

Jon C Jacobson:



1947-1970

The Uncle I Never Knew

Kevin Laskey

June 2004

Introduction

This biography grew out of an eighth grade social studies project assigned by my teacher at Montgomery Middle School, Mr. Carl Cooper. He asked us to write about a member of our family, telling that person's story and connecting it to the period in which the person lived. I chose to write about a person I had never met, my mother's brother, Jon C. Jacobson. Jon had been killed in Vietnam in October 1970. When I started this project, I thought of him as the uncle I never knew. To me, he was more a name on the wall of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. than a real person. Two years ago, wanting to learn more about him, I wrote the poem that precedes this book. And now, I have learned about Jon and see him as a person, not just a name. I have also wanted to preserve his memory for others as part of the biography project sponsored by the New Jersey Vietnam Memorial Museum in Holmdel, New Jersey.

There are many people who made this book possible. Firstly, I must thank my mother and editor Mary Jacobson, who gave me great suggestions and refined my words, as well as helping me with my research. I must also thank those who told me about Jon: his siblings William, Merrill, Paul, Clifford, Robert, Thomas, Julie, and Richard Jacobson; and friends Joe Doria and Hugh Roarty. My father James Laskey helped me with formatting and publishing; without his help the book would not look as good as it does. Thanks also go to Mr. Carl Cooper, who created this great assignment and gave me suggestions to make this biography better.

I see a wall,
A black wall,
A shiny wall.
A wall so simple,
Yet so powerful.

As I walk towards it,
I see grooves in the smooth,
almost wet,
Granite.

And as I get closer,
The grooves become more visible,
A pattern of lines,
Formed to make letters,
To make names.
The names of those who died in the Jungles of Vietnam.

Now I am at this wall,
I walk along its V-shaped path,
Looking at all of the names.
Names of people who I will never know,
never see,
never hear.

And now I come to a special name,
One I know of.
I feel along the perfectly carved grooves.

The name reads "Jon C. Jacobson,"
The uncle I never knew.

Chapter 1

Growing Up



Jon Christopher Jacobson was born on October 19, 1947, to William and Katherine Jacobson, who lived in Bayonne, New Jersey. He was born in his grandfather's red brick sanatorium that stretched from 327 to 333 Avenue C. The Swiney family had lived at the Swiney Sanatorium since its opening as a small general hospital in 1912, and Katherine and Bill made their home there as well. This building would be Jon's home for much of his life. The extended family of grandmother and maternal aunts lived there, and Jon's aunt, Juliana Swiney, M.D., practiced medicine on the first floor. Across the street was the family's church, St. Mary's.

Bill was a World War II veteran and a magazine salesman, while Katherine was a homemaker. Jon was their fourth child, and there were more to come. His brothers William, Merrill, and Paul were born in '43, '45, and '46 respectively, and the next one, Cliff, would be born in '50.

The year Jon was born, his mother fell ill with Scarlet Fever and was in bed for the better part of Jon's first year. So, his grandmother and other relatives, including his aunt Alice Belle, stepped in to help. As he grew older, more children were added to the family. After Cliff came Robby in 1951, Tom in '52 and Mary in '53. Julie and Richie brought the number to ten in '55 and '56. Sister Julie was born eight years after Jon on the very same day. From that time, they always shared birthday celebrations. Like his siblings, Jon was a baby boomer, one of the many children born in the years following the end of World War II.

The "Baby Boom"

The "Baby Boom" era was the period after World War II that extended throughout the fifties. A huge influx of children were born around the world. Many World War II veterans came home to their sweethearts and settled down to raise a family. Also, the "Baby Boom" era saw changes in American culture such as large scale television use for the first time. The Jacobson family got their first TV in 1950. Jon's brother Merrill remembers the day Dad brought the TV home. "It had a radio, a victrola, and about a 12 inch, black and white screen. When we first turned on the TV, the show was 'Howdy Doody.'" "Howdy Doody" became one of Jon and his brothers' favorite shows to watch.



The main characters from "Howdy Doody"



The first Jacobson children. From left to right: William, Jon, Paul, and Merrill



The "Lone Ranger"

As Jon grew older, he began to watch western TV shows and movies. He watched the "Lone Ranger" frequently and always wanted to see the latest western film release. With his vivid imagination, Jon would get very involved in shows. While watching TV, he would sometimes beat a stick on the floor in excitement, possibly using it as a whip. Unlike most children, who would imagine themselves as American Cavalry fighting out west, Jon always identified more with the Indians. As opposed to imagining himself in a blue uniform with a rifle, he would see himself in Indian garb with a bow and arrow. He had performed dressed as an Indian in a show at grammar school, PS No. 12. A picture of the show appeared in the local paper and was one of the things his mother kept for many years.

