

Newsletter

November 2003 Manny Bacon Post 1758

Vet John

I received this story via E-mail. Let's remember our homeless Vets over the Holidays.

He was called "Vet John" by the street people he knew, but that wasn't his real name. He and his common-law wife had been on the streets for a decade or longer and in that time some of the details of his previous life had dimmed from his memory becoming old and meaningless luggage he toted around with him wherever he went.

Vet John had been there the day the city cops had descended on their makeshift camp under the Brent Spence Bridge in Covington Kentucky right across the river from Cincinnati, rousting the homeless there and throwing away all their belongings however meager they were in an effort to rid the newly developing riverfront of "unsightly and possibly dangerous" vagrants. Nobody can look at the homeless and like what he sees. The city thought that the image of these castaways living under a bridge abutment was "counter-productive" to creating a user-friendly place where the city could showcase itself to money-bearing consumers so they were tossed, roused and what few things they had managed to accumulate were thrown away, including clothing and sleeping gear needed to weather the severe winters we often get here in the midwest.

Since that time Vet John had hung around the area because as he said "pickins are good" and you could usually see him and some of his group panhandling near the sports stadiums during games and events. On more than one occasion I stopped to talk to him, passed him a pack of smokes and listened while he told about the many places he had been and some of the things he had seen. He was able to laugh about some of them, some of them caused glints of tears in the corners of his eyes.

I asked him once, why they called him "Vet John" and he told me it was because he had been in the military a long time ago, but he was slow to add any details. Street people are not trusting souls and it wasn't easy to pick his story apart; getting little grains of truth here and there mixed into the wilder stories he was fond of telling. Vet John had been a Marine and had served in Vietnam, that much was solidly truthful, a vet can read the truth in another vets eyes, whatever else he was and had been was vague and nebulous at best but when he spoke on rare occasion of his time as a Marine his eyes lit with a hard edged pride and he seemed to lift himself a bit straighter and taller on these occasions.

He would tell you that he had served up near Con Thien and had been at Khe Sahn when the siege was at it's height. He knew things that only a veteran of those fights would know. I was convinced that, at least this part of his life, was something he was proud of and remembered, maybe remembered too well.

His common-law wife that he just called Sally or Sal would hold his shoulder as he talked, laughing too loud at the funny things and hugging him when he stopped in midsentence or his gravelly voice failed him and he stuttered to a painful and uncomfortable stop.

Vet John wasn't happy with his life, that couldn't be a surprise considering the place he found himself in. It was Vet John and four others who filed a class-action suit against the city of Covington Kentucky for destroying their goods. A local good samaritan had replaced the homeless' sleeping bags and clothing. He was also one of the "ringleaders" of the group that set up camp once again under a bridge abutment, this time under the Fifth Street ramp to the expressway on the Cincinnati side of the river. Even though homeless, he was still a leader. He and his homeless friends spread out their sleeping bags under the shelter of the pilings, erected a big paper sign that said "Don't turn your back on the homeless, we are not invisible" and somehow came by an American Flag which was also displayed there in the dim light under the bridge. Some generous person actually paid for a portolet to be put on the site for sanitation.

Last month the city of Cincinnati hosted an event called Tall Stacks and old fashioned riverboats gathered here in a week long festival taking people on river cruises and making an estimated 65 million in profits. Obviously, the city didn't want a bunch of bums and panhandlers irritating their paying consumers so the homeless had to go again. This time the city was more respectful and kinder letting this group which had grown to around twenty people gather their things and move along on their own. The city didn't care where they went as long as it wasn't out in the public's eye.

Four days ago Vet John and his wife died. As the local newspaper reported "...and the ex-Marine who talked a lot about 'Nam died Saturday night in a house that wasn't theirs." (byline: Jane Pendergast, Cincinnati Enquirer).

Vet John and his wife burned in their sleep in an abandoned building fire, the city will no longer have to concern itself with these two street people, that's the feeling going around the top end of the city administration, "sad but they won't be missed" seems to sum it up best. They were disposable people.

You hear a lot from the locals here about it: things like "Yeah, that was bad but so what?", and one of my favorites " No big deal, they were bums and losers, no loss" and this chills me. Are we a people become so callous that the loss of human lives is "no big deal"? We can hear of a tragedy and weigh the loss based on whether these victims were worthy and acceptable?

