

Young Fellows, My Lads

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Young Fellows, My Lads

By R. R. Keene

They came home. But it was not the way they—or anyone else—wanted.

Their brother Marines still in country would never see them again. One thing about Vietnam, when our killed in action left the field, they were gone.

Yes, there was grief and sorrow, but it didn't last long, at least not initially. We simply moved on. We knew the real grief would, in the form of uniformed casualty assistance officers, darken the threshold of next of kin in a day or so.

As the routine medevac helicopters carried the dead off amid tempests of dust, we silently whispered a prayer, knowing those back home had no idea their lives were about to change. There was empathy and pity in our knowledge: Their impending suffering would be far greater than ours. There would be anguish as realization set in. The plans and futures of those still living would be changed, forever. Their beloved would be coming home encased in a gray metal casket to be solemnly escorted to a cemetery plot.

"How often have we thought of those who fought with us and

PFC Gene T. Gietzen, 19, son of William F. and Mary E. Gietzen, was killed in action May 21, 1969, southeast of Hill 55 during Operation Oklahoma Hills. He is buried on this hillside at Saint Clement Cemetery, Hebron, N.D. (Photos courtesy of Victor Vilonis)



made the ultimate sacrifice?" asked former Sergeant Victor Vilonis, now a 68-year-old white-bearded and bespectacled Vietnam veteran who served with Seventh Marine Regiment. "Certainly they have not been forgotten, and I decided several years ago to honor as many as I could, no matter whether I knew them or not. They are all my brothers in arms."

He has become a benefactor for his regiment's 1,593 Vietnam dead, taking roll and marking those bivouacked in small family plots or under all-but-forgotten sites overgrown with tall grass.

These men are the sanguinary legacy of the regiment in Vietnam. Seventh Marines was one of the infantry regiments in the vaunted First Marine Division. It traces its lineage back to 1917, in Cuba and other Caribbean Island crises then common to the West Indies.

But it was during World War II that the regiment, known as the "Magnificent Seventh," became bloodied with the first of its heavy casualties. In its ranks of infantry were fighting legends, John "Manila John" Basilone and Mitchell Paige, recipients of the Medal of Honor. They were among others who fought their way across the Pacific: Guadalcanal, Eastern New Guinea, New Britain, Peleliu and Okinawa. Men who led them, such as



COURTESY OF VICTOR VILONIS

Above left: Walter Krauss, center, was promoted to major by MajGen Herman Nickerson Jr., right, Commanding General, 1stMarDiv, on Oct. 1, 1966, in Da Nang, Vietnam. He was killed nine months later.

Above right: Krauss is buried in the Long Island National Cemetery in New York.

Colonel Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller, already had multiple Navy Crosses from the "Banana Wars." Col Herman Hanneken had been awarded the Medal of Honor in Haiti.

They inspired confidence and led the way through terrible and costly battles. At places with names such as Dakeshi Ridge and Wana Ridge on Okinawa, the 7th Marines sustained a total of 1,200 Marines killed or wounded.

Col Homer Litzenberg commanded the regiment in 1951 when it risked the fast-moving tides to land at Inchon, South Korea, and, in keeping with its motto, "Prepare to March," headed toward the Yalu River on the border with China. Thus, the regiment would be with the 1stMarDiv at the "Frozen" Chosin Reservoir when hordes of Chinese swept south. "Blitzin Litzen" would earn the Navy Cross as the regiment, with the division, fought its way through Communist burp-gun fire, potato masher grenades and frostbite to the Sea of Japan.

In 1963, a lean kid from Montreal crossed the border to enlist. He had every intention of joining the U.S. Navy, but when he got to Plattsburg, N.Y., all the recruiting offices were closed except for that of the Marines.

Fate (and a set of orders) led Victor Vilonis to Vietnam in June 1966 and to 7th Marines at Chu Lai and later to Hill 55 near Da Nang.

"I wasn't an infantryman," he explained. "I worked at the regimental S-2 [intelligence]. He did get to the field. He served like most and did his job not expecting or asking anything in return and, when it was over, hurried up the ramp to the "Freedom Bird" and home.

Home was still Canada, and Vilonis worked at a number of jobs, settling for construction and eventually investing in real estate in British Columbia. His time in Vietnam was a distant memory until 1996 when he visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. He recognized the names of men he knew, etched into the black granite slabs known as "The Wall."

A visit to Vietnam with Military Historical Tours in 1999 followed. His visit was, as with most returning veterans, a catharsis: "I was able to visit some of the places where I had served and think about those men I served with and the lost innocence of youth."

Old fire bases, airfields and battle sites were still recognizable, and he was able to trace 7th Marines from its combat assault across the beach at An Cuong during Operation Starlite on Aug. 18,



COURTESY OF VICTOR VILONIS

1965, through more than 22 combat operations to when the last leathernecks of the regiment stepped aboard amphibious ships bound for Okinawa on Oct. 13, 1970, and breathed a sigh of relief.

