A Tapestry of War: Three Veterans' Stories

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A TAPESTRY OF WAR: THREE VETERANS’ STORIES

by
Clancy Lane Smith

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
May 2015

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A special thanks:

To the veterans who took time to share their incredible stories with me

To my family, my constant source of support and the only people willing to entertain and encourage my wild imagination

To Mr. Bill Rose, a patient editor, mentor and friend

To Dr. Will Norton, an inspirational leader and sometimes “dad” in times of international misadventure

And to the Meek School of Journalism and New Media for providing me with the tools I need to make my way in the wonderful world of journalism
ABSTRACT
CLANCY LANE SMITH: A Tapestry of War: Three Veterans’ Stories
(Under the direction of Bill Rose)

The purpose of this thesis is to record and preserve the memories of American war veterans living in the Oxford area. The researcher interviewed local veterans and recorded their recollections in a narrative way, similar to how a feature story is written for publication in a newspaper or magazine. The results of this project demonstrate the stark contrast in a veterans’ experiences based on differences in background, faith, family and decision-making. The stories are written so that they might be passed on to future generations.
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INTRODUCTION

For more than a decade, three photographs have decorated the aging white vanity in the corner of my bedroom.

In the first, my mother’s parents hold my two-month-old self between them. I lie asleep in my grandmother’s arms, wearing a smocked baby dress that she painstakingly crafted herself.

Their salt-and-pepper hair, depicted in the picture, has since faded to gray, but I am lucky to still have them near. Their love, intermingled with birthday savings bonds, hand-made quilts and snippets of wisdom derived from lives of experience, remains an ever-present blessing in my life.

The second picture was taken the same day as the first and in it my father’s mother holds me close. The image of her wise, tilted smile takes me back to younger days spent at the neighborhood swimming pool and the annual Prairie Arts Festival in West Point. It’s still easy to recall her gentle spirit and soft-spoken manner left behind not many years ago.

I am absent from the third picture, and its subject has always been a bit of a mystery to me. From the black and white photograph stares my father’s father, a man I never knew. My guardian angel, as I grew up knowing him, was often left to my imagination. Old pictures and newspaper clippings tell his grandchildren stories
that he was never able to tell himself – stories of service in World War II and small town police chief heroism.

While I enjoy my own imaginings, I appreciate even more the thoughts, experiences and stories shared by my elders. It burdens me that my grandfather’s memory will never be preserved in my mind like that of my other grandparents. To record his recollections of his life of service would have been a great honor.

My thesis is an attempt to fill a missing piece of my own puzzle and also preserve the memories of three Americans who sacrificed a portion of their lives to do what they believed was right. Each story is as different and unique as the men who tell them.

There’s a reason for that.

There is no doubt that soldiers returning from war can bring a lot of emotional diversity home. But it is also worth pointing out that those soldiers enter the military with diverse orientation as well.

What was their childhood like? What were their parents like? Were they rich or poor? Were they strong in their faith, or did they lack faith entirely?

Answers to these questions can affect how a soldier handles combat and its aftermath, as you will see in the stories of Thomas Jones, Floyd Metts and Lee Jones. Their different backgrounds and decisions weave a colorful tapestry from which I believe the reader can learn a plethora of important life lessons.
THE STORY OF THOMAS JONES

The worn, age-spotted manuscript matched the hands of the elderly man who carefully leafed through its contents.

As he reached the last page, the old soldier gently closed the plastic folder and smoothed its edges.

He handed the document to me.

“This will explain everything,” he said.

“Fought in a small Asian country previously unknown to the American public, the Vietnam War became a cause that divided the nation and defined the times.”

In the year 1949, as America continued recovering from the Great Depression and World War II post-war prosperity began, Thomas Jones made his way into the world. The sixth child of nine, Jones boasted parents who made up for their lack of money with love and affection.

He was born in the quiet little town of Moorhead, Miss., on January 30, but wasn’t there for long before his family moved to follow his father’s nomadic construction work.

“The worst thing was the moving,” said Jones. “I hated that with a passion.”
Despite a happy home life, the continual relocations were a constant strain on the family. Sometimes there were only a couple days’ notice before Jones’ father needed to start work in a new city.

Changing schools two to three times a year took its toll on Jones. Always being the new kid led to fighting, bad grades and heckling classmates. He quickly grew to hate school.

At the age of 16, he decided it was time for a change. His older brother Johnny dipped a pen in Whiteout and carefully changed the year on Jones’s birth certificate from 1949 to 1947, to help his little brother be eligible for work.

“My dad knew and he never said a thing about it. Matter of fact, he was kind of impressed that he did such good forgery,” Jones chuckled.

Jones, like his father, operated heavy machinery on construction sites. At the age of 17 he had his own apartment and car. It was an independent, carefree lifestyle, and Jones was happy.

On his nineteenth birthday he checked the mail after work to receive news that would substantially alter his life forever.

“Greetings!” was the first word on the piece of paper drafting Jones into forced military service.

“I had three days to get my things in order,” Jones recalled.

After eight weeks of basic training and eight weeks of AIT (Advanced Individual Training), Jones felt prepared to head to Vietnam.
“When I got through with basic and AIT in the military at Fort Polk, they had me and all of us so brainwashed that we would have gone out and done anything for the country,” said Jones.

Amidst the chaos of goodbyes during his 30-day leave before heading to Vietnam, Jones discovered his sweetheart, Eileen, was pregnant. They quickly got married.

