

37 YEARS LATER

In January 1972 I ended a chapter of my life. I carefully boxed up those memories and placed them in a closet labeled “Fragile Do Not Open.” Every once in a while I would have to open the closet peek in the box and get reminded why I had placed them where I had, further into the closet I pushed that box. Somehow through my 25 year military career I relied on the examples of those I had known in Vietnam as the foundation for my leadership style. Those examples from Mike, Burch, Jim, Pineapple, Sugar Bear worked, the most important of all was getting the team to work together to accomplish what ever had been assigned and not using those I led as the stepping stones for my personal success. But the memories of that time were kept away, hidden in that dark closet; until I received a call from a lady who was obviously on a mission. Kitty called me in October of this year to ask if I served in Vietnam. She told me about some of the others she had contacted from my unit. With her and my wife Christina’s encouragement I went into the closet and opened the box. The first person I talked with was HL Burch and then Mike Hitchcock. They seemed to be enjoying having the box opened and learning what, where and how other brothers were doing.

During one conversation HL Burch asked me did I know the given name of Sugar Bear. Sugar Bear had been Killed In Action (KIA) August 15, 1971. I didn’t know but felt compelled to find out. After talking with the inter net wizard pro, Kitty. I also began searching everything I could about Sugar Bear. I soon discovered his name was Vernon Hart and there was a War Memorial in Toombs County, Georgia with his name on it. Kitty informed me that the only relative on record appeared to be a second or third cousin. It was at this point that no other information could be found, we had

reached a brick wall. I made the decision to travel to Toombs County, specifically to the town of Vidalia and conduct a personal search. I must mention I relied heavily on my OCD wife because once she is on the trail of something she's more determined than a bloodhound on a fresh scent.

We arrived in Vidalia early the morning of the 5th of November 2008. To be honest neither of us knew where to begin. Vidalia is a small town so we quickly discovered that everything was close. As we wandered around the town we passed a funeral home. We decided to stop and see what information we could get. I went in and was greeted by a very kind gentleman. I explained why I was in Vidalia. He brought me into an office and took a large bound book. He told me the book contained all the deaths in Toombs County by year and would tell which cemetery and plot they were buried in. We found Vernons' name and the cemetery but there was no plot listed. By the way, his entire given name is Vernon Lee Hart Junior and he was buried in East Park Cemetery. What a start, this was going to be easy. We would have all the answers just as soon as we got to the cemetery.

We arrived at East Park Cemetery on the corner of Poe Street and 4th Avenue and my heart sank. The cemetery is not maintained, over 1/2 of the graves did not have markers, many of the remainder could not be read due to age and neglect. There was no one to see to get information on location of burial plots. Christina and I spent the next 2 1/2 hours searching for Sugar Bear's grave. My heart

seemed to sink even further; we did not find it. The emotions were almost overwhelming. I kept thinking “I had deserted my brother for 37 years and now he was truly lost and forgotten.” We departed the cemetery without a clue what to do next.

Christina wasn't about to give up, she suggested we go to the local library and that is where our search began in earnest. I reviewed microfiche of the local newspaper for the years 1971 and 1972.

There was no mention of Vernon Hart. We discovered there was an extension to the library a Genealogical Library, only to discover that the records for 1960-1970 would not be released to the public until 2030. I looked at Christina and asked where next. She said why not Vidalia City Hall, so off we went. I introduced myself to the secretary at City Hall explained why we were in Vidalia and what we were searching for and she introduced me to Jackson Posey, the city building inspector. He took an extreme interest in the story of Vernon, wrote down the information I had and asked if I could come back the next day. He would make some inquiries for me. This day ended with more questions than answers and I felt the full impact of guilt and shame for the 37 years of neglect. I owed Sugar Bear more; I owed all of those I spent that time with more. I didn't know how I could make up for what I had done. That night I prayed.