In that time, the regiment had paid a price with the lives of Marines and corpsmen who shed blood from Quang Ngai north to the Demilitarized Zone. Nearly 50 years later, it occurred to Vilonis they still needed to be remembered.

"I began my research project to identify all the men who served in my regiment who died as a result of their service in Vietnam. My research expanded to locating their individual burial sites as well as documenting all 7th Marines and Navy corpsmen who sacrificed their lives during and subsequent to the war."

He searched out and diligently documented each man through individual casualty reports and unit diary entries, command chronologies and after action reports.

Then he set out to locate and document individual burial locations, with final documentation being done by photographing and noting the GPS location of each grave in the United States and Canada.

He visited graves in most states, but did not visit sites in Puerto Rico, American Samoa and the U.S. Virgin Islands. "There are no members of 7th Marines buried in Alaska," he said. His native Canada has its share of Marines "in every province with the exceptions of Newfoundland, Northwest Territories and the Yukon."

"Austria, Colombia, France, Germany, Mexico, Panama and the Philippines also have members of 7th Marines KIA in Vietnam buried under their soil."

Additionally, Vilonis uncovered history. "I have managed to identify all our 7th Marines casualties, documented all as to unit and incident."

He notes those buried in veterans and national cemeteries, but the primary purpose of his endeavor was to locate and mark those buried in memorial parks, city and church graveyards and family plots. Also, where he found Marines buried without markers, he submitted applications to the Veterans Administration.

Vilonis traveled on his own in his car and planned his trips carefully. Although the goal was to locate his comrades, he also saw North America in ways most never do.

"The people were for the most part friendly and eager to be of help," he said. "Some naturally kept their distance initially, especially when you mention the name of one of their loved ones



COURTESY OF TOM REECE

Cpl Cecil D. Lamm

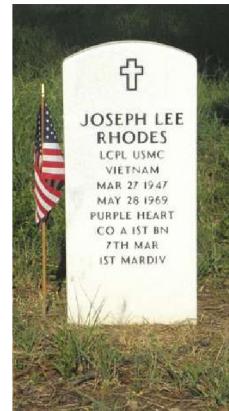


COURTESY OF VICTOR VILIONIS

LCpl Joseph L. Rhodes' grave went unmarked in this unmarked cemetery in Greenwood, Miss., until Victor Vilionis and friends located the burial site and ensured the VA provided a headstone.



COURTESY OF MARILIE MAYNOR



COURTESY OF VICTOR VILIONIS

who was killed in Vietnam. However, two have become close friends and have spent an extraordinary amount of time and effort in helping to confirm and photograph burial locations."

One of them, according to Vilionis, is Kathy Christianson, widow of Second Lieutenant Richard K. B. Toepritz, 25. He was killed while serving with Company G, 2d Battalion on April 5, 1967, during Operation Desoto when a buried bomb killed five other Marines and one corpsman, and another corpsman later died of his wounds. He is buried in Holy Cross Cemetery, Culver City, Calif.

The other friend Vilionis made is former Sgt William L. "Bill" Davis, who spent two tours at Chu Lai with the First Marine Aircraft Wing. His cousin Corporal Cecil D. Lamm, 20, was reportedly killed by small-arms fire while serving with Co L on Nov. 26, 1967, during Operation Forester near Phu Long in the "Arizona Territory." He is buried in Evergreen Memorial Park in Wilson, N.C.

Most of the graves that have been found and marked by Vilionis, however, are those of men personally unknown to him. He visited the grave site of a Marine he knew for barely two weeks before he was killed in a UH-34D Seahorse while overflying a battlefield during Operation Arizona. Major Walter Joseph Krauss, 33, son of Walter J. Krauss Sr. and Alice Krauss, was the new regimental S-2 officer. "He celebrated his 33rd birthday on June 10 and was killed June 18, 1967, on that ill-fated flight," Vilionis said.

"I finally took the time to visit him in June 2010 where he is at rest at the Long Island National Cemetery. I discovered that the awards of two Bronze Star medals he received were not inscribed on his headstone, something that I have corrected." Vilionis realized there were certain to be many others.

"Did you know Lance Corporal Joseph Lee Rhodes of 'Alpha' Company?" He asks no one in particular, but continues reflecting. "He was the son of Mary E. and Willie Rhodes. He was killed in action on Operation Oklahoma Hills, May 28, 1969."

Only 22, Rhodes was born in Mississippi. "He enlisted in Jackson; his record indicated his next of kin lived in Memphis. A *Life* magazine cover story in the June



COURTESY OF VICTOR VILIONIS

Second Lt Paul F. Cobb is buried in Salem City, Va. He was awarded the Navy Cross, but there is no mention of it on his marker.