Days later, Jones embarked on his journey to war.

“I didn’t realize how happy I was before I went. Although, I thought it was going to be an adventure. At nineteen years old traveling halfway around the world was an adventure.”

He didn’t know it at the time, but America’s “adventure” in Vietnam would change him in ways he could never have imagined. And he was not alone. Forty years after the war, veterans’ homes across America are cluttered with broken old men scarred by the war. Though many soldiers fought and then eased smoothly back into society, many others bore lasting wounds that were both physical and mental. For some, the mental wounds were also the hardest to acknowledge. They were victims, just as much as those slain or maimed by the war. Even today at age 66, Jones deals with the war and what it did to him.

“Soldiers don’t have time to feel. They have a job to do.”

In Vietnam, he soon learned that waiting for their Vietnamese adversary was about the only thing the soldiers could do.

“The only time you engaged the enemy is when they engaged you,” Jones said.
Jones was a .50-caliber gunner atop the middle truck in a convoy that hauled jet plane fuel, gasoline and explosives. Life or death situations bonded him with the other soldiers in his vehicle: a rifleman, a .60-caliber gunner and the driver.

“‘They become your family, they become like your brothers,’ said Jones.

“Actually, you’re closer than brothers.”

Tensions ran high when the men faced battle. The taste of adrenaline became all too familiar. The fear arrived later, after the enemy slipped back into the bush.

“‘You don’t have time to be scared,’” he said. “‘You’re busy trying to fight them off, trying to kill them instead of them killing you. Then when you have time after you think, ‘Wow, I heard that bullet go by my head.’ ”

More than once, other trucks in the convoy would scatter under fire, leaving Jones and his comrades to fend for themselves. The third such occurrence proved too much, and Jones lost rank the same day he earned it after cursing leaders of the other convoy trucks.

“‘They would run off and leave us in an ambush so I was angry,’” Jones admitted.

“I was just angry as I could be.”

During lazy days on the firebase, the men drowned their fear with beer and their boredom with the mind-altering haze of marijuana. Both substances were new to Jones, but both were plentiful, with the government supplying the booze and the Vietnamese villagers selling marijuana at five dollars a bag.

“‘We drank beer like it was water,’” said Jones. “‘Nobody ever said anything about it, because our NCOs and lieutenant, all of them drank and all of them smoked marijuana. Everybody smoked marijuana.’”
Only one inspection was ever demanded of Jones’ outfit. The men stumbled to the examination high after a day of smoking, shirtless in their cut-off blue jeans.

“They just gave up and there were no more inspections after that,” Jones shrugged.

And so it was that the men spent many days waiting and watching, drinking and smoking on the firebase, always situated near a village.

As the villagers grew accustomed to their foreign visitors, the children began to play a dangerous game.

They would jump on the side of the moving convoy trucks. They laughed and chattered in a language that Jones and the other soldiers never learned to understand as they played with the giant, fascinating toys roaring through their villages.

One hot, sticky day as the game progressed a little boy missed his footing when he jumped to grab the side of the truck and slipped under the wheels. The monstrous treaded tires crushed his small chest before the driver could stop.

Jones jumped from the truck and ran to the child. As he knelt to check for vitals the little boy emitted just one deep gasp before dark, hot blood spewed from his mouth, covering Jones’ uniform shirt and pants.

Shock and helplessness left Jones frozen until the little boy stopped breathing.

Forced to move on, Jones had to leave the child’s body and wear the sticky blood, which smelled more and more offensive as the sun beat down on the convoy. It wasn’t until several hours later that he was permitted to wash away the boy’s remains, but as he scrubbed himself clean the haunting memory clung to him and would not let go.
“The Vietnamese people got caught in the middle,” he reflected. “They were catching it from the Viet Cong and they were catching it from us. There wasn’t a way they could win.”

It was no longer an adventure, no longer as simple as democracy vs. communism or a battle for freedom. It was something else, something frustrating and intangible. It changed the men who fought, sometimes for forever.

Over time, he saw many people die. While many casualties were accidental, others resulted from soldiers who had been pushed past their breaking point. Officers didn’t enforce rules on how Vietnamese civilians should be treated; Jones said, therefore, soldiers were left to handle the locals however they saw fit.

“If one of them got killed it didn’t mean nothing, it didn’t mean nothing at all,” admitted Jones.

Because of this, innocent happenstances escalated to violence quickly.

“I can close my eyes now and I can see it,” he said.

One soldier on a truck in Jones’ convoy had a crazed look in his eyes as he pushed a surging crowd of Vietnamese women and children away from the U.S. supply vehicle. Jones looked around for a way to assist without becoming confrontational.

He called out and tossed his rifle up to the soldier. A couple of warning gunshots should scare off the poverty stricken civilians, he thought.

However, instead of pointing the rifle to the sky, the panicked soldier pointed the gun at the women and children and opened fire. Bodies collapsed one by one around the truck.
“I blamed myself for a long time after that, because I handed him the rifle,” Jones shuddered.

“I can’t stand to see a child suffering.”

Jones said no one ever reported the incident and no one was disciplined for it. No attempt was made to confirm that the incident took place.

“The nation was able to ease its conscience by distancing the vets, it relegated the soldiers to the role of society’s sinners.”

The wind felt cold and biting in the wintertime of 1970 when Jones, along with other discharged Vietnam soldiers, stepped off the plane in Seattle back in the U.S.A.