Going to School

Like his three older brothers, Jon started elementary school across the street at Saint Mary's, the elementary school associated with Saint Mary's Catholic Church. Fairly soon after, at the urging of his Uncle Merrill, he and his brothers were moved to Public School #12. Jon excelled at school. He was very smart and worked hard. He was a real straight-shooter who would do everything to the best of his ability.

At school, Jon was known to befriend the outcast. A boy in his grade named Michael Lennon had Elephant's disease and had a very large head. Naturally, he became the butt of many jokes. Instead of laughing at the jokes, Jon became his friend. Jon would stand up for him, something no one else would do, and Michael would remember this act of kindness.



During elementary school, family friend Bee O'Connor took each child on a "Bee Day." The child could select a day trip in the New York metropolitan area. Trips included the Statue of Liberty, Coney Island and Yankee games. Bee was like a member of the family and felt close to all the children.

As Jon grew older, he became interested in ancient languages and the classics. So, when he went to high school at Saint Peter's Prep School, in Jersey City, he took the classics curriculum instead of the science curriculum that several of his brothers had chosen. He studied hard throughout high school and continued to do well. Everyone who knew him thought that he would be successful.

Sports



Jon with a basketball trophy

One of the favorite Jacobson pastimes was sports. The Jacobson boys played basketball, baseball, and football. Although he was almost 6'4" and 200 pounds, and extremely strong, Jon was not as competitive about sports as some of his siblings were. He did play Little League and Babe Ruth baseball, as well as basketball in PAL and CYO leagues, and of course pick-up games at 9th Street Park. When playing casually, Jon always wanted to play by his own rules. He was known for holding on to the pole under the basket when boxing out. When he did this, you couldn't move him.

In high school, Jon tried to play football, an experiment that ended in comic fashion. According to his brother Paul, Jon was standing on the sidelines of a

football game, with his thumbs in his pants trying to act tough. Then suddenly, a player was forced out of bounds and ran into Jon. In the collision, Jon broke his thumbs, ending his dabbling with football.

After School Activities



Jon and his 3 elder brothers and uncle Ken at church

Instead of spending his afternoons on a sports team, Jon was involved in many other after school activities and clubs. He was a cub scout. Katherine was the den mother for his troop and conducted meetings in a room in the house that had a large metal table. The room became known as the “cub room” and projects were completed on the “cub” table. Family members remember Jon being involved in a production of the Jonah and the whale story, and attending “Blue and Gold” dinners where cub scout awards were given out. Being a devout Catholic, Jon made all of his sacraments at St. Mary’s. Later, he would join the Knights of Columbus, following in the footsteps of his grandfather, Dr. Merrill Swiney, who had been a Grand Knight and whose sword the family treasured.

Jon also had a great interest in politics. Although he was more conservative than others in the family, he was involved in the Young Democrats. In addition to his studies at St. Peter’s Prep, Jon was part of an Ancient Greek language club. He would always try to keep himself occupied and extend himself.

For a time, Jon’s younger brother Tommy shared a room with Jon. Instead of objecting to this arrangement like most older siblings might, Jon said it was okay and looked out for Tommy. At night, he would read the “Landmark” books to Tommy and would sometimes take him to St. Peter’s Prep



Jon (left) and Tommy (right) football games. Tommy’s love of history and sports was nurtured by Jon.

When Jon was older, he would care for his other younger siblings as well. At night, he would put his youngest brother Richie to sleep. Richie remembers that they would play a game in which Jon would think of an animal and Richie had to ask questions to try to find out what it was. Richie remembers that Jon would often think of some of the most outlandish animals from around the world, many times stumping Rich.

To help pay his college tuition, Jon got a job working at the local A&P. To his family, Jon was not the most sociable person. He was more of a workaholic and a private person. So,

some of them did not expect him to do well at the job. But Jon was very successful at the A&P. He became animated when acting as a cashier, meeting new people and chatting with old neighbors. He made many friends at the A&P and most people would comment on how sociable and courteous he was. With his job, he had contact with many people in the community, who grew to know, like and respect him.