COURTESY OF VICTOR VILIONIS



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COURTESY OF VICTOR VILIONIS

LCpl John C. Robinson posthumously was awarded the Silver Star and Purple Heart, but he lay without a headstone for more than 40 years. Bill Davis (above right) and Victor Vilionis (below) traveled to Savannah, Ga., and installed the stone provided by the VA.

his country and comrades and had lain unknown for more than 40 years. I knew that he deserved recognition for his sacrifice and service; at the very least a headstone.

"New rules for ordering headstones and markers had been put in place by the Veterans Administration. It took more than two years of searching until we found a relative who could and would authorize a request for a headstone, which was eventually shipped to the cemetery. To complete honoring Lance Corporal Robinson, Bill Davis and I were able to travel to Savannah in January 2013 and personally installed the headstone at the Marine's grave."

Vilionis continued, "Second Lieutenant Paul F. Cobb, the husband of Bonnie W. Cobb, father of a young son, and the son of William C. and Edla R. Cobb, was posthumously presented the Navy Cross; it is not indicated on his marker." Cobb was a 25-year-old platoon leader with Co A, KIA May 16, 1968, on Go Noi Island south of Da Nang. Lt Cobb and his fellow Marines fought a battle against a tenacious and dug-in enemy, through withering fire, amid multiple air strikes and under sweltering heat. The Marines pried the Communists from their entrenchments and forced them to retreat. It cost 7th Marines 10 of their best, including 2d Lt Cobb who was laid to rest at Sherwood Burial Park, Salem City, Va.

Vilionis has found three other unmarked graves of leathernecks with 7th Marines in addition to LCpl Rhodes and Robinson. Cpl Marvin E. Gay, 21, son of Anna M. Gay, KIA Nov. 12, 1968, on the Cobb Bridge, over the Tuy Loan River. He is buried at the Highland Memorial Cemetery in Louisville, Ky.

PFC Lorenzo Tuggle, 20, son of Andy and Odie B. Tuggle, KIA July 5, 1969, during a road sweep of Route 4 near Da Hoa Hamlet in Dien Ban District. Records show he was buried at Pleasant Hill Cemetery in Jackson County, Ga. According to Vilionis, "Somewhere on this hillside, formerly known as Pleasant Hill Church Cemetery, lies PFC Tuggle surrounded by a housing development. On a trip in 2010, I found that the church had burned down and the cemetery no longer existed; his grave location was unmarked and could not be found on the hillside overgrown with trees. We were unable to locate the exact grave location."

LCpl George A. Myers, 19, son of George C. Jr. and Frances M. Myers, was killed during Operation Rio Blanco in Son Tinh District, Southern I Corps on Nov. 25, 1966. He was buried at



COURTESY OF VICTOR VILIONIS



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The grave of Cpl Marvin E. Gay was unmarked in Louisville, Ky., until Vilionis and friends ordered a stone from the VA for their fellow Marine.



COURTESY OF VICTOR VILONIS

The church is gone, having burned down; the cemetery no longer exists; and records of the exact location of the grave of PFC Lorenzo Tuggle are lost. He is buried somewhere near this site.

Gateway Gardens Cemetery, St. Louis. He got his headstone in 2010. His younger sister Betty told a local reporter on July 28, 2010, the family was not financially able to buy a headstone.

Vilionis and friends did the paperwork.

"Our intent is to find the final resting places of everyone killed in Vietnam from our regiment," He told reporter Kevin Carbery: "I feel we must ensure that those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice with their lives must and will have the proper recognitions they so richly deserve."

Across this great continent and nation there are Marines alive today who remember Vietnam and their Marine comrades who died much too young. Had they survived, what they would have done with their lives we can only surmise. But, we try to remember them, especially on days such as the anniversary of our Corps and Veterans Day. We try to honor them throughout the years by living a life they would have wanted lived. For the parents, spouses and loved ones, the poet Robert W. Service, in another time and in another war, gave these bittersweet words to remember:

*"They've told me the truth, Young Fellow My Lad:
You'll never come back again:
(Oh God! the dreams and the dreams I've had, and the hopes
I've nursed in vain!)
For you passed in the night, Young Fellow My Lad,
And you proved in the cruel test
Of the screaming shell and the battle hell
That my boy was one of the best.
So you'll live, you'll live, Young Fellow My Lad,
In the gleam of the evening star,
In the wood-note wild and the laugh of the child,
In all sweet things that are.
And you'll never die, my wonderful boy,
While life is noble and true;
For all our beauty and hope and joy
We will owe to our lads like you."*



COURTESY OF BETTY MYERS

LCpl George A. Myers and his cousin Johnny Schmidt, shown here as toddlers, would both be killed in action in Vietnam—LCpl Myers in 1966 and Army Specialist 4 Class Schmidt in 1968. Myers' family was unable to afford a headstone, so Vilionis and his friends did the paperwork, and the veteran of 7th Marines who made the supreme sacrifice for his country has been duly honored.



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