

## The Unexpected Call – Revisiting the memory of my brother, Jon

By: Julie Jacobson, December 7, 2019

Tom pressed the button on the answering machine and listened to the message. An unfamiliar male voice said, “I’m Mike Eberhardt and I’m trying to reach the relatives of Jon Jacobson. I served with Jon in Vietnam.” Mike explained that tomorrow, Oct. 7, 2017, would be the forty-seventh anniversary of the mission in which Jon was killed and Mike continues to remember it. He left his phone number. Already in a somber mood on the eve of the anniversary of Jon’s death, Tom, one of my older brothers, felt stunned. As he caught his breath, he wondered what Mike had to say. Feeling a mix of curiosity and anxiety, Tom returned Mike’s call. They talked for a long time. In sharing the phone call with the rest of the family, Tom’s email was brief and conveyed something uncharacteristic for him, “It was very emotional for me.” Tom offered to relay the details of their conversation with each of us in the future.

Tom, 65 years old, works as a school administrator and lives in our family’s home in Bayonne, New Jersey with two of our older brothers. Our parents had ten children, eight boys and two girls. In birth order, I’m the ninth. We were raised in an extended family with our maternal grandmother and two aunts. Our home is a large, red brick building situated on property that spans 175 feet. It faces a Roman Catholic church which stands across the street on a main avenue in Bayonne, New Jersey, a working/middle class city just outside of New York City. The home has four separate front entrances with many small rooms inside that have been divided into apartments and offices. My mother’s father purchased the building and land in 1912. He was a doctor and ran a hospital in the building. The Swiney Sanatorium, as it was called, lasted through his death in December of 1946. It formally closed in 1950. My grandfather and his family resided in a section of the sanatorium. As its functioning decreased, some of the rooms on the second floor were repurposed into an apartment where my mother and father raised the ten of us.

When I received Tom's email, my first reaction was, "What? I can't believe this." It amazed me to learn of someone else in the world closely connected to Jon and to the events surrounding his death on Oct. 7, 1970. It also amazed me that after forty-seven years, with the many changes in telecommunication, that Mike could even get in touch with us – that the same phone number Mike possessed from 1970, still belongs to our family today, in 2017! When I saw Mike's phone number, my first thought was, "I'm not going to call him." I didn't want to revisit the complex and sad episode of my brother's death. I had already made peace with it. Yet, I wondered, "Was there more to the story than what a soldier (who we've now come to know was Mike) wrote our family in 1971, the year after Jon was killed?" The letter has been lost but I remember its author saying that he and Jon had become friendly. He shared that they were in a small group consisting of three soldiers and an interpreter and on a mission in the jungle. When walking along the narrow path, a bomb, commanded by the Vietcong, was detonated, killing Jon instantly. Knowing that he didn't suffer brought tremendous relief to my family. I appreciated that this comrade filled us in on the details. For me, this letter in 1971 provided a consoling closure to Jon's death.

But, I've had lingering concerns that I've longed to ask someone in the army from the Vietnam period. Before Jon's departure, my impression was that he was going to an area of Vietnam with little fighting. I thought (and hoped) that since he entered service as an officer via his college training in the Reserve Officer's Training Corps (ROTC), he likely would not fight on the front lines. In addition, it seemed that the war was in its ending phase which, in my mind, translated to mean safety. So, the news of Jon's death merely 2 months after he left for Vietnam shocked me. Now, hearing from Mike, an Army officer, offered me the opportunity to discuss these concerns. In a couple of days, I changed my mind and decided to call him.

One Thursday morning, I collected my courage and called the phone number in the email. I introduced myself and Mike quickly made the connection to Jon. We arranged to talk the following Tuesday morning after he and his wife returned from his 48th reunion of his graduation from army officers' training school. During our Tuesday call, Mike explained about the five-man Mobilization Advisory Team (MAT V) to which he and Jon belonged. Their family-style of functioning meant no saluting, no wearing medals on their uniforms, just brothers working together,

some with more experience than others. The MAT V consisted of two commissioned officers, two non-commissioned officers and one interpreter. Mike referred to these men by their nicknames, Mac, Fang and Wolfe, which brought the situation alive to me. I am unfamiliar with anything military so during his description he answered such questions as “What’s the difference between a commissioned officer and a non-commissioned officer?” Mike spoke in an open, honest, strong, compassionate and sometimes humorous way. He shared how he, Mac and Wolf were raised in the South and were accustomed to having grits for breakfast. In Vietnam, though, fried rice was the staple breakfast food. They lightheartedly bantered, “It’s just not grits.” I began to understand and appreciate the strong bond that grows among soldiers who work closely together in dangerous circumstances.