Jon in many ways was a stereotypical Baby-Boomer child. He watched TV, played sports, and respected older people. He accepted the values of the World War II generation and grew up much like millions of other boys in America. But by the end of high school, the innocence of the 1950's and his childhood ended. Bullets flying in a small Southeast Asian country and the winds of social change would completely change Jon forever and create conflicts within the Jacobson household.



The 10 Jacobson children. From left to right.
 Row 3: William, Merrill, Paul
 Row 2: Tommy, Robbie, Jon, Cliff
 Row 1: Julie, Richie, Mary



Jon and his younger sister Julie, who shared the same birthday, blow out the candles



Jon held by his father William



Chapter 2

Conflict and Social Change at Home



As Jon was graduating from high school in 1965, the winds of social change were blowing across the United States. The seeming innocence and affluence of the Baby Boom Era disappeared amidst drastic changes in the culture and social climate of the country. Young people across the nation rebelled against their parents, the culture, and the status quo. Among the political causes fuelling the rebellion were equal rights for all Americans, the civil rights movement, and how the United States government should deal with a small, unknown country in Southeast Asia called Vietnam.

Going to College



Jon with his two sisters, Mary and Julie after his junior year of college

After graduating from St. Peter's Prep, Jon wanted to become a Jesuit priest like his brother Merrill. The Jesuits rejected his application and told him to reapply after college. So instead, he moved on to St. Peter's College in Jersey City where he planned to be an English major. He would ride the bus from Bayonne to Jersey City each day, frequently sitting with fellow student and friend Joe Doria. Joe remembers Jon as being a very sincere and respectful person who would always give you his entire attention in conversation. But Jon was not a typical 1960's college student. While many teenagers were abandoning religion and traditional moral values, or growing long hair and adopting untraditional spiritual practices, Jon was a devout, by-the-book Catholic with very strong beliefs. He had been a youth member of the Knights of Columbus, and a member of the sodality at St. Peter's Prep—a group devoted to the Blessed Mother. Many of Jon's values came from his religion.

At St. Peter's College, Jon studied English, theology, philosophy, and the classics. He also enrolled in the highly controversial Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC). ROTC would provide military training to a student during college, often giving scholarship money to defray tuition, in return

Protest Against the Vietnam War

On college campuses and public places throughout the United States, young people were assembling to protest US involvement in the conflict between North and South Vietnam. Many times these protestors were met with resistance. In Des Moines, Iowa, for example, Mary Beth and Joe Tinker were suspended for wearing black armbands to school, protesting the war. They sued the school on the grounds that they had the right under the constitution to wear the armbands. The case went all the way to the United States Supreme Court. In the end, the Court ruled in favor of the Tinkers, stating that wearing the armbands was protected under the First Amendment of the Constitution.

Other protest against the Vietnam War ended in more violent fashion. On May 4, 1970, students at Kent State University in Indiana assembled on the campus to protest the US "incursion" into Cambodia. The mayor of the town of Kent called in the National Guard to try to quell the protest. After several attempts to disperse the crowd, several guardsmen opened fire, killing four students, two of which were not even involved in the protest, and wounding nine others. After the protest, many colleges just stopped; classes stopped, exams were cancelled. After Kent State, the "Campus-based protest lost lots of its momentum" (American History with very few large protests taking place in the 1970s.



for service in the Armed Forces following graduation. During the 1960s, ROTC was highly unpopular with college students and was the object of much protest. Some colleges discontinued ROTC programs because of strong student opposition. In 1969 at Kent State University in Indiana (see above), when the ROTC building caught fire, some students cut the fire hoses to prevent the fire from being put out!

Jon probably enrolled in ROTC for several reasons. “We fight because we must fight if we are to live in a world where every country can shape its own destiny,” said President Lyndon B. Johnson. Jon could identify with this quote. He was an ardent supporter of democracy and disdained communism, partly because it disapproved of religion. In addition, many of his values were those of the World War II era. He believed that it was his duty to serve his country in the armed forces during a time of war. Jon knew he could be drafted into military service as well, and decided he would prefer to be in the army as an officer than as an enlisted person.

During the summer, Jon trained at Indian Town Gap in Pennsylvania. During a visit to see her older brother on a hot summer day, Mary Jacobson remembers watching a military parade with Jon leading a column of soldiers. As they marched the soldiers sang, “I want to be an Airborne Ranger, I want to go to Vietnam. I want to be an Airborne Ranger, I want to kill the Viet Cong.” Despite his patriotism and sense of duty, Jon did not strike his family as a person born to be a soldier. He was very sensitive, and loved things like opera and theology. He did not fit the macho stereotype that his sisters connected with military service.

