

A Veterans' Day tribute to a fallen hero: Vietnam vet remembers a comrade in arms

BY [MARK J. PRENDERGAST](#)

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Nearly every year around this time, I head up the Hudson to [Kingston, N.Y.](#) I did so last weekend. It has nothing to do with [Veterans Day](#), everything to do with being a veteran.

My destination is always the same, an unpretentious grave in St. Mary's Cemetery. It is marked by a government-issued bronze plate laid flush to the ground, embossed with a small cross, dates of birth and death, an Army rank and the notation of a Bronze Star and [Purple Heart](#) earned in [Vietnam](#).

It was set down 41 years ago and now belongs for the ages to the one named on it, John Patrick Brady Jr., who was 21 when he died near Song Be on Nov. 4, 1969.

Truth be told, I didn't know [John Brady](#) well in life. I have come to know him better in death, for not a day has passed since that he has not been in my thoughts.

Our position was overrun that night. I watched John Brady die as I held him in my arms and tried to shout him back to life.

But he has never haunted me. I haunted myself, hating myself for his death, for leaving him, leaving his body behind.

In November 1987, I finally tracked down his burial site in Kingston and arrived there the day before Thanksgiving, just as the autumn light was fading behind darkening hills. As I stood over that bronze plate and gazed down at his name, thinking how close I was again to John Brady after so many years, I could only remember the last thing I said to him: "John, I'll be back."

Like him, I had already been wounded and moments before was temporarily blinded by the flash of a rocket-propelled grenade that burst next to us. I crawled through the crossfire, following the sound of distant, encouraging voices that called my name.

Others tried to reach Brady, but were turned back by the ferocity of enemy fire. A young lieutenant and a tough career sergeant finally did make it, only to confirm that he was dead, with the lieutenant badly wounded in the effort.

Nearly 20 years later, as the shadows of the headstones lengthened and a chill wind hissed through leafless branches on that Thanksgiving Eve 1987, I felt a surge of inexplicable warmth and peace.

I had finally come back for John Brady, but at a time that did him no good. Yet the rush of guilt I'd braced for never materialized. It was as if a hand of forgiveness had reached up through those six hard feet of cold earth and delivered a healing touch. Beyond that, I cannot explain. But my own belated journey back from Song Be began in earnest that night.

I am still in touch with other vets who made it back. After my most recent trip to Kingston, I told one that this annual pilgrimage is a poignant reminder of how blessed we are to have survived and lived our lives.

It is also a reminder of how much so many have given, past and present, and not just those who lie beneath bronze markers.

I spoke once with Brady's mother, by phone in 1987, shortly before my first visit. I had wanted to meet with her, and she had agreed, but something in her voice told me no. So I called back to cancel, slipping into town to find her son's grave on my own.

During one of my visits, in one of those you-can't-make-this-up coincidences, I met Brady's niece, the goddaughter he had never gotten to see, who had been born just as he was about to die. She was there to lay flowers on the nearby grave of her own child, an infant.

She promptly called her mother, John's sister, who rushed over. We talked, teared and embraced. I learned more about John Brady that afternoon than in all the time we had served together in Third Platoon.

Most moving was the toll his death took on the family. His father died prematurely, two years after John. His mother lived into the 1990's, but never recovered from the loss of her only son.

Too often, lives lost to violence or tragedy become public abstractions. But for those who knew them, grief and loss are intense and exponential. And everlasting.

In the early 1980's, at the [Vietnam Veterans Memorial](#) in [Washington](#), I met a vet who said he was living in the woods nearby, so he could be close to his "brothers on The Wall." He was clearly troubled, but after awhile, grappling with my own demons, I grew impatient and cut him off.

Look, I said, living here in squalor, haranguing the tourists and wallowing in the past is no way to live life. If you want to pay tribute to the guys on The Wall, live the life they can't. If they could come down off that wall for even one day, they would not waste a moment of resurrection.

I was speaking to him, yes, but also to myself.

The ultimate tribute to John Brady, all the [John Bradys](#), is a life of meaning, of purpose. To live not the good life, but a good life. Or at least seek the courage to try. To keep reminding me of that, I will make the journey to his grave every November as long as I am able.

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