Yes we can. Yes we do. Every day.

Vet John would never have been invited anywhere, he was raggedy and smelled bad.

Except for a few sparse moments no one ever took any interest in John or the others living there in the underbelly of the city except to run them off and get them away from decent and respectable people, "bad for business" you know. But John had stories he could tell and lessons he could pass along if anyone had ever bothered to ask him. Buy him a six pack and some Marlboros and he would talk about stuff, distant lands, fierce battles, friends killed and missing, a life gone wasted, and how he and his wife had coped with living on the streets for more than ten years. Not once, I repeat, NOT ONCE did John ever blame 'Nam or the Marines for his life on the streets. He'd say "...well, I have a really bad temper and got a couple of arrests on my sheet, can't get no job and I'm too damned old now to change." He'd talk of having few chances in life but accepted that he had been the architect of this and laid no blame outside himself. He even laughed about some of his minor scrapes with the law, chuckling to himself as he told of one arrest where he slapped a female cop and got maced by her six back ups. "Man, I thought I'd fallen headfirst into the chili pot!"

All this is gone now, all that he is and knew and owned. Lost and who cares? Vet John will go into a pauper's grave with few acknowledgements and fewer mourners. There will be no Honor Guard and no flag draped casket, his final resting place will be marked by a small aluminum sign stating his name, date of death, and a case number from the local coroner's office.

It irks me and darkens my soul that men who served their country honorably and bravely should never have a place to lay their head in comfort and peace while we pony up money to rebuild a nation that is swimming in oil and is well capable of rebuilding their own country or at least paying for it's restoration. We have our priorities mixed up when a vet dies this way. How many shared apartments could 87 billion dollars buy here at home? And you know, I find myself asking if we are going to live to see this next generation of American veterans also living under a bridge someday soon. What's to prevent it? The VA is a tangled mess and few social service agencies are willing to work with the hardcore homeless, setting unobtainable goals and demanding accurate paperwork from people that don't even have a mailing address to receive these accurate papers demanded by the workers in their climate controlled and distant offices.

No veteran should ever lack for a place to call home no matter what reason brought him to this unenviable end, none, not one.

Do you feel a twinge of sorrow that a man who once stood tall to serve his nation died in an abandoned house because he had no other place to go, because he had to hide from the cops and the people who would turn him in for trespassing on private property. Maybe you should..... maybe we all should. Vet John made his life such as it was and asked nothing much beyond some change for food and a short bottle of Mad Dog to take the edge off and let him be happy in a stuporous sort of way. It should be something that we hate and despise that there are people out there like him, many people like him and many are veterans. He was a veteran.....and he was my brother too, I will miss him.

For the record: he was a United States Marine, his real name was Gerald Cash. Farewell my brother, you are not forgotten.

Oldest Marine Found Living in Syracuse, NY

SYRACUSE, NY -- As Eugene Lee, a native of Liverpool, NY, enlisted in the Marine Corps during World War I, he never thought that he would one day be the Oldest Marine alive at 104 years old, a survivor of the Battle of Belleau Wood and a Silver Star recipient. While Lee's memory stretched back to a distant land and time, his eyes sparkled as youthful scene flashed across his mind. He recalled men, Marines from his unit. He remembered 5th Marines commander Col. Wendell Neville, who would later become Commandant of the Marine Corps from 1929-1930. "I didn't see much of 'em," Lee joked dropping a subtle innuendo about his junior enlisted rank at the time.

On the first day of the Battle of Belleau Wood, June 1, 1918, 2nd Division troops dug in along a defensive line just north of the village of Lucy-le-Bocage. Capt. Lloyd Williams when advised by French officers to withdraw, replied, "Retreat, Hell! We just got here!" Williams did not survive the battle.

As Lee's mind played back the footage of his Marine years, the World War I Battle of Belleau Wood came into focus.

"We got up there and they split us out into formation. They had the first wave go so far. They kept on firing in the woods there. The next wave would come and jump over them and they'd go so far, and would fire till they got in the edge of the woods." Lee explained that the wave would advance in a leapfrog manner. He was in the third wave. It took four waves across the field to make it to the wood line.

Lee stopped talking as the memories brought on a wave of emotions he couldn't withstand. He dropped the dignified air that a man of his years is accustomed to carrying and sobbed uncontrollably for a brief moment.

"I'm a damned fool!" Lee whimpered out, ashamed of his tears.