The Draft

Every 18 to 25 year old feared it; tried to avoid it. But there was little you could do when the pink slip found its way to your residence. It was the United States military draft, formally called selective service.

In 1967, the US congress passed the Selective Service Act declaring that all males between the ages of 18 and 26 must register for service. Many young people greatly opposed the draft. In protest, young men would burn their draft cards, return them to the government, or refuse their summons if they were drafted, risking jail in the process. Some fled to Canada to escape the draft.



A student burning his draft card in protest

Selective Service came to the Jacobson household in the mid-‘60’s. A small piece of paper came in the mail for Paul, who was a student of philosophy and an opponent of the Vietnam War. He had been drafted into military service. Objecting to the very idea of war, Paul could not conscientiously go to another country and kill people. He objected to his summons on grounds of conscience and was classified for alternate duty.

Having one Jacobson child preparing to go off to war and another objecting to it created much friction at 333 Avenue C. While conflict wracked the jungles of Vietnam, and protests filled college campuses, another conflict of words erupted in the Jacobson household.

Conflict at Home

With such stark differences of opinion, arguments erupted between Jon and Paul. Even at the dinner table, the brothers' divergent views of the conflict surfaced.

Jon's brother William remembers one such argument. One night at dinner, each brother defended his position about the country's role in Vietnam. Jon stood up for American involvement, while Paul argued that it was immoral and that American soldiers had no right being there. During the fierce debate, Jon said, "I'll be back in a body bag," and left the room.

Just as the fabric of the country was torn apart by Vietnam, so divisions over political issues created unease in the Jacobson family as well. How could a family in the turbulent sea of the '60s survive this great social conflict, especially with one son in the seminary, one a conscientious objector and one headed for service as an officer in the United States Army?

Graduation

Jon graduated from St. Peter's College in 1969 with a degree in English. Because of his participation in the ROTC program, he was assigned to basic training in the army at Fort Benning, Georgia at the rank of 2nd Lieutenant. He had hoped to be assigned to intelligence, but was placed in infantry. He had hoped to be sent somewhere other than Vietnam, but many military units were being shipped off to fight in the sultry jungles of Southeast Asia. Since he was very worried about his future, he took out a large life insurance policy. What was going to happen to Jon? Would he be shipped off to Vietnam? Would he die there? His future was clouded with uncertainty.



Jon, far right, leads a column of soldiers during training.

Chapter 3

Off to War



Jon preparing to head to Fort Lewis pictured with his Aunt Juliana Swiney (left), and a family friend, Bee O'Connor

Basic Training

After graduating from St. Peter's College in May 1969, the army assigned Jon to basic training at Fort Benning, Georgia. There, he learned the ins and outs of the army. After completing training, he was transferred in the fall to Fort Lewis out in Washington State.

Jon was not the best driver, so his mother worried about his driving himself to Washington State. Older brother Will came to the rescue. Will remembers the long cross-country drive, followed by visits with uncle Ken Jacobson and his family in Oregon. The brothers also met other Jacobson relatives on that trip since Bill's uncle, John Crocker, had settled on the West Coast.

Jon had hoped that he would be assigned to intelligence services, possibly in Germany, and not to a combat unit in Vietnam. While serving at Fort Lewis from November 1969 to July of 1970, he received orders to ship out to Vietnam in August. He wondered if he would ever return home to pursue a new dream of attending law school. When he left Fort Lewis, Jon headed to Vietnam and army headquarters in Ben Hoa.

The Vietnam Conflict



American soldiers rush to a Bell UH-1 "Huey" Helicopter

In late 1945, Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam to be independent from its French Rulers. In the subsequent revolution, the French, backed by the United Kingdom and United States, fought to keep Vietnam in French hands. However, in 1954 at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, the French were defeated and Vietnam became independent, but divided into North and South until political leaders could be elected. The US was worried that communist Ho Chi Minh would easily win the election, so they prevented it from occurring, with the result that North and South Vietnam became separate entities. The United States backed the South, with the North becoming Communist under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh. Since Ho Chi Minh and many Vietnamese wanted Vietnam to be united, in 1960, the North Vietnamese announced the "National Liberation Front" to unite both Vietnams. The United States, wanting to stop the flow of Communism as it had done in the Korean war, decided to help the South Vietnamese defend themselves against the Northern forces.