A little more than a year had passed since Jones left for Vietnam, and he shivered slightly in the unfamiliar weather. Seconds after descending from the plane, he looked up just in time to see an object whizzing by the head of the soldier in front of him.

Shouts erupted as a large group of protestors began throwing dirty snowballs and hurling insults at the men in uniform.

Jones seethed on his connecting flight home.

“It was like a joke, us spending our time getting shot at to stop communism and it was a joke to everybody else,” said Jones. “You wanted to come back and shoot some of these protestors.”

He remembered looking down at his full dress uniform, and deciding he no longer wanted any part of this war. During his last layover in Dallas, Texas, Jones stopped in the restroom and changed into civilian clothes.
The medals he had earned clinked together jauntily as he balled up his uniform and threw it in the trash on his way out the door.

None of the soldiers bothered saying goodbye to one another. Men who trained, lived and fought side-by-side went their separate ways without sharing so much as an address or a phone number.

“It’s like everyone thought ‘Let’s put this all behind us,’ and if we stayed in touch with each other we were still going to keep it alive,” said Jones. “Everyone just split up and that was it.”

“Veterans often develop a killing rage. They also have quick psychological responses to danger. Vets have an early warning system, which is sharpened by the threat of death.”

Nothing after Vietnam was easy. Keeping a job, maintaining a marriage and readjusting to the way of life in America all presented a complicated set of challenges.

Jones was overjoyed to be introduced to his son, Joey, upon his return, but he said he soon found himself wrapped in a bitter divorce after discovering that Eileen had been unfaithful to him during his absence. Jones turned to drinking to cope.

“Really, I wanted to go back to Vietnam, because to me everything over there was cut and dried,” he said. “You either killed or be killed; there was none of this in between.”

Friends and family noticed the difference in Jones’ demeanor, but didn’t know how to help.
“You aged at least 10 years in that war,” Jones’ mother said to him one day. “It changed you.”

After a while, to an untrained eye, Jones was doing well. He remarried and he and his wife, Teresa, had a daughter, Tiffany. Jones managed to hold a steady construction job in Mendenhall, Miss.

Life took an unexpected turn on February 13, 1986.

For years, as Jones tells it, his wife’s brother-in-law tormented the family with violent antics. Known as the county bully, he was mean to everyone he encountered and had a reputation for beating his wife and children.

The family reached out to the authorities to help, but to no avail.

When news reached Jones that the man threatened to kill Tiffany, Jones decided enough was enough. He sent Teresa and Tiffany to stay in a motel, and drove to confront his brother-in-law.

“I had all of it I could take and I went to him,” said Jones. “All I was going to do was whup his ass.”

It was two o’clock in the morning, and Jones walked into the house to find a pistol pointed at his chest. A tussle for the weapon ensued.

_Bang_.

It took Jones a moment to realize what happened.

He left the lifeless body sprawled on the floor where it fell and traveled immediately to the local sheriff’s department.

Luckily, Jones only spent one week in jail before a family friend put up his farm to cover the enormous bond.
Eight months passed before the case went to trial.

“Can you imagine having to sit every day, trying to work and trying to function as a human being and not knowing whether or not at the end of that eight months whether or not you were going to be lethally injected?” asked Jones. “It’s pretty tough.”

The trial resulted in an acquittal for Jones, to the joy of his family and friends. However, the triumph was short-lived and Jones suffered a nervous breakdown a week after the trial’s end.

“The majority of veterans that experience these symptoms are not aware of the existence of PTSD. Most victims feel that they are losing their sanity because they cannot stop feeling the way they do.”

The pressure had proven to be too much. Jones was rushed to Charter Hospital, where he received three shock treatments. Ultimately the treatments damaged his short-term memory, he said.

“The stress had taken such a toll on me that it just finally boiled over,” Jones remembered.

Doctors blamed the breakdown on Delayed Stress Syndrome and sent Jones home a few days after his arrival.

Despite the shock treatments, things at home took a turn for the worse. Jones began experiencing nightmares about Vietnam, something that had never troubled him before, and stopped eating and sleeping.
“I had my brother-in-law’s death on my hands, plus my mind was going back to Vietnam as soon as I would go to sleep,” said Jones.

Jones sought help from psychiatrists at the G.V. (Sonny) Montgomery VA Medical Center in Jackson in the fall of 1986, nearly 16 years after his return from Vietnam. There he had his first brush with the term Post Traumatic Stress Disorder when his psychiatrist diagnosed him with that condition.

“They told me I had PTSD, and I said no, I don’t,” said Jones. “I don’t even know what it is and you’re not going to tell me I have it. It took them a year to convince me that I was suffering from this.”

PTSD is an anxiety disorder that occurs after extreme emotional trauma that involves an injury or threat of death. Doctors told him that his version was delayed, brought on by the turmoil of the death of his brother-in-law and ensuing trial.

“They shut it away and then something might occur years later to open that flood,” said Dr. Sandra Holmes of the North Mississippi Medical Center’s Behavioral Health Center in Tupelo.

Those suffering from PTSD often experience startled responses, anger or irritations and difficulty sleeping. It took time for Jones to recognize the symptoms as his own.

“It was something that I didn’t want to admit to myself, but finally they got it through my thick head,” Jones confessed.