When Lee regained his composure he returned to his first hand account of the Battle of Belleau Wood. He explained how one wave of Marines would rush forward a number of yards. As that wave dove to the ground and began firing across the field at the German positions imbedded in the woods, another wave would come from behind. The second wave would run past the third wave as far as the first wave had run.

"I remember a sergeant. He was the first man I seen fall. Before we got to the woods, I seen him fall from view."

Lee wasn't sure how many Marines made it to the wood line with him. "When we got to the woods, there was fighting in there." His voice trembled after the comma of the previous sentence as another memory returned him to tears. He recovered more quickly, with the same courage it must have taken to overcome the fear experienced during the up-close fighting in the French woods. What kind of battle caused a Marine's voice to waiver after 86 years?

"When we got fighting in the woods there, we were mixed up," Lee said. The fear that comes from the disorienting confusion know as the fog of war, which Lee must have been experiencing at that moment in time back then, could still be heard in his voice as his few words implied so much.

"After we got settled there, I helped carry some of the fellas back so far," he said modestly.

The Battle of Belleau Wood raged from June 6 to 26, 1918. There were 9,777 U.S. casualties, of which 1,811 were fatal. Lee received the Silver Star for his actions at Belleau Wood

Welcome Aboard

Richard Palazzo , Rick Croniser , Joseph S. Green III

As of November 14th our post was still listed as number 1 in department with 143% of 2004 goal. Please continue to keep an eye out for new members . Our post is on course to be Number 1 in department by the mid winter conference in January. Way to go guys.

Agent Orange exposure tied to CLL

WASHINGTON, October 20, 2003 - Chronic lymphocytic leukemia, or CLL, has been officially added to the list of diseases for which Vietnam War veterans can receive free-of-charge health care and disability compensation from the Department of Veterans Affairs. American Legion National Commander John Brieden praised VA's publishing of a final rule Thursday in the Federal Register that codifies VA Secretary Anthony Principi's January announcement that the government will extend benefits to Vietnam veterans suffering from CLL.

The Institute of Medicine found a link between CLL and exposure to the herbicide Agent Orange, and that finding is a sound basis on which to award just compensation and VA health care to Vietnam veterans suffering from the disease," Brieden said.

Legislative Update

All our elected representatives in the senate and congress have gone on record as stating that they are against the closing or reduction of service at any VA hospital in NY. They all have testified before the CARES commission to state that they are opposed to this. We should thank them all for their support on this issue. Further more Senator Clinton stated that she would introduce legislation that will seek to stop the funding for the entire CARES process until the program can be looked at in more detail. She feels the process was rushed and not well thought out.

She is also introducing legislation for a Cold War victory medal.

A deal was reached on the disabled veterans tax aka Concurrent Receipt. It will be phased in over 10 years and would still leave about 250,000 veterans still paying the tax. In my opinion that's 250,000 to many.

WASHINGTON, November 14, 2003 - The morning after President George W. Bush delivered his Veterans Day message at Arlington National Cemetery, the administration's Office of Management and Budget - in writing - opposed an additional \$1.3 billion for the Department of Veterans Affairs health care budget and reiterated its call to charge many veterans seeking treatment at the VA a \$250 annual enrollment fee and to raise the pharmacy co-payment from \$7 to \$15.

"A veteran is a veteran," American Legion National Commander John Brieden said. "The law was changed in the '90s to allow all veterans to seek treatment at VA. Although OMB is willing to wield the budget to repel veterans from seeking treatment at VA, the men and women of The American Legion as well as Republicans and Democrats in Congress remain determined not to let that happen." Simply put:

Health care for veterans is the delayed cost of war.

Therefore, if Congress can meet the president's request for an additional \$87 billion to fund the ongoing war in Iraq, then Congress also can raise an additional \$1.8 billion next year, and a \$3 billion increase the following year, to meet the health care needs of veterans.

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Any veteran who has had to wait for 30 days or more for an appointment at Castle Point please, contact me. Also any veteran who is turned away from enrolling at Castle Point due to being category 8 please get the reason for your denied enrollment in writing and contact me. My number is 845-226 8246, Dana Verissimo.

Thanks to everyone who helped with our Veterans Day fund raiser I wish I could have been with you all. Hope you had a happy Turkey Day See you at the party on the 9th, the County Commander will be attending.