As the sixties progressed, the United States involvement escalated from sending only military advisers to providing large numbers of soldiers to fight in the Vietnamese civil war. To achieve this growing amount of manpower, the United States reinstated the military draft. Young Americans from across the United States were sent to the jungles of Vietnam to fight and perhaps die for reasons they did not fully understand.

As the United States became increasingly involved in the conflict, and more and more Americans were dying on foreign soil, the war became less and less popular with the public. In January 1968, the North Vietnamese armies launched a large attack on South Vietnam called the "Tet Offensive." Although it was largely unsuccessful strategically, many Americans died, making the war even more unpopular.

When Richard Nixon became president in 1969, he called for the process of “Vietnamization,” through which command of the conflict would be gradually handed over to the South Vietnamese, allowing for the gradual withdrawal of US troops.

In 1973, the United States officially withdrew their military forces from Vietnam. Two years later, the Northern Vietnamese captured the southern capital of Saigon, uniting Vietnam into one country. The United States’ defeat came at great cost and “diminished its reputation of the defender of democracy and freedom throughout the world.” (American History).

To Vietnam

In the spring of 1970, Jon was assigned for training at the US Army Headquarters in Ben Hoa. He first flew in to Saigon before going to Ben Hoa and met with a friend from back home named Hugh Roarty. Roarty was an intelligence officer under MACV, the overall command for all the military branches in Vietnam. Both men were confused, felt culture shock, and were frightened when they first arrived in Vietnam. They were in a strange country and part of an army that was so different from their former lives as students. Also, they were very much isolated from the rest of the world, their only outlets being Armed Forces Network TV, the armed forces newspaper, and the occasional letter from home. And they had not even been exposed to combat yet.

[Bien Hoa]

While training at Ben Hoa, Jon had been bombarded with Vietnamese mortars, his first taste of real combat. After training he went back to Saigon and met with Hugh Roarty again. Jon told Hugh that he was very nervous during the bombardment, questioning his confidence under fire. Seeing Jon’s distress, Roarty tried to get Jon a job in intelligence at MACV, away from actual combat. But Jon had already been assigned to train a battalion of Vietnamese soldiers in the province of Go Cong south of Saigon in the Mekong River Delta.

[Ben Tre]

After being assigned there, not much is known about Jon’s experience in Vietnam. Did he see much fighting? What happened to the soldiers under Jon? What was Jon feeling? We can only speculate about these questions. The true combat experiences of Jon Jacobson have been lost to history. *[see page 13]*

It is clear that Jon did retain his sense of humor and caring for others despite the challenges of his assignment. In a letter to his Aunt Alice Belle on October 1, 1970, Jon expressed concern for her recovery from a broken hip she had suffered the winter before. He wrote, “There is no ice over here in Vietnam. So if you ever come to this exotic orient, you do not have to worry about slipping on an icy street.” He went on to note that, I believe the mud pie was invented in Vietnam. The ingredients are plentiful all over this area.” He went on to comment that the weather was not as hot as he had expected, although he had yet to experience



Jon’s boots from Vietnam

the dry season which he understood would bring much hotter temperatures. Jon closed with the wry observation, “Dry season is the off season for mud pies.”



The highlighted text was our original understanding. We later learned the actual events. See below for information provided by M. Eberhardt (1stLt, Ret.), who was present on that day.

It was another sultry day in the Go Cong province along the Mekong Delta. There only seemed to be two types of weather in this area—humid and humid. The day did not seem to be out of the ordinary in Vietnam.

A first Lieutenant was riding in a jeep with two other soldiers over a dusty jungle road. The jeep rolled around a bend heading towards camp. Suddenly, there was a deafening boom. The jeep had run over a Viet Cong landmine. The jeep’s occupants were sent flying in all directions. The first Lieutenant lay lifeless on the road while soldiers from the camp came running to the sight of the explosion. One of the soldiers found the dead officer. He scanned over the bloody uniform trying to find a dog tag to identify the unlucky soul. He found it. “Jon C Jacobson,” the silvery letters read.

[The details below were provided by Mike Eberhardt (1LT Ret.) and written by Julie Jacobson, the aunt of Kevin Laskey on 2/21/2020]

It was another sultry day in the Ben Tre Province, southwest of Saigon, on Saturday, Oct. 3, 1970 when Jon arrived for his first combat assignment at the military compound in the small village of Ham Loung. He was replacing a lieutenant who had developed appendicitis and was medevacked to a hospital. Jon became the fifth member of a five-man Mobilization Advisory Team (MAT V). It consisted of two commissioned officers, Mike Eberhardt and Jon, two non-commissioned officers, nicknamed Mac and Wolfe and one interpreter, referred to as Fang. Their purpose was to support the South Vietnamese in regaining their land. The Vietcong were heavily embedded in the Ben Tre Province area of the Mekong Delta. MAT V regularly conducted missions ranging from one to five days that involved walking through jungle and rice paddies to clear out the Vietcong, their arms and supplies.