The Vietnam War, in particular, shows widespread occurrences of PTSD, with 31 percent of its veterans being diagnosed. The diagnosis of PTSD in other wars, such as Desert Storm (10 percent), Afghanistan (11 percent) and Iraq (20 percent), pales in
comparison, though it does not approach World War II, where the Japanese sent thousands of soldiers to brutal POW camps in the Pacific and 85 percent suffered serious long-term physical and emotional trauma, according to a study done 40 years later.

“Probably the veterans that I’ve seen with the most traumatic responses have been Vietnam vets,” said Holmes. “There’s a lot of knowledge and acceptance that we have now that we didn’t have during Vietnam along with the fact that that war carried with it a lot of strong opinions and beliefs.”

“The treatment process of PTSD is not a magical cure performed by a doctor or therapist. It is a process of coming to terms with intense emotions.”

The road to bettering himself did not always prove easy. He and Teresa divorced after 27 years of marriage and Jones was married four more times before deciding that he was better off single.

Holmes said it is common for war veterans to struggle with relationships because they often feel rejected and misunderstood.

“For a mental health professional, being able to be with that person through their sadness and alienation and helping them to recognize that their feelings are normal under the circumstances is so important,” said Holmes.

For years, Jones struggled with the anniversary of his brother-in-law’s death and refused to talk about the memories of Vietnam that still bubbled up to worry him periodically.
Today, he recounts his story openly and chooses to focus on what he sees as lessons from the war. Although Jones did away with the pictures, medals and memorabilia from his service, his social worker at the Veterans’ Home in Oxford, has already recovered replacements for two of the medals and is working to help him retrieve substitutes for the others that were discarded long ago.

“It took me a long time to get over it,” said Jones, “but after I got over it I feel like I’m a better person because of it and the benefits I’ve received from it are just enormous.”

He became serious as he considered life lessons instilled by the war.

“It gave me quite a respect for life and how to treat your fellow man,” said Jones. He chuckles at the thought of nightmares now, dismissing them with a wave of his hand.

“I can tell you why it’s passed,” he said. “It’s because I gave my heart and whole life to the Lord. That’s unpopular in this day and time to say something like that, but I don’t care. It’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me and I love Him with all my heart.”

This newfound optimism is vastly different from his previous state of mind. The turning point occurred four years ago.

“I liked to died a few times,” said Jones. “I hate to say that I came to the Lord on account of my sickness, but I’m just still glad that I came to Him, because I was a miserable person without God in my life.”

He looks forward to what the future holds.
“There’s nothing impossible for God,” said Jones with a smile. “He can take care of things, He can fix things, and He can work things out when we can’t do it. I just kind of leave things up to Him.”

“Some of America’s bravest and best men that ever wore a uniform fought in the Vietnam War. They deserve to be honored because beyond the battlefields of Vietnam, the emotional casualties are still being counted.”

Jones took the document back and gently placed it in the backpack on his wheelchair, where he kept it as a reminder. He beamed, a proud father.

The manuscript, entitled “When the Nightmares Never Stop,” takes a look at what Vietnam War veterans endured and their common struggle with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

It is written by Tiffany Jones.

As a high school student, Jones’ daughter had handed it to him proudly amidst her father’s emotional battle with the murder trial and PTSD.

For years he pushed it away, refusing to read anything more about the event that had shaken his life to its very core. He did everything he could to lose it, put it away and keep it out of sight, but the paper kept popping up.

When he finally came to grips with his disorder, Jones decided it was time to read it. His eyes filled with tears when he recognized the story as his own.

His daughter had taken the time to research his problem and try to reach him through the paper. She understood what he was dealing with.
But even here, there is tragedy, yet another painful scrap of fallout from a war in an Asian country that today’s school kids know only as a name.

Jones and his daughter don’t talk much. Too many open wounds.

But she had taken the time to understand and appreciate his service, and to Thomas Jones, still bearing the scars of a painful past, that means the world.
THE STORY OF FLOYD METTS

The nose of the big B-17 tilted toward the sky at an unusual angle and the aircraft began to spin, a dreaded dance that filled every pilot with terror.

World War II pilot Floyd Metts pushed the yoke in front of him as hard as he could, but the plane continued to twirl like a suicidal ballerina.

Think, Floyd, think.

Back in civilian training he had learned that a flat spin never ended well. So he did the only thing he could think of. Taking a deep breath, he reached up and turned off all four engines. The plane slowed. It dropped nearly 1,000 feet before Metts restarted the engines, leveled off and cruised to the safety of the landing strip.

He wiped sweat from his brow and emitted a half-hearted chuckle. The practice mission was over. Now came the real test.

When Floyd Metts was born on September 1, 1921, no one could have guessed he would grow up to be a part of the greatest war in human history. And no one could guess that unlike many B-17 pilots who suffered emotional trauma that lasted long after the war, Metts would handle it with the same cool equanimity with which he has handled many other challenges in his life.

Metts’ family lived on a 500-acre farm four and a half miles from the city of Oxford in an old tin-topped house. A creek ran through the hilly property, and Metts spent his time plowing cotton with the family mule.
“We had one tractor, but I plowed with a mule, and when I asked people if they had done that and they said no, I would say ‘You don’t have any basic education at all have you?’” Metts chuckled.

Metts attended school at the old First Baptist Church of Oxford for a bit while a public school was being built to serve his area.

