers and gunners and medics and mechanics and those who had led them.

Our Cavalry Squadron, a combination of 800 men and 100 armored vehicles, was one of the few armored units in what had been declared to be an infantry war. We were both in demand and misunderstood by our more numerous infantry brethren as a result, and we never worked with the same people for very long. We operated in all of our Division's operational sectors south of Saigon at one time or another from our arrival in 1966 until after TET in January 1968, and then we were sent to the northern-most part of South Vietnam where we worked, in succession, for two different Marine divisions, two different Army divisions, and an Army mechanized brigade. In the course of this nomadic existence, we never had a permanent base. Home to our troopers was their armored vehicle. They lived in and around it, they fought from it, and some died in it. The care and feeding of these armored vehicles was an all-consuming effort, and we were not above stealing parts or ammunition to keep them functioning. Because of that, and because we were forever strangers to the soldiers to whose units we were attached, we were looked upon with some suspicion. All of this conspired to make us a very close-knit unit with a lot of esprit. It did not take long for that feeling to reassert itself as we gathered on that Friday of the reunion.

When we entered the hospitality suite at the motel that first night, we signed in and provided some personal data on a handy yellow pad of paper. Then we wrote our name, the unit in the Squadron in which we had served, and the dates of our sevice on a stick-on nametag and turned to the crowded room to look for

familiar faces from our past. There was a short space of time for each when we hung back, and then we were absorbed into the swirling conversation, squinting at nametags to establish common periods of service. We drifted from one group to another around the room and then out into the semi-dark parking lot to lean against the cars. The wives soon tired of our talk and went off, but we stayed on and on. As our familiarity with each other grew and the warm evening and cold beer worked its magic, the stories started to gather strength and intensity. Do you remember ...? And one led to another. The kind of stories that you had to have been there to appreciate; the kind that too often have a grim touch to them, but that are nevertheless the common currency of all veterans. The kind of stories that are not funny to those who watched the war on television screens, and the kind of stories that end with remembering the names of those who were killed in that fire fight. It may be that the best memorial anybody can ask for is to be remembered and talked of fondly by your fellow soldiers 20 years later.

We talked of mistakes made -- and the price paid -- of small victories, of the armored vehicles that could be at once protective and maddening, and of how we felt in combat. And, finally, we talked about why it had taken us so long to have this kind of a gathering, to come together with others in whom we could confide knowing that we would be understood. We supplied for each other 20 years late what we should have had when we made the transition in 48 hours from a hostile Vietnam to our own peaceful country, where nobody wanted to hear what we had been

doing. We shared our memories with these almost strangers as we had shared the events that shaped them. We talked to each other as we had not been able to talk to people who were our neighbors and our relations. Not even the traditional hometown veterans organizations had provided a relief from that. The bulk of those groups were made up still of men who fought in the "big war" and who looked down on those of us who had done something -- they didn't quite know what, but suspected deep down that it wasn't real soldiering -- in Vietnam. We kidded about what made their war the "big" war -- was it that they shot at you with bigger guns that made you more dead or more wounded?

On Saturday morning, we took a bus into Washington for a tour of the city and its sights, but the focal point for our visit was the Vietnam Veterans Memorial -- the wall. We brought with us a floral display in the form of our Division's shoulder patch and an old baseball cap inscribed with the Squadron's numerals, which spent the remainder of the day at the feet of the wonderful sculpture of the three soldiers that has been erected near the wall. Being at the wall was a moving experience for all of us, but amongst us was the difference of opinion that had haunted the building of the memorial: some felt that it was not visible enough from outside the immediate area and that standing below ground in the middle of it was like standing before a mass grave, while others found the black color and the gash-in-the-earth appearance peculiarly appropriate to the period in our lives that it represents. The heat had gone out of those

feelings, though, and we all agreed that in the end it was simply very moving.