Day two in Vidalia began. I told Christina “Humor me, I want to walk the cemetery one more time.” I got that look, the one that says, “all right I'm doing this because you want to but we've already done it once.” She said “Are you sure that's what you want to do?” I said “Yes, I just feel the need to do something and looking one more time is what I want to do.” As we traveled back to the cemetery Christina decided to contact the local school board to see if she could get any information about him. She talked with a lady who, after hearing our story, said she might know someone who would help us but it would take some time to get in touch with this person. She would call us back later.

We arrived at the East Park Cemetery and began searching again. Christina and I had split up to cover more ground. In about two hours still nothing. She told me later she had just said a prayer to God “Lord I wish you would lead me to just stumble over Vernons grave,” when she looked up she was staring at a dingy black marble marker, next to three clean markers. She got real close and read “Vernon Lee Hart Jr, A Company 3rd Infantry 23rd Infantry Division, BSM-PH. She started hollering for me to come over that she thought she had found him. We had found the site, I knelt, said a prayer and could almost hear Sugar Bear asking me “Where the have you been all this time?” I spent some time there struggling with all the emotions. Christina, meanwhile, had gotten in touch with a gentleman who specializes in cleanup and restoration of burial sites and after hearing our story he came immediately to meet us in the cemetery. He agreed to clean up the site.

I called HL Burch, Mike H. and Kitty to tell them the news. Sugar Bear had been found and the site would soon get the attention it deserved. We then went to City Hall to tell Mr Posey that we had found what we had come for. We talked with Mr Posey and at the end he told us that he had located an address for his cousin, did I want it. Based on all the information we had we believed that this was maybe a cousin to Sugar Bear and the only living relative. I took the phone number and address from Mr Posey and thanked him for all his help.

We had pretty much accomplished everything we had planned. On the way out of town we decided to stop at the cousins address. When we got there no one was at home, so we were going to return

to Chattanooga and call him later. As we started out of town Christina received a phone call, the lady she had talked to from the school board asked us to stay in Vidalia for another hour or so because she believed she had found someone who knew of Vernon Hart's family. Well what are a couple hours, we went to eat and then we waited two more hours. No call. We started our journey back to Chattanooga, but the cousins home was on our way out of town so we decided to make one more stop. He was home. I introduced myself, stumbled through my apologies and told him how I felt about Vernon. He looked at me and said "That's good but don't you want to meet his mother and tell her?" It's a very good thing the day was calm because I'm positive that had there been the smallest breeze it would have knocked me down.

At the same time I was having the conversation with him, Christina received a phone call, which began with "I understand you are looking for me." Christina explained to the caller why we were in Vidalia and that any help she may be in finding Vernon's close relatives would be appreciated. The caller responded with "I don't think you can get any closer than me because I'm his mother!" Christina almost dropped the phone. By now his cousin had offered to bring us to the home of the mother of Sugarbear. That mile and a-half felt like an eternity. How do you pay respect to the mother of a brother, friend, and comrade 37 years after the fact? What words do you use? How will she react?

We arrived at the house and she greeted us outside. She then invited us into her home. On the wall was Vernon Hart's Basic Training photo. I know I stumbled with the apology the first time, I felt like I really stumbled through my second apology. I wanted her to know that Vernon was loved and respected as a brother he had not been forgotten. She was more than gracious; her only question of me was "Did he suffer?" I told her he had not suffered. She then explained that Vernon was her only son; she did have a daughter as well. We talked for quite awhile. I asked if she minded if others

from the unit contacted her. She said she would like that, to hear stories about Vernon would be good. I told her about the burial site clean up, as when that decision was made we did not know she was still there. She told me thank you to do that for Vernon was kind. The time seemed to fly; it was time to start our journey back to Chattanooga. I gave her a hug and we took some pictures.

The box has been taken out of the closet. It is open and I'm just a little bit different than I was before. We did not come home as heroes, that was not our fault. But if we don't look out for one another who will? To all my brothers take a peek in the box, it's time.

Wayne Haines