Their MAT V was part of the Vietnamization period of the war in 1970. The purpose of this phase was to support the South Vietnamese in regaining their land. The MAT V lived in the same compound along with South Vietnamese forces in the small village, Ham Loung, in the Ben Tre Province, southwest of Saigon. It was hot. Their huts had thick walls but netting for the ceiling to circulate air. They’d regularly plan and conduct missions ranging from one-to-five days. These assignments involved walking through rice paddies, trees or jungle to clear out the Vietcong, their arms and supplies.

Jon arrived at MAT V wearing a brand new, never-washed uniform on Oct. 3, 1970. He replaced a lieutenant who had developed appendicitis and was medevacked to a hospital. Mike and the MAT V were in the process of planning the next clear-out operation which was scheduled to depart on Oct. 6th. As the custom, a new team 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. Mike poignantly and vividly recalls Jon’s response, “This is why I’m here.” Jon set off with three of the MAT V squad on Oct. 6th .

First, they traveled by jeep 13 miles to a United States compound in Ben Tre City. In the morning of the next day, Oct. 7th , a small boat transported them to the beginning of the trail. They walked carefully along a narrow, dangerous, jungle path, passing, at one point, a sign that read, “Killing Zone.” After stopping for lunch, they resumed their trek. Suddenly, Mike heard a deafening “pop.” As Mike

regained consciousness, he felt tremendous pain and thought, “This is how I’m going to die.” The Vietcong, hiding off the trail, had detonated a bomb. Then, he heard Mac calling, “my legs are gone.” Crawling over to him, Mike saw their other comrade, Fang, alive, but bleeding profusely. Jon was lying lifeless off the trail. Mike tried to use the radio on his back to signal for help but it didn’t work. Mike commented, “The bomb destroyed the radio but not me.” Smoke from the bomb alerted helicopters which arrived and medivacked Mike and Mac. Fang died before he could be lifted into the helicopter. Later, in the hospital, Mac died. Mike, the sole survivor, incurred severe injuries to one leg that required a number of surgeries.

Mike eventually returned to the USA and to his wife. He pursued a calling to the ministry and became a Baptist minister.

When I got off the phone with Mike, about two hours later, I felt exhausted physically and overwhelmed emotionally. I well understood my brother, Tom’s, comment, “It was very emotional for me.” It astounded me that Jon was killed just four days after his arrival at his first combat assignment. Respect and compassion for Mike, Jon, Mac and Fang filled me. I appreciated Mike’s warm, patient, lighthearted and personal way of relating and ended our conversation saying, “I’m glad the last few days of my brother’s life were spent with someone like you.”

Mike has been carrying these memories for forty-seven years. My family and I have been holding a different set of memories for those years. Mike’s call gives us the opportunity to bring these two sets of memories together – to complete the story and to know a side of our brother we didn’t know and couldn’t have known.

Thanksgiving, 2017, was approaching. As usual, my older sister, her husband and their family hosted Thanksgiving dinner at their home in New Jersey. Most of the eight remaining siblings and their families gathered. Over the course of that weekend, we talked about Jon’s death, an experience as memorable for us as the assassination of JFK or the terrorist attack of 9/11. I knew how and where I was when I received the news of Jon’s death – I was curious how it was for the rest of my siblings.

My oldest brother, William, died of cancer in 2012. Luckily, my cousin, Dori, who was integral to Will’s learning of Jon’s death, was able to recall the story for me.

She was an undergraduate at Williams College. My brother, William, age 27 at the time (Oct. 1970), was visiting a girlfriend at Williams College. Since he was not at his home, he could not be reached by phone with the news. Earlier in the day, Dori received a phone call from her father, my paternal uncle, who shared the news of Jon's death. Returning to her dorm, after dinner, she spotted Will's distinctive car with Vermont license plate, "Holes." She called hello and gestured to Will. She quickly sensed that he had not heard the news. Filled with awkwardness, she asked him to come inside to talk. He, seeming to sense something serious, declined. She persisted and he continued to decline. Then, she told him that he needed to call home. Following the call, Will said nothing, just got in his car and drove away. Later that evening, though, he returned and talked with Dori for hours. He ended the visit by singing Mr. Tambourine Man, as if to soothe himself.

