

*Let us not forget those who paid the price
for peace.*

Fate Revisited

By John Shoemaker

IT HAD taken several years to muster the emotional courage to make my first visit. Standing there somewhat stiffly, the dark reflection of my image before me, I reached up to rub my fingers across his name. It could have been mine. Fate chose differently.

Eighteen years ago, I was a platoon leader for the Americal Division in South Vietnam's I Corps. The lead gunships were billowing smoke to camouflage our assault upon enemy territory. Only a couple of miles from Laos, we spotted the obvious sign of trouble—a cornfield carved into the middle of a jungle. Scrambling as fast as our legs could carry us, we jumped from the hovering choppers and headed toward the edge of the thick growth for cover.

In seconds, the UH-1 "Hueys" were gone. Huddled in the underbrush,

using binoculars, I could clearly see a half-dozen or more North Vietnamese regulars frantically setting up machine guns on a small hill overlooking the landing zone. My heart pounded in my chest.

They hadn't seen us yet. They were probably waiting for the Hueys to come back.

I called for the *Cobra* gunships to strafe the hill with grenades and cannon fire. Simultaneously, I moved my 23 teenagers into position, while my thoughts raced. What if we were trapped? What if we were up against a battalion of enemy regulars? The nearest help was miles away with no access by land. What if we get captured and . . . ?

With the last pass of the *Cobras*, we attacked. There was no turning back now. Adrenalin fed us energy we did not know we had. Finally, reaching the top, we were firing point-blank into their foxholes. Even so, a few got away as darkness closed in on us.

For once, we had caught them by sur-



prise, and this time we suffered no casualties. "Thank you, God," I said to myself as I closed my eyes to steal a few hours of sleep.

SOMEONE TO TRUST

Early the next day, a resupply chopper provided us with a German shepherd scout dog to track down the enemies that had escaped. With the dog and its handler at point, Pvt Larry Gatliff followed second in the line of march. This time, I would be third. As we left the hill, I watched Larry in front of me. He was an uncomplicated, pleasant 19-year-old from Lebanon, Ore. I appreciated his attitude. He didn't moan and groan about being there. He did no whining about whether this war was right or wrong. He did his job and just wanted to survive like the rest of us. I could trust him.

It wasn't too long before we came to a clearing in the triple-canopy jungle. We uncovered a road wide enough for an 18-wheeler. It was too suspicious. Sweat drenched my body in the suffocating heat. Bugs chewed freely on the back of my neck. My mind was racing as I tried to anticipate every possibility. I concluded that if we were going to be ambushed, this was where it would happen. I brought up one squad

In an oft-repeated action of emotional bonding, a child reaches up to touch the name of a fallen soldier.

to cover our right flank. The squad leader muttered disagreement and grudgingly followed orders. The scout dog gave no signals of potential danger. "Follow your instincts," I said to myself. We inched forward, our eyes bulging as we searched for any sign of the enemy.

Suddenly, their attack came from nowhere. With explosive sound, AK-47 bullets were smashing everything in their path.

Explosions, screaming, blood, silence.

I made a commitment not to forget Larry. Some time ago, I tracked down Larry's relatives and learned that Larry's mother couldn't afford to come to Washington, D.C., to see Larry's name at the Vietnam Memorial. In fact, she and Larry's sister had not ever been on an airplane in their lives. The trip would be expensive.

I contacted several organizations, but their money was tight and their priorities already established. Fortunately, a Boston-area businessman, Robert Jeffrey, was moved by my ear-

lier article, "The Real-Life Platoon," published in the *Wall Street Journal*, and he said he would fund the trip under the auspices of the Vietnam Veterans of Massachusetts. Jeffrey's letter stated, "... please assure her we will never forget the terrible loss of her very special son in the service of our country."

FITTING BACKDROP

On Veterans Day, 1987, Larry's mother and sister held hands with my wife and me as we listened to the ceremonial speeches at the "Wall." On that particular day, a howling blizzard of snow pounded the gathering that came to make tribute. It seemed an appropriate hardship. In 1970, I had seen Bob Hope's Christmas show in Da Nang. Somehow it was fitting to see him again while a foot of snow blanketed Washington. His presence helped to remind us of courage unfazed by the adversity of war and weather.

Following what has become a standard practice, I lifted up Larry's sister so that she could rub her fingers across Larry's name. Bowing my head, I whispered, "We remember you, Larry." Tears streamed from a thousand eyes that day.

Looking over my shoulder, as we walked up the West Wall to leave, I felt a chill streak up my spine as my eyes froze on another name etched in the black marble. It was that of "John Shoemaker." He was another story. Another time. The coincidence was frightening.

The weather cleared the next day, revealing a deep blue sky and a brilliant sun, and during the flight home to Boston, I tried to put things into perspective. I thought about what a great country this is and wondered if most Americans really appreciate what we have here. Do they understand how dangerous this world is and how cheaply life is regarded by so many on this planet? Peace is expensive, as no one knows better than those who volunteered to pay the price



John Shoemaker is a previous contributor to The Retired Officer. His last article, "The Real-Life Platoon," appeared in the September 1987 issue.