“Back in the first grade, when I started to school, they lacked a little bit having that finished and they misspelled grammar on the school. They spelled it g-r-a-m-m-e-r,” said Metts. “I still laugh about it.”

After high school, Metts took a couple of courses in business at Ole Miss but chose not to finish college when he was presented with a different opportunity.

“It would have been better if I had got a college degree, but I had a choice when my brother offered to sell me his half of the hardware store to go into business,” Metts said.

He worked five years in the hardware store before the war intervened.

A low draft number prompted Metts to take control of his own life and join the service before he was forced to do so. He enlisted to fight in World War II in the fall of 1942.

“Every boy in my ’39 class from high school was drafted,” said Metts. “They didn’t leave anybody out in World War II.”

Metts decided to take a cadet test on the Ole Miss campus in hopes of joining the United States Army Air Corps.

His experience working in the hardware store paid off and Metts scored well, impressing others who struggled to pass the test. Although he was a B and C student in
high school, the technical skills learned from watching plumbers and electricians who frequented his store gave Metts the tools he needed to pass the cadet test with flying colors.

“There’s lots of plumbing and wires in the B-17, so I fit right in after those five years in the hardware store,” said Metts. “I had a pretty good background for getting in.”

Unfortunately, his acceptance into the Army Air Corps was short-lived.

Soon after joining the service and traveling to Alabama for training, a nasty scare with spinal meningitis sent Metts back home to Oxford. Doctors gave him a one percent chance of surviving.

Not only did he survive, he says it led to the best thing that ever happened to him. Today, he reminisces about that specific event fondly.

The leaves were changing colors, and Metts felt happy to be out-and-about after a month spent in the hospital. He turned onto the Oxford Square in his old 1936 Chevrolet and spotted two young women walking along the sidewalk. It was a cool Sunday afternoon, and Metts stopped to offer them a ride.

“We’re headed to the First Baptist Church,” replied one.

“Well, that’s where I’m headed,” said Metts.

Little did he know that when Luna Cook, a pharmacy student at Ole Miss known to friends and family as “Cookie,” hopped into his truck he was meeting his future wife.

“She and I never would have met if I hadn’t had spinal meningitis, so you see I’ve had a lot of good luck in life,” Metts smiled. “Really good luck.”

Metts remained convalescent for two months before he was healthy enough to return to Alabama to complete his training, where he finished his early training. From
there he traveled to Arkansas, Greenville, Miss., and Columbus, Miss., where he learned to fly a two-engine airplane.

He then spent the winter in Tampa, Fla., training to fly a four-engine plane. It was there that he first encountered a B-17 aircraft.

Metts met the crew he would be working with overseas during that winter in Florida.

“I just felt like I had a good crew,” said Metts. “They were conscientious people, and that’s another reason I thought I had it good.”

As winter bloomed into spring, the men prepared themselves to join the action across the Atlantic.

“I went overseas on May 27, 1944,” said Metts.

Coincidentally, he can recall this date more easily than the date of his wedding, which would occur after his return.

Upon his arrival in England, Metts and his crew joined the 381st Bomb Group, and Metts piloted a B-17, the famous World War II airplane known as the “Flying Fortress” that helped turn the tide against Germany. The aircraft earned its nickname because of 13 machine gun emplacements, including nose gunners, tail gunners and waist gunners.

In 1944, Metts and the rest of the 381st were recorded as flying 35 missions, a remarkable number to fly over enemy territory in an air war that was famous for killing off its pilots and crews. But this was war, and ordinary men were called upon for extraordinary deeds.

A typical official mission often lasted more than eight hours and struck targets deep within enemy territory.
“I’d say we probably had more like 40, but we didn’t get credit unless we went a certain depth in there,” said Metts.

The men took part in briefings before each mission. Officers attended a separate briefing than the rest of the enlisted men. Every detail of each mission was planned beforehand in hopes of preventing any problems, and the rest was left to chance.

“You’re scared on all of them because you know that there are just so many things that can happen,” said Metts. “You can run together and you can be shot down …” he trailed off thoughtfully.

“Yes, you’re always scared, and you’re not too proud to pray.”

However, Metts said no level of discomfort in his B-17 would convince him to trade being a pilot for the horrors he heard about on the ground day-in and day-out.

“The plane was loud because it didn’t have any insulation in it or anything,” Metts recalled. “But see, you get used to things and you’re so glad you weren’t walking down on the ground, you just don’t let that bother you at all.”

The 12 airplanes that made up the 381st Bomb Group flew close together on missions near and far.

“You can’t get your mind off of getting shot down the whole time you’re up there because the Germans were up there after you,” said Metts. “You don’t do much thinking about anything except, ‘Don’t get shot down.’ ”

While Metts recalls more failed airplane engines than killed comrades, he did experience some close calls. Any one of them could have easily cost him and his crew their lives.
Fortunately, with an air speed of 250 miles an hour and a cruising altitude of more than 30,000 feet, the big B-17 bombers were known for their ability to sustain heavy damage and keep flying.

On one frightful mission, Metts and his crew encountered a series of bombs that blasted the nose off their plane. The third bomb hit the B-17 far enough back to kill the bombardier sitting merely six feet in front of Metts’s pilot chair.

“We were moving at about 165 miles per hour, so how long would it take for that bomb to get from him to me?” questioned Metts. “That just goes to show the good luck I’ve had.”

Heated suits kept Metts and the rest of the crew alive during the prolonged exposure to the elements caused by the gaping hole in the plane’s front.