Merrill, the second child, age 25 and a Jesuit seminarian, was studying in Frankfurt, Germany. He was new to Germany and to the German language. The rector called Merrill to the office. Being unfamiliar with the language, Merrill wasn't sure if the rector said that Jon was injured or killed. As the meeting progressed though, it was clear that Jon had been killed. Arrangements were made and Merrill was picked up at Kennedy Airport by Bea, our sister-in-law. During the drive home, Merrill shared that one evening, earlier that week, out-of-the-blue, he experienced a strange and overpowering feeling of desolation. It was gone the next morning. Merrill wonders if he intuitively sensed Jon's tragic death. It seems likely.

Paul, the third in line, age 24 and a conscientious objector, was pursuing a PhD in philosophy. He and his young family were temporarily living with our family in Bayonne, NJ while applying for a college teaching position in philosophy. Paul and his wife, Bea, had one daughter with another on the way. Paul was working at the Archdiocese of Newark in Newark, NJ. In mid-morning, Bea heard the front doorbell ring and walked to answer it. Our front door was a Dutch style, split horizontally so one could open only the top half to see who was coming. It was a protection for children so they would not fall down the steep front steps that led up to the second-floor apartment where we lived. Bea opened the top portion of the door and recalls, "I looked and saw at the bottom of the steps, a man in a military uniform. I remember thinking if he comes up the steps, this isn't good news." He did come up the steps and told my mother that Jon had been killed in Vietnam. Bea

recalls that my mother fell to her knees. Bea telephoned Paul who came home from work immediately.

Jon was next in line and the fourth son.

Clifford, or Cliff, as we call him, was number five. He was 20 years old. His memory of Jon's death is hazy and confusing. He vaguely remembers walking on 13th Street approaching home and seeing two men in military uniforms standing outside our home. He knew this was odd. He remembers little else and even questions the accuracy of his memory since he was a junior at college and lived in off-campus housing during the week. Since we learned of Jon's death on a weekday, Cliff doesn't think his recall could be accurate.

Robert, number six, and 19 years old was a sophomore at St. Francis Xavier College in Canada. His rugby team had just won the championship game in Halifax, Nova Scotia! They were celebrating their victory. Amid the raucous and wild partying, the coach signaled to Rob and told him that he needed to call home immediately. The news of Jon's death plunged the soaring excitement of the party into confusion and sadness. Rob returned to college and flew home.

Thomas or Tom, seventh in-line, was 18 years old and in his first semester of freshman year at college. He heard that he could get dropped off in Bayonne by a fellow student at Rhode Island College who was driving through New Jersey for the weekend. Feeling some homesickness, Tom gladly accepted the ride. The driver dropped him off at the north end of Bayonne and Tom walked about two miles home. He recalls that about a block away from our home he noticed two men in uniform at the bottom of the front steps. This sight evoked a sinking feeling in his stomach. Tom, like Bea thought, "This is not good news."

Mary Carol, my older sister, the eighth child, first girl, 17 years old and I, Julie, the ninth and 14 years of age, learned of Jon's death at the same time. We both attended Holy Family Academy high school, a senior and sophomore, respectively. At lunch, Sr. Rose Constance signaled to me. A stern nun, I wondered, "What did I do wrong?" She told me that the principal needed to see me. Perplexed, I arrived in the office. The principal instructed me to find my sister and both return to the office with our books and belongings. I obeyed without asking any questions. As I set out, I realized that I had no idea in which classroom or class to find Mary.

There were two hallways in the school. I walked quickly down one side of the hall glancing in the windows of every classroom. With every unsuccessful glance, anxiety mounted. I began to feel short-of-breath. My imagination began to run wild as the realization that for the principal to send me to get my sister and our belongings must mean that something serious is happening. Interestingly, though, I don't recall thinking that the serious news was that Jon was killed in Vietnam. In fact, I don't recall any particular catastrophic fantasy. On the last of the two halls, I finally spotted Mary in history class. I knocked on the door and opened it. Mary gave me a puzzled look. I blurted out to the teacher that the principal told me to find my sister and for both of us come to the office with our things. In an irritated voice, the teacher, a blind woman, asked the reason for this unusual interruption. I didn't know and felt embarrassed to have no idea. The teacher dismissed Mary anyway. Waiting for us in the principal's office was our Uncle Merrill and Aunt Marie. He told us that Jon had been killed and they were there to take us home.

