

Gurney. Tiny. Pig Pen. I Remember Them All

What if Jimmy from Georgia hadn't been killed? And we'd all danced at his wedding instead?

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A Memorial Day Remembrance by Jack Estes



In 1968 I was 18 years old, broke, flunking out of school and my girlfriend was pregnant. Then I joined the Marine Corps and went to Vietnam.

When a rocket hit the mess hall, half full of young Marines, I was about 200 yards away. I saw it pass overhead, long and white, and heard the explosion. I had only been in country a few days and knew no one. Some of the boys were placed in body bags and trucked out, as I recall.

Now I'm old and beat up, moving toward another Memorial Day. I'm thinking about the Marines I did know and wondering what their lives would have been like if they had survived.

Gurney was my first squad leader in Vietnam and I've spent a lot of time over the decades thinking about him. He had blond hair and blue eyes. He quoted memorized lines from movies. One night he told me he had once taken an R&R trip to Hawaii and flown home to get married.

The next day our company was flown out in choppers to the jungle for a big operation. Our squad was leading as we hacked through elephant grass up to our waist and began the ascent up the mountain. The jungle was thick and hot as we climbed. I was scared and worried about getting shot in the face. Gurney was on point, Forrest followed and I was behind him.

Soon we were on a well-used trail where enemy had carved out steps and built bamboo guard rails, which was frightening. Gurney and Forrest disappeared around the bend and soon the firing came. Forrest yelled, "He's hit, Gurney's hit."

When we found him Gurney was lying on his back, eyes open, with a startled look on his face. He had a hole in his neck, with a white cord hanging from it. He's dead, I said, as Forrest was shaking.

What would Gurney have done with his life? If he had moved an inch or two and the bullets whizzed by, he might have lived. He'd have come home to his young wife's kisses. He could have read books and walked on beaches and had children and some kind of fulfilling career. I knew he used to surf. I'll imagine him as a surfer or actor or director, making movies about war and how families feel when their soldier's don't come home.

Over 58,000 died in that damn war. Some were boys from the city or young men from Midwest farms, like Tiny. He was big and strong and carried a machine gun. His best bud hauled Tiny's extra ammo and I nicknamed him Pig Pen. We all laughed about that. They reminded me of blue-collar guys who drink beer after working a day shift at the warehouse. They both died when a rocket-propelled grenade hit Tiny directly. Forrest saw it.

But I'll pretend they're alive and remained close pals. That they went into business and owned a string of gas stations and their boys played baseball and they sat in the stands, ate hot dogs and cheered. Simple stuff we take for granted.

What if Jimmy from Georgia hadn't been killed? When he was first wounded I helped him on the chopper and the enemy kept firing and I dived off. What if Jimmy didn't get shot again and die as the chopper landed? And suppose 20 years later, I never called his parents to tell them how he died? What if his sister didn't fly into town to meet the man who once knew her dead brother?

No. No. I'll pretend none of that ever happened. I can wish Jimmy alive and that we stayed friends and that the way I met his pretty sister was when he introduced us at his wedding. It was high on a hill, with a little church, where the pastures below were green and everyone danced and drank, and his name didn't end up on the black granite wall in D.C. The wall full of nightmares, where everyone comes to grieve.

Hodges was wounded and Recon and Happy and Doc, too. I don't know what happened to any of them. But I saw them bleeding as we helped them to the chopper. Charlie Young took a round through the throat like Gurney and shrapnel ripped through Bo's head. Bob was shot four times. Today he walks with a limp and has a useless arm, and a slew of grandchildren. We were best friends during the war, and I tied his shattered forearm together with my sock.

One night our squad was set in a village overlooking a graveyard, when we were attacked. Corporal Swan ran shirtless outside of a grass hut and took one round through the heart. I heard him say, "Oh my God," as he fell. If he had lived, would he have come home damaged inside, the way some did and still do? I won't imagine that.

These are all real young men I lived with and fought with and think of on Memorial Day. When the picnics are over and the beer has stopped flowing and the flags have been picked up at all the graveyards, memory brings them back to life. They sweep into my dreams or visit when I'm walking in the woods with Gurney.

Mr. Estes is the author of the 1987 Vietnam memoir, "A Field of Innocence," (Kindle, 2014); his novel, "A Soldier's Son," will be released Aug. 1 through Ingram Spark and Amazon.