“It got 50 below zero, but those heated suits were just warm as toast,” said Metts.

Small miscalculations or mistakes in formation, such as this one, often resulted in dire consequences, according to Metts, who blames another plane in the 381st for the mishap.

“He was over top of us when he shouldn’t have been above us at all, so that person was killed where he shouldn’t have been killed,” Metts said.

A more direct threat on his life during a different mission left Metts feeling equally lucky.

Metts and his crew were flying at approximately 20,000 feet when they began taking fire from German anti-aircraft guns. The air filled with 105-millimeter shells designed to explode at a certain height, spewing sharp shards of metal, known as flak, in every direction.
Metts reached under his seat to grab his parachute and clip it on in case he needed to bail out. He returned his focus to piloting the plane only moments before he was jolted in a way that knocked the wind out of him.

“Something hit me,” said Metts. “It felt like if you would have hit me as hard as you could in the chest with your fist.”

Jarred by the blow, Metts managed to maneuver the B-17 through the attack and land safely.

Upon touchdown, Metts found a thick piece of flak about the size of his thumb. He noticed that the small metal buckle of his parachute was broken where the flak had burst through the wall of the airplane, and headed straight for his chest.

“If it had hit me anywhere else it could have gone all the way through me,” said Metts.

Even Metts’s return trip held an unexpected surprise. On the last day of 1944, he and the other discharged men made their way to Newfoundland, Canada. The 12 men occupied the space of the aircraft where the bombs were usually kept. As the plane dropped below a cloud in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, a loud POP reverberated through the aluminum casing.

One of the men sitting with Metts, a pilot, scarred by burns after surviving a fiery plane crash, panicked and had to be restrained so he wouldn’t jump from the aircraft into the Atlantic Ocean.

“If you saw him you couldn’t blame him,” said Metts.

Upon arrival, those aboard found a large black streak along the right side of the plane’s nose where a lightning strike had left its mark.
“Of course, you’re up there in it so you can’t look and see what’s happened to the airplane, but anyhow you have accidents and all,” said Metts, shrugging his shoulders as if to say, no big deal.

Back in the States, Metts continued his service in a different capacity.

“When I got back they told me I could go into B-29s and fly bigger airplanes or you can go to instructor school and be a B-17 flying instructor,” said Metts with a grin. “I said I’d rather fly that B-17 better so I went to Columbus, Ohio, and taught how to fly.”

Despite the stress and long hours Metts sacrificed during his service, he feels proud of his contribution to his country.

“It makes you feel good in a way that you did what you were supposed to do,” said Metts. “I feel like everybody should serve this country and that you shouldn’t be dodging.”

While veterans across the country struggled to transition after being discharged, Metts returned to normal life with ease. He resumed work in the hardware store, and eventually became the sole owner. He renamed the store “Metts Hardware” and ran it successfully for 15 years.

“I didn’t have any negative emotions left over from the war, because I felt like I didn’t do anything I wasn’t supposed to do.”

He was one of the fortunate ones. While Post Traumatic Stress Disorder was not yet a formal diagnosis, thousands of soldiers were labeled as suffering from “traumatic war neurosis,” “combat exhaustion,” “shell shock,” and “operational fatigue,” according to The National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Symptoms of each, which
primarily define PTSD today, include nightmares, irritability, increased startle response and angry outbursts.

“Luckily, I didn’t have nightmares,” said Metts. “That was the one thing that I dreaded most about combat, but I didn’t have nightmares like some people did for some reason. I guess I prayed and I guess the Lord heard my prayers.”

A consensus has not been reached as to why some veterans have a harder time adjusting than others. Faith is the only way Metts knows how to explain his seamless transition. The solid Christian principles instilled in him as a child followed Metts into adulthood and kept him grounded during his time at war.

“I think Christianity has as much to do with that as anything else, because you have a whole different outlook,” said Metts. “If you get to looking back and you think you had it bad, just look at what Jesus had.”

Metts married his sweetheart, Cookie, on June 4, 1945, in Taylorsville, Miss. Together they raised five children and lived a happy life in the town of Oxford until Cookie passed away in 2003.

“You’re looking at a person who has had a lot of good things happen to him,” said Metts.

Today, Metts leafs through his World War II mementos fondly. Pictures are on display for all to see, his medals gleam from their worn velvet cases and a copy of “The Mighty Men of the 381st: Heroes All” by unit chaplain James Good Brown rests on the cluttered dining table.

“I’ve had so many good things that have happened to me, how could I be anything but smiling?” he said. “Wouldn’t you if you were in my shoes?”
THE STORY OF LEE JONES

Mimicking the native Montagnard tribesmen surrounding him, Colonel Lee Jones sat cross-legged in the dirt of Vietnam’s highlands and stared at a large earthen jug.

He took a deep breath and eased a flexible bamboo rod, which extended from the pot, to rest between his lips.

He noticed the people watching to see if the level of the traditional rice wine would decrease. He knew that he must drink, or he would no longer be welcome in the remote village.

As the mysterious liquid made its way into his body, Jones tried not to think about the fermenting bugs and larva that others told him frequently made their way into the homemade brew.

Satisfied smiles spread across the faces of the primitive tribesmen, and Jones breathed a sigh of relief.

It seemed that Vietnam had much more in store for his military career than he ever expected.