Richard or Rich, the last of the ten of us and 13 years old, distinctly remembers being in the middle of an English test (on question 4 out of 7) in freshman year at Bayonne High School (BHS). He saw the shadow of the vice principal at the classroom door. When he looked again, he saw our Aunt Marie who was a Latin teacher at BHS, also standing there. The English teacher looked annoyed by this intrusion. The vice principal spoke with the teacher and Rich was excused. As they walked down the hall together, Aunt Marie told him that Jon had been killed. "No! Is there a mistake?" Rich recalls exclaiming. He gathered his belongings at his locker. Maybe it was the shock and emotion but Rich has no recollection of how he and Aunt Marie got home.

In mid-afternoon, the doorbell rang and one army officer returned. He said, "Mrs. Jacobson, I've made a mistake." My mother exclaimed, "I knew it couldn't be true." And, he quickly rephrased his words and said, "No, not that. It's protocol that I have to give this news to your husband in-person. When do you expect him home from work?" This misunderstanding added even more emotional intensity to an already difficult day. My father worked as a salesman, selling magazines to small businesses in New Jersey. He spent his workdays in his car, on-the-road from 9:30 a.m. through 6:30 p.m. In 1970, before the days of mobile phones, we had no way to reach him unless he called home which rarely occurred. Paul kept an eye out for the arrival of my father. He met Dad, a quiet man, at his car and told him

the news of Jon's death. Paul remembers that my father said nothing but had a stunned look on his face. The officer returned at 6:30 p.m. I was not in the living room when he shared the news with my father.

These recollections of Jon's death reflect just one small piece of a much larger story. Jon was a complex mix of qualities in an intense personality. He, like my other brothers, was tall. He stood at six feet three inches, had a solid build, short dark-brown hair and a dimple on one cheek. Jon was "as strong as an ox," my brothers often remarked. He took his studies seriously and showed a preference for Greek, the Classics and Theology.

Jon was a quiet person and didn't regularly express what he was thinking. So, in his late teens, when he worked as a check-out person at the local A&P grocery store, it surprised our family to learn from neighbors and parishioners that Jon was friendly and outgoing. Tom fondly remembers Jon reading the Landmark history book series to him. Rich, a night owl from an early age, enjoys the recollection of the bedtime word game ritual that Jon created to lull Rich to sleep. Jon also took Tom and Rich, two of his younger brothers, to high school football games. My most deeply cherished memory of Jon is his yearly Christmas gift of a bottle of Coke perfectly placed in the foot of our Christmas stockings. At that time, soda was a luxury. A bottle of Coke was a special treat. Jon bought my mother a beautiful set of delicate, colorful, china place card holders in the shape of rosebuds. My mother loved them. She used them at holiday meals, when relatives would join the 12 of us. Mom wrote our names on small cards and placed them in the rosebuds around the table so we knew our seat assignment. Jon's selection of this gift shows his intuitiveness and generosity, even extravagance. I fondly remember how, at my grammar school graduation party, Jon spontaneously and graciously greeted my classmates at the door, talked with them and served them refreshments. Recently, I bumped into a grammar school classmate who recalled how nice Jon was to him at the graduation party. Jon faithfully washed the kitchen floor every Friday evening. I still picture the kitchen chairs turned upside down on the kitchen table. He also built a brick patio in the backyard of our home which was frequently used for barbecues. These are some of the endearing memories of my brother, Jon.

Yet, not all memories of Jon are warm and cherished. When he believed in something, he often expressed it fiercely, often antagonistically. For instance, he



was a conservative Roman Catholic and adamantly opposed the modern changes initiated by Vatican II. My mother accompanied him to some lectures at St. Peter's College about the changes in the Church. She shared with me feeling embarrassed by the hostile way Jon expressed his opposing views to the speakers. Cliff shared that he kept his distance from Jon to avoid his sarcastic put-downs. Jon often dramatically expressed his ideas. For example, once, in the kitchen, he proclaimed that he would, "be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause." My Mom quickly retorted, "God would never ask another to do that." His style of debate was a provocative, fierce, unrelenting manner that felt more attacking, like he was picking a fight with his opponent, rather than a strongly expressing a different point of view.

"You'll be sorry when I come home in a body bag," Jon exclaimed to us at dinner one night as he angrily stomped out of the kitchen. A discussion about Vietnam was occurring. Not everyone in the family shared Jon's pro-military stance toward the Vietnam War. Jon avidly wanted to stop the spread of communism in the world and saw the war in Vietnam as one more step toward this aim. Another brother was against war of any kind and was a conscientious objector. Another brother's position was influenced by reports that our country was misguided in its understanding of the conflict between North and South Vietnam and the USA shouldn't be there. At fourteen years old, I wasn't sure what I believed but I leaned toward the views of the war protestors. It was May, 1970. Jon was preparing to leave for his first assignment in Vietnam. He had just graduated from St. Peter's College where he completed the ROTC program. That night at dinner, the different opinions, formerly held in respectful silent regard, exploded. Jon's searing words continue to chill those of us who heard them as they foreshadowed actual events.