When Jon joined the MAT V team, they were planning the next operation, scheduled to depart in three days, on Tuesday, Oct. 6, 1970. As the custom, a new member was not sent on a mission until he had acclimated himself to the environment. But, as Jon participated in the planning, his interest increased. Even though not expected to go, Jon repeatedly stated, “This is why I’m here.”

On Oct. 6th, Jon, Mike, Mac and Fang set off on the operation. The first leg of it involved traveling by jeep 13 miles to a United States compound in Ben Tre City. In the morning of the next day, Wednesday, Oct. 7th a small boat transported them to the beginning of the trail. They walked carefully along a narrow, dangerous jungle path, passing a sign that read "Killing Zone." After stopping for lunch, they resumed their trek. Suddenly, Mike heard a deafening “pop.” The Vietcong, hiding off the path, had detonated a bomb. Jon was killed instantly. Mac and Fang incurred severe injuries which soon proved fatal. Mike, carrying the radio, injured one leg. He was the sole survivor. Mike Eberhardt, the team leader of MAT V, provided the details of this story in 2017.

Chapter 4

The Aftermath

Bayonne Lt. John Jacobson, Victim of Cong Booby Trap

A Viet Cong booby trap took the life of a 22-year old Bayonne lieutenant on Thursday, the 27th Bayonne soldier to die in the Vietnam war.

John Jacobson, a recently commissioned officer, had been assigned to Vietnam since Aug. He had just been transferred to an area south of Saigon, the Tam Long district in Kienhoa province.

LT. JACOBSON had entered the Army after completing courses at St. Peter's College in Jersey City. He finished basic training at Fort Benning, Ga., then joined an infantry training brigade stationed at Fort Lewis, Wash. From there he was sent to Asia.

He attended School 12 in Bayonne, St. Peter's Prep and St. Peter's College. He was an honors student at the college, on the dean's list, and he was graduated with honors. He also



LT. JOHN JACOBSON
Killed in Vietnam

wrote for the school newspaper.

HE WAS ACTIVE locally in the Knights of Columbus and the Young Democrats. According to

his older brother, Paul, he was much more conservative than the rest of the family.

The son of Katherine Swiney and William W. Jacobson, Sr., he also is survived by seven brothers and two sisters, ranging in age from 27 to 13. He was the nephew of Drs. Merrill and Juliana Swiney and Miss Marie Swiney, a Bayonne teacher.

LT. JACOBSON had planned to enter law school after his release from the service and had signed up for a pre-law examination administered by the Army. At St. Peter's he had majored in English with an emphasis on classic literature. He also enjoyed classical music, especially Wagner, and had a large record collection.

While in Asia, he wrote home frequently and according to his family was in good spirits. His brother Paul said he believed in what he was doing, and didn't resent serving in the Army.

An article in the Bayonne Times covering Jon's death. Note that his first name is spelled wrong.

The News Comes Home

Tommy was driving home from college for the weekend when he saw two army officers outside the door of 333 Avenue C. Merrill was in Germany studying to be a priest when he was called in by his rector because something had come up at home. He had only been in Germany a few weeks and his German was not good. He remembers returning to his room in confusion, not understanding whether the rector had said Jon was wounded or had been killed. Mary and Julie were summoned to the office at Holy Family Academy where they attended high school and told to bring their books. Their aunt and uncle were there, looking somber. On Friday October 9th, 1970, the news reached the Jacobson family that son and brother Jon had been killed in Vietnam two days earlier. He was just 22, about to celebrate his 23rd Birthday.

The news sent shock waves throughout the family and the community. The entire family mourned the loss of a beloved person who had been a part of their lives and was taken from them too soon. Paul, who had been serving in alternate duty, was immediately discharged from service. Friends and neighbors hung up flags in his honor and offered condolences. Many shared reminiscences about Jon with the family. Many spoke very highly of him. Joan Closick, 79, who had known Jon from his job at the A&P, said, "He was a friend of everyone." (Bayonne Times) Mrs. Joseph Molloy, 91, went as far as saying, "I think if anyone is perfection, then he was perfection." (Bayonne Times)

Neighbors donated money in Jon's name. With some of the money that was given to the family, the Jacobsons erected a flagpole as a memorial for Jon. They selected a site in the backyard, outside the kitchen



—Times Photo
IN MEMORY — Flags wave at half mast in front of homes on West 15th Street. They were raised in honor of 1st Lt. Jon Jacobson who died Oct. 7 in Vietnam.

