

# Reflections After the Reunion

By John Bessette



The reunion ended on a festive note Sunday morning in Hampton, as people parted, vowing to keep in touch and meet again at the next "show." My wife Carol and I contemplated what to do next. She is a licensed tour guide for the District of Columbia and, being retired Air force and a Vietnam veteran herself, she has a special affinity for the Vietnam Veterans Wall, down on the National Mall in Washington. We had learned that the traveling version of the Wall was in Hampton, so we decided to visit it.

The Traveling Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the "Wall That Heals," was situated temporarily at an American Legion post not far from our hotel. There we found a one-half replica of the Wall, laid out like its Mall counterpart (only not partially below ground). It was in a beautiful setting, especially prepared for it by the Legion post and other such organizations. A strong Air Force contingent from Langley AFB was helping cope with the crowd, including assisting the Legionnaires in solemnly reading out the names of those inscribed on the Wall. It was a very moving experience.

Both Carol and I know people who are memorialized on the Wall, so we sought their names out again and had quiet conversations. I especially sought out the name "Loel F. Rexroad." Rex was a KB-50 pilot in the 429th AREFS when I arrived there in 1960, and I quickly grew to admire him, as a pilot, an aircraft commander, and a man. We flew a few times together, but he went PCS about a year later. I missed him. Rex eventually, like most of us who stayed in the Air Force, went to Southeast Asia. He died there in 1970. I went over to the panel where his name was inscribed and told him all about the reunion. He would have loved being there with all the guys and gals again, swapping stories and telling lies. So he needed an update.

Then it suddenly occurred to me that he was there among us through the reunion days. He was listening to us, and quietly adding to the conversation in our heads. Like all our comrades, who departed us in Vietnam or since, he was whispering thanks during our Memorial Service.

Thank YOU, Rex. You and all the others helped make us the prime outfit we were. We're grateful for your participation in our lives.

## THIS BAND OF HEROES

By Johnson Wood

This one's voice is deep, strong accustomed, I think to command. He carries himself as straight and as tall as he must have in that long vanished world where he was an airplane driver carrying explosive peace missives to would-be world conquerors.

Another is not as tall. Age-bent, he speaks quietly as if he had not the strength for shouting as he must have shouted his way from Omaha Beach, through captive Europe and to a defeated enemy's capital city.

Another guy's red USMC ball cap is almost redundant it's been half a century and still that Marine's swagger proclaims the Pacific Island proof of his breeding. He carries those decades tucked under his arm like the lightest of bundles and you just know that he'd do it all again should the need arise.

The tall man in the USN style khakis, holding himself fast against the tremors, who learned to lead as a youth is a leader still. A man with a cause, be sure that when this cause succeeds he will find another. Meanwhile: join him in the Pledge of Allegiance.

With these guys for a few hours every other week I forget my puffy ankles, the knees I don't trust anymore; I forget the shortness of breath. I am a kid coming of age in rainy Alsatian woods. In those few hours I'm content with my lot, content with the company of this dwindling band of heroes, with this, my own native land.

## Friendship

I have a list of folks I know...  
all written in a book,  
and every now and then...  
I go and take a look.  
That is when I realize these names.  
They are a part.  
not of the book they're written in  
but taken from the heart.  
For each name stand for someone...  
who has crossed my path sometime,  
and in that meeting they have be-  
come...the reason and the rhyme..  
Although it sound fantastic...  
for me to make this claim,  
I really am composed...  
of each remembered name.  
Although you're not aware...  
of any special link,  
just knowing you, has shaped my  
life...more than you could think.  
So please don't think my greeting...  
as just a mere routine,  
your name was not...  
forgotten in between.  
For when I send a greeting...  
that is addressed to you,  
It is because you're on the list...  
of folks I'm indebted to.  
So whether I have known you...  
for many days or few,  
in some ways you have a part...  
in shaping things I do.  
I am but a total of many folks I've  
met, you are a friend I would  
prefer...never to forget.  
Thank you for being my friend!!!

## Memorial Day in Williamsburg

by Carel Humme

This is just a short one to relate an experience I had Monday, May 27, at Williamsburg Memorial Park. I was attending a Memorial Day Service at this local cemetery representing our local Exchange Club passing out small flags to the children as they arrived at the ceremony. As I was handing out the flags, I looked down at my feet where I was standing and there was a grave marker for Louis J. Roffinoli, Navigator, 427th AREFS and an old friend. I was surprised and pleased at the same time as I had attended a memorial service for ROF after he passed away, but had no idea where he was buried. I was reminded of our Memorial Service at Langley. The service in the cemetery was as heart grabbing as our Memorial Service. To me the entire service that day was dedicated to an old TAC Tanker Lou Roffinoli.

## Reminiscences of "TAPS" by Ted Raschke

Probably no other 24 notes of music using only three of the scale notes, C, F, and A, can evoke so many varied emotions from career military personnel. My father was a retired LtCol., (USA). During the early years World War II, we followed him to many a military post before he joined the fighting forces on the continent of Europe. As a pre-teen I can recall being at his side on many an evening out of doors listening in hushed silence as these mournful, yet lilting, notes echoed through the post amplified by the powerful speaker systems installed on bases at that time. "Taps." All I knew then was "lights out, it is time for bed." Fast forward fifteen years and I have become a career officer in the USAF flying aerial tankers at England AFB, LA. On a dark rainy night our squadron is undergoing an Operation Readiness Inspection by Higher Headquarters. Six KB-50J's are lined up for one-minute take-off intervals. I am a pilot in number three aircraft to roll and my cousin is number two just sixty seconds ahead of me. We have his beacon and formation lights in view and suddenly there is a fireball explosion right in front of us. The mission continued with five remaining tankers. Our squadron lost all seven crew members on that aircraft that night. Two of the crew was buried locally at a Veteran's Cemetery and the entire squadron turned out for the ceremonies. "Taps" had taken on a new lump in the throat dimension for me during these solemn rites. Over the next twenty years, or so, the Vietnam conflict, and the loss of many a fellow airman, I could not begin to count the number of times I have stood teary eyed next to a grave, eyes closed, tears welled up inside my eyelids while memories of a lost friend raced through my mind during the playing of those 24 notes.

In 1989, my father passed on at the age of eighty-one. He was an "Old Warhorse" and endured under intense battle condition during World War II and through the Korean Conflict. He had paid his dues, so to speak in career terms, and we interred him a newly dedicated veterans section of a cemetery in Maryland. A military Honor Guard, the accompanying rifle team and bugler were present and the ceremony was pretty much straightforward, right out of the book. In finality, "Taps" echoed more softly over the rolling countryside this sunny afternoon. The same tears and lump in my throat were there as in times past, but how different it was this time. "Taps" had com full circle. I was no longer just standing by my fathers' side some 49 years ago and thinking, "lights out, and time for bed." It was a farewell to a warrior who happened to be my Dad.