My relationship with Jon was filled with ambivalence for many reasons, beginning with our birthday. I was born on the same day, October 19th, in 1955, eight years 9 later. I hated sharing my birthday with someone! Being one of ten children, I longed for something all for myself. Then, to have to share my special day felt so unfair! I never knew how Jon felt. However, an older brother recently told me that on Jon's eighth birthday, learning of my birth, Jon was happy. It's possible that he didn't mind sharing his birthday with me.

Jon embarrassed me. “Is that the band that sings the song that says, ‘One is the loneliest number that you’ll ever do?’” he disdainfully asked as I was getting ready to go to a Three Dog Night concert. I retorted, “Yes.” He added, “That doesn’t make any sense. It’s not even good English!” I didn’t care. I walked away. He liked opera. I liked rock music. He wore thin ties. He had a crew cut. He held conservative views religiously and politically. I embraced liberal thinking and many aspects of the 1960’s culture –the style of dress, long hair, the music. Jon wasn’t cool at that time when being cool was important to me! It seemed the only ways Jon and I were similar were that we were born on the same day and to the same parents.

A year after Jon’s death, as our mutual birthday approached, the guilt about my ill feelings toward him coalesced and moved me to talk to God about them. I was in my bedroom with the door closed. I knelt on my knees with my arms on the side of the bed. As honestly as I could, I expressed the anger toward Jon about having my birthday and about my embarrassment about his “uncoolness.” I asked God to forgive me and help me forgive myself. This encounter with God lifted the guilt I carried and allowed me to live unburdened by these earlier reactions – those of an angry, competitive younger sister. I also sensed that voicing these ill feelings would not hurt Jon. This understanding was a relief to me.

During the years since Jon’s death, I’ve wondered if his pent-up frustration and anger could be attributed to the painful separation from our mother when he was a toddler, between 1 and 2 years old. I learned that Mom was confined to bedrest for many months recovering from Rheumatic Heart Disease. Jon was too young to understand the absence of his mother. Understandably, he reacted with bouts of kicking and crying. By the time Mom recovered, she was again pregnant and more children came along. In reflection, I suspect that our mother’s illness followed by births of more children put a strain on Jon’s relationship with her. This probably played a role in Jon’s subsequent difficulties managing frustrations and angry feelings.

Jon was a complicated and challenging person to love. Depending on my focus, I can feel anger or tenderness toward him. How can I have such vastly different feelings toward the same person? Might all of us, if we look inside ourselves, detect strong disparities? I’ve wrestled within myself to reconcile some extreme

emotional reactions as well as contradictions that often confuse me. But, in writing this story, I've come to believe that one of life's challenges is to know both the infuriating aspects and the tender aspects of ourselves and others and still love them in all their complexity.

In the passing years, I see the good things that Jon's death (and life) brought our family. What transformed me was the hug my oldest brother gave me as we walked down the street to view Jon's body for the first time. My family was not affectionate and when William put his arm around me as we walked, I thought, "I've never been touched before." This embrace activated a longing for physical affection. From then on, I began to embrace my family members when we'd greet each other or depart from a family gathering. This has meant a lot to me over the years. I thank Jon for this.

After his death, my parents learned that prior to his deployment to Vietnam, Jon had purchased a hefty life insurance policy. It surprised them that Jon, being single and in his early twenties, would think of this. My parents used part of this money to pay college tuition for their remaining children. My older sister was able to attend her first choice, Smith College, an expensive, small women's college in New England. We could afford Georgetown University for me. My younger brother was able to attend Princeton University. I appreciate Jon for this.

Forty-seven years have gone by. My parents have died. My older brother, William, has died. Each year, though, October 7th carries a sad ring. Jon's death came at a formative time in all of our lives. We were in our teens and twenties, on the cusp of our lives. Over time, memories faded. Then, Mike unexpectedly called last October, 2017. He told of a Jon we couldn't have known: that of a courageous comrade who said, "This is why I'm here." I now have a larger, more complete story - not just of the generous brother or the intense, difficult sibling, but also of the courageous member of a team of military brothers. I thank Mike for this.