A photograph from the Bayonne Times showing the flags hung by neighbors in Jon's honor

Deaths

JACOBSON—Jon. C., 1st Lt. U.S.A., on Wednesday October 7, 1970 at Vietnam. Late residence, 333 Avenue C. Devoted son of William W. and Katherine Swiney Jacobson Sr., Loving brother of William Jr., Merrill, Paul, Clifford, Robert, Thomas, Richard, and Juliana Jacobson. Dear grandson of the late Dr. Merrill A. and Julia Cawley Swiney and the late Charles Edward and Winifred Crocker Jacobson. Dear nephew of Dr. Merrill A. Swiney, Dr. Charles Jacobson, Kenneth Jacobson, Dr. Juliana Swiney, Miss Marie Swiney, Miss Alice Swiney and the late Carol Swiney McCarthy. Also survived by one niece, Carol Jacobson. Funeral from the WILLIAM KOHOOT FUNERAL HOME, 86 West 14th St., on Friday, October 16. Requiem mass at Our Lady Star of The Sea R.C. Church at 7 a.m. Interment in Holy Name cemetery, Jersey City. Visitation 7:30 his evening and 2-5 and 7-10 thereafter.

Jon's obituary

window, so his mother could look out and see the flag flying in his honor. She kept a picture of him on the kitchen windowsill, where she would light a candle for him each day. The flagpole site was visible from the sidewalk as well, and the family hoped that the neighbors would think of him when they saw the flag as they walked by. The family held a party at the dedication of the flagpole to thank all of the neighbors and to remember Jon. Later St. Mary's school would install a new scoreboard in the gymnasium and dedicate it to Jon's memory.

A little more than a week after his death, on October 16, 1970, three days before his 23rd birthday, Jon's funeral was held at St. Mary's Catholic Church. St. Mary's was the church where he had been baptized, received all the sacraments, and where his parents had been married. It was directly across the street from his home, and it had been the spiritual home of the family for three generations. Instead of going in a hearse from the funeral home to the church, the family, accompanied by a military escort, walked the one block to the

church, past the Jacobson backyard where Jon had played so often. He was buried in Holy Name Cemetery in Jersey City with a full military burial, including taps and a gun salute. The family received a flag at the burial, which Bill and Katherine cherished.



A photograph from the Bayonne Times of Jon's funeral procession

Jon's Insurance

Before going to Vietnam, Jon worried that he would not be coming back. Through the Knights of Columbus, he purchased a large life insurance policy. At the time of Jon's death, his sister Mary was applying to colleges. She later was admitted to Smith College, a renowned women's college in Massachusetts. When she was admitted but not given a scholarship, it looked as if she could not go. Her parents decided, however, that they would use some of Jon's insurance money for Mary's education. Mary later attended Smith, majoring in English and eventually going to law school—sharing some of Jon's own interests. After arriving at Smith, the director of financial aid called her to a meeting. The director asked for the source of Mary's tuition money, because she said that they had not expected Mary to attend Smith without a scholarship. When Mary told the director that she was able to attend Smith only because of the insurance money her parents had received following Jon's death in Vietnam, the director broke

down in tears. She later arranged for a scholarship for Mary, and Smith even awarded her a scholarship at graduation to use toward law school. In addition to educating Mary, Jon's insurance money was used to send sister Julie to Georgetown and brother Rich to Princeton.

The Vietnam Memorial



The Vietnam Memorial with the Washington Monument in the background

In the late 1970s, Vietnam veteran Jan Scruggs decided that there must be a memorial dedicated to the over 58,000 Americans who fought and died in the jungles of Vietnam. With the help of veterans Robert Doubeck and John Wheeler, who established the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, a bill was passed by congress in 1981 to set aside a few acres near the Lincoln Memorial where a Vietnam War memorial would be built.