From his birth on June 23, 1940, Lee Jones seemed destined for a life of service to the United States military. Claiming the same lineage as Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee, one of Jones’s first memories includes learning about his father’s decision to fight in World War II.
Only a year ago, Jones found a poignant letter written by his father the day after Pearl Harbor was bombed. In the letter to his wife, whom he affectionately addresses as “Mac,” Jones’s father struggles with whether or not he should enlist. He writes:

*December 8, 1941*

*Mac doesn’t want me to, but this is something I think I need to do. I need to do this.*

The last sentence:

*I’ve got to enlist.*

“I’ll never get rid of that letter,” said Jones. “I cried when I read it. I couldn’t help it. You’re in the moment with him when he’s talking about that.”

His father, George Jones, joined the Army Air Corps and became an L5 pilot assigned to reconnaissance, artillery spotting and convoy control.

“He got in and he went through North Africa, Sicily, Italy and the invasion of southern France,” said Jones. “They called him Pops in the outfit because he was the oldest one in the squadron. He was older than the squadron commander.”

Jones remembers traveling as a five-year-old with his mother to Camp Shelby to pick up his father after he was discharged from the war.

“I would talk to him a little bit about the military in general,” said Jones. “My daddy, like a lot of veterans, was very reluctant to talk about a lot of stuff.”
Jones grew up amid adults, happy as an only child. In fact, he can still recall his parents drinking coffee together at the kitchen table when they called him into the room to ask him if he’d like any siblings. Jones respectfully declined.

“I knew I had it made,” Jones smiled.

Jones’ military experience – and its aftermath – was very different from a number of other Vietnam vets. He maintained an enviable stability despite the pressures of combat followed by a sudden shift to civilian life.

After a brief bout of indecision concerning what type of career to pursue after high school, Jones ended up studying at the University of Florida with hopes of going into the real estate business with his father.

At Florida, Jones joined the ROTC. While choosing a major had been difficult, the decision to join the service came easy.

“I knew I wanted some military time,” said Jones.

Jones graduated as a DMG, a distinguished military graduate, which gave him the option of taking a regular army commission with a three-year obligation instead of a reserve commission with a two-year obligation. He initially chose the regular army commission, but as graduation approached and the real estate business flourished, he reconsidered.

“In the last semester of my senior year I told the ROTC department I wanted to decline the regular army commission,” said Jones.

Instead of beginning Jones’s active duty after his graduation in 1962, the Department of the Army chose to delay his active duty until the following year.
“That was their way of hitting me in the mouth because I had turned it down,” said Jones.

In March 1963, Jones was sent to the Eighth Infantry Division in Bad Kreuznach, Germany.

“That’s where the rubber really meets the road because if the balloon goes up the Eighth Division’s job was to cover the Fulda gap,” said Jones. “If World War III comes, this is the turf where it’s going to take place.”

During this first tour, Jones decided to become a paratrooper and attended jump school. It soon became clear to him that he wanted his service to be much more than just a one-time experience.

“It was so evident that this is what I wanted to do with my life,” said Jones.

Jones remained apprehensive about telling his parents that he wanted to reapply for regular army commission. His father, a small businessman, did not have a high opinion of people seeking the government for personal security.

At the time, the Vietnam War was running full blast. American boys were coming home in body bags and protestors were beginning to challenge America’s involvement in this deadly little war in Southeast Asia. In time, the war would divide the nation and America’s streets were filled with angry young protestors.

As the time to reapply approached, Jones wrote a heartfelt letter to inform his parents.

“I told him I know how you feel about this and I feel that way too, but I have looked at myself every which way I can,” said Jones. “This is not about getting a check every month. It’s about doing what I’m doing. My country needs me.”
The letter he received in return was positive. His parents gave him their blessing.

After returning from Germany for a short leave in the United States, Jones was sent to Vietnam in 1966. He had been promoted to captain, but sought the position of company commander when he joined the war.

“You wanted command time in a combat zone for career reasons,” said Jones. “I was pushing for that.”

He replaced a company commander who had been relieved. He was stationed in Nhatrang, on the South China Sea.

What he found left him stunned.

Drunk and sloppy non-commissioned officers and G.I.’s wandered aimlessly with .45 submachine guns strapped to their backs without permission. Marijuana use was widespread.

“It was the Wild West. I had to do something about it and do it quick,” said Jones. “I got another first sergeant in there and we shaped them back up. It turned out, hell, they wanted to be shaped up.”

During that first tour Jones earned two bronze stars for his meritorious service in a combat zone. He returned to the United States in 1967.

He decided the first thing he needed upon his arrival in Hattiesburg was to go on a date. Service in a combat zone had left him ready for a serious commitment.

“At some point you do understand there’s something else to life,” said Jones. “You can’t act like a dumb teenager all your life.”
After asking around, friends agreed that he should call high school classmate Mary Kathryn Pulliam, who was recently divorced and had two children. Jones gave her a call and the two reunited for the first time since their high school graduation.

“She answered the door and she was absolutely stunning,” said Jones. “She was absolutely gorgeous.”

The relationship progressed quickly during Jones’ short time at home.

“We had 10 dates in 10 days and then I had to leave for Vietnam, so we got engaged,” said Jones. “We were terrified about letting parents know or anybody else because they would have thought we were nuts, so we agreed that we wouldn’t say anything about it.”

The couple waited until Jones returned from his five-month leave to Virginia before telling family and friends about the engagement. As Jones pointed out, however, mothers know everything.