It was moving in different ways for all of us, but two things stood out from those lines of names for me. I had looked up the names of two friends, one killed in October 1967 and the other killed in April 1968. There were 19 tablets between the two names: 15,000 to 20,000 names in the six months that separated their deaths. My time had spanned that six months. It brought home to me once more how thin the line was between being one of the names on that wall and being one of those looking at the names.

The other shock for me was the grouping of the names. Because they are listed in the order of death, you encounter the names of those who died at the same time as the person whose name you are scanning for. If the action was of any size, you find yourself unexpectedly confronting the forgotten names of everybody else who was killed in that particular fight. And then the details of that action come tumbling back and for a moment you are not in Washington on a pretty June day. In the end, however, there is a sense of overwhelming sadness that lingers; sadness that is compounded of the youth and strength whose loss is represented by all those names and of not knowing exactly what it all accomplished.

If the wall is a tribute to youth and strength spent, the sculpture of the three soldiers is a tribute to eternal youth and strength. The figures are wonderfully wrought and the accuracy of detail is truly amazing. It brings you back sharply to the

time and the place when you wore those uniforms and carried that equipment, but unlike the reality they will not get old or die and their uniforms will forever remain dry. It probably takes a veteran to fully appreciate the detail represented: the use of a Marine flak vest on the one figure and an Army flak vest on the other, the grenade pin in the bush hat and the "bug juice" bottle in the camouflage band of the helmet, and the three distinct styles for lacing up the jungle boots. It is all there. But most of all, like John Keats' Grecian Urn, they are frozen in time in their youth and vigor and cannot fade. They will remain there together to tell the world what we were long after the individual names on the wall below have lost their emotional content for the people who come to see the sights of Washington.

We returned to our motel for dinner and dancing. Toward the middle of the evening, several people brought out their collection of slides and a slide projector. We gathered around the projector and watched together, making comments about the people or scenes over the blare of the disk jockey's rock music. More often than not, the pictures featured either a group of troopers working on their armored vehicles or a group of troopers drinking beer. Though we had spent far more time doing the former than the latter, the two activities seemed to be the ones most likely to be recorded. There was even a picture of a crew playing bridge in the shade of their armored vehicle during a lull. A short time later three of the four were dead. There also were some pictures of armored vehicles on the move and of the spectacular of supporting fires landing on the terrain around our

vehicle positions at night. One picture of a troop of Armored Cavalry deployed in the open and moving brought a roar from the group and the profane chant of "If you ain't Cav, you ain't sh--." The sight of a moving formation of armored vehicles could still start the adrenalin pumping, even knowing what we knew on a soft night in Virginia.

From watching pictures, we went to taking pictures. We grouped together for the wives to take pictures and then we had the wives and kids group together. Each grouping took its share of kidding as it posed while the onlookers remembered one characteristic or another of that unit of the Squadron. The dancing and talking and drinking went on well into the morning, as if it were 20 years ago and it was our Saturday night out. Remarkably, nobody looked much the worse for wear when we gathered on the following morning for a barbecue brunch.

The brunch in the bright Sunday morning sun was a time for winding up. Addresses were exchanged and the organizers thanked for their efforts. We gathered for some final pictures, passed the hat for money to cover some extra expenses, and then it was over. We all had places to go, lives to resume living, and obligations to pick up, but we left feeling somehow reassured by our renunion. We left with a feeling of pride that we were all right, that we had come through, that we had friends who had been through it with us, and that we had, at least in our own eyes, belonged to something a little special -- something bigger than ourselves -- that was still important to us.

We have already agreed that we will meet again in three years. It may not be as big a deal as those encampments that the Grand Army of the Republic had after the Civil War, but I believe that we will be coming back together every few years because we like each other.

As my wife and I drove away it occurred to me that I had not heard one comment about having been drafted back then or about the bad break of having been sent to Vietnam. We had been celebrating what we had done, not what had been done to us. If you ain't Cav ....