After the bill passed, a competition was held to select the memorial's design. Out of more than 1,400 designs, the Committee selected the one submitted by Maya Lin, a Yale Architecture student. Her design was simple—a black granite wall that would rise up and descend back into the ground with the name of every American who had died in Vietnam engraved in it in the order in which their deaths occurred. In addition to the wall, a sculpture of three soldiers by Frederick Hart was added. On November 13, 1982, the memorial was dedicated and opened, with the name of Jon C Jacobson engraved on panel 7 west, line 117.

Jon's parents had a chance to visit the memorial. They went together on a Sunday morning, during a weekend in December 1985 when their children had treated them to a stay at the Mayflower Hotel, where

Katherine had attended tea dances as a student at Trinity College in D.C. They were also in Washington to observe Mary argue a case in the United States Supreme Court. They never forgot the profound sense of love and loss they felt on that chilly day in 1985.

Before and since that time, many of Jon's family and friends have made pilgrimages to the Memorial. Julie, who lives in nearby Maryland, gave family members framed rubbings of Jon's name, taken from the Memorial. Often when the family visits the memorial they find Jon's name, stand before it in prayer, run their hands across the grooved letters, and make a rubbing. These acts help us to remember Jon, and make us feel that we are touching him in some special way.

The New Jersey Vietnam Memorial



A statue at the New Jersey Vietnam Memorial

After seeing the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in Washington DC, a group of New Jersey veterans were inspired to build one in their own state to honor all the boys from New Jersey who gave their lives in a country far away. For the next few years, these veterans worked through the state legislature, veterans groups, and community groups to gain support for the memorial. Katherine and Bill contributed to the effort. In 1986, New Jersey governor Tom Kean signed a bill to create a committee to propose, design, and build a New Jersey Vietnam memorial. In 1988, a competition was held to find the design for the memorial. That competition was won by another Asian-American, Hien Nguyen. The construction of the monument, which is located in Holmdel, New Jersey, began in 1989 with the groundbreaking ceremony. Money problems ensued, delaying completion of the memorial and its dedication until May 7, 1995, coinciding with

the 20th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War. Bill and brother Richard attended the dedication ceremonies. Rich treasure a photograph he took that day of Jon's name on the wall and the reflection of his family members visible on the stone.

As in Washington, Jon's name is engraved in stone on the New Jersey monument. His name is joined with those of all the New Jersey residents who, like him, died in the jungles of Vietnam. I have ventured down to this memorial as well, looking at Jon's name in silence, remembering what he did and how he never saw home again after stepping into a foreign and forbidding world.

Jon's hometown of Bayonne lost an unusually large number of its young men in the Vietnam War. So many Bayonne boys died in the war that the City asked the federal government to stop sending Bayonne boys to Vietnam. That did not happen, but the City never



An overhead shot of the New Jersey Vietnam Memorial

forgot the great sacrifice of its residents. So Bayonne erected its own memorial at the foot of the City in a park overlooking the Kill Van Kull and in the shadow of the City's symbol—the Bayonne Bridge. Jon's name is there as well, engraved yet again in stone.



The Bayonne Vietnam Memorial with the Bayonne Bridge in the distance

When the Veterans of the war came home from Vietnam, they came back to a country divided, and found their deeds often ignored. In the years since the Vietnam War, however, the country has tried to heal the wounds, and to show appreciation for the sacrifice of those who served and those who gave their lives in Southeast Asia. The construction of the memorials has helped this healing process. They stand for the thanks of all Americans. They stand for our love and honor. And they show how we will never forget.

Epilogue

I have visited these memorials several times. Often I stare in the granite, bright in the sunlight, and see my own reflection in the wall. Although I know Jon is gone, I know he will always be a part of me. Through writing this biography, I now feel that I know him. Even though I never met him, I will always remember his life as a brother, a friend, and a soldier.

Before writing this book, Jon was just a name to me; the uncle I never knew. But now, I have touched his boots and medals, held photographs of him in my hands, and learned about him through the recollections of others. I feel in a way that I have a relationship with him. I have learned about his personality, his opinions, and his faith. I think I would have enjoyed talking to

him about Greek mythology and ancient history. I would have liked seeing him play basketball, especially his unique defense of holding the pole under the basket. I wish he could have read to me, or taken me to a ballgame. I would have liked to talk to him about Vietnam, and what it felt like to be in a war. I would want to know if his experiences were anything like what is written in books, or if it was a reality beyond words. I am glad that I now know Jon. He is no longer the uncle I never knew, no longer the name on the wall. He is just the uncle I never met.



My reflection in the Wall



Engraving Jon's name



At the Vietnam Memorial on a cold autumn day



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