“My mother looked at me and she said, ‘Lee, don’t you think that we knew that?’” Jones chuckled.

“We got married in June of ‘68 and in July I had to report to Ole Miss, because the army was giving me 13 months to get a master’s degree in business,” said Jones. “Oxford was our Alpha and it’s going to be our Omega.”

While Jones and his new family loved Oxford, settling down wasn’t an option just yet. After earning his Masters degree, Jones joined the Department of the Army Military Personnel Management Team, which required the family to move around several times.
In 1971, Mary Kathryn and Jones had their first and only child together, Rob. Their son was only three months old when Jones left for his second 12-month tour in Vietnam.

The second tour proved much more challenging than the first. Like his dad, Lee is not prone to bloody war stories. Like most men in most wars, he prefers to leave that stuff in Vietnam.

“I was blessed, I didn’t get wounded or shot or anything like that, but it was harrowing,” said Jones.

Jones was a major stationed in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, or “Montagnard Country,” as some called it. The Montagnards were very primitive people compared to the Vietnamese, and the two groups rarely lived in harmony.

“The Vietnamese air force would drop extra bombs on the villages, but we got that kind of stuff stopped,” said Jones.

During the Vietnam War, Special Forces trained the oppressed minority group in guerrilla tactics, providing them with weapons and acting as aid workers in their villages. As a result, the Special Forces formed a close bond with the “Yards,” as they nicknamed them, often eating and drinking with them in the rugged, undeveloped highlands.

“I did eat dog and I will tell you that it wasn’t bad,” said Jones. “It was manageable.”

Jones served as an RFPF advisor, which stands for regional force and popular force. He worked with a Vietnamese lieutenant colonel to maneuver the regional forces through Darlac, the largest province in Vietnam. The popular forces he maneuvered
through their own districts, using them to guard their village at night and work during the
day.

“It was a unique experience,” said Jones. “When I got there, there were about a
hundred Americans on that, and when I left there, we were less than a dozen.”

Little by little the Nixon administration began shutting down operations in
Vietnam. Those left behind to finish the job struggled to make up for the soldiers who
were being withdrawn. The task left Jones weary.

“On that second tour the manpower drain went down. You were consciously
looking, where could there be an ambush. You just had to be aware,” said Jones.

“Mentally, you just couldn’t lapse. You slept light.”

Toward the end of his tour, Jones even found himself providing nighttime guard
duty, a responsibility rarely performed by an officer.

“I didn’t turn off the lights there,” said Jones. “But it wasn’t long.”

Jones was thankful to return to the United States without encountering protestors.

“I knew that if I ever walked up on somebody creating grief for somebody in
uniform that my fuse would burn out and that would probably be the end of the Army for
me, but I would not leave that guy standing,” said Jones. “I just absolutely could not see
that.”

Returning to life at home meant continued service in the military, so the effects of
the war remained indistinguishable to all but one person – his wife. Jones retains no
memory of his struggle to cope with his memories, but Mary Kathryn kept a close eye on
him after some disturbing nighttime episodes.
“I apparently did some talking and screaming at night,” said Jones. “It didn’t last a long time, but it did occur.”

But that, as far as he could tell, was it.

As an officer, Jones admits that he was probably more prepared for what he encountered in Vietnam, making him less likely to experience Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

“I’m sure that there are officers that have had mental problems, but I don’t think it’s anywhere near as frequent or severe,” said Jones.

Among other accomplishments, Jones attended the Air Force War College, served as a Senior Army Advisor in Puerto Rico and was promoted to colonel. He was in the service 23 years, 6 months “and one week.”

“When you’re in the army for a career, in the military for a career, it is a family occupation,” said Jones. “It can be tough.”

Jones retired from the military at age 49, and he and Mary Kathryn moved to Oxford permanently, where he applied for several jobs at the University of Mississippi.

He became Academic Counseling Coordinator, helping students adjust to college life and teaching positive study habits.

“I can’t tell you how much it means to me,” said Jones. “Former students of mine have come back to me and said you made a difference.”

Jones said it ended too soon.

“I’d still be out there teaching if I could,” said Jones.

The move to Oxford also served to reintroduce Jones to his faith, something that had often been set aside throughout his life.
“If you had asked me are you a Christian I would say yes,” said Jones. “I was raised by spiritual people and I was brought up in the church.”

However, Jones carries deep regrets about the lack of spiritual guidance he provided as a father.

“We went to church periodically, infrequently, church or chapel if we were on the post,” said Jones. “I set the wrong example.”

Today Jones strives to read his Bible daily and is active in his church in Holly Springs.

“A nod to God and keep on trucking – that won’t work,” said Jones.

Another change in Jones’ daily routine occurred when the Veterans’ Home was built in Oxford.

“I knew that I had to find a way to pay back. I came out here and I saw what they were doing and I kept coming back.”

What started out as volunteering at a Thursday afternoon game of bingo became a weekly visit, and soon Jones became a fixture. He was even asked to be a speaker and master of ceremonies for the annual Veterans Day and Memorial Day programs.

“I’m retired, but I’m still Army,” said Jones. “I’m not ‘Colonel’ out here. I’m Lee. We’re all the same. There ain’t no rank out here.”

The more time he spent with the residents, the more Jones grew to know and care about them.

“I love talking to the World War II vets out here, and I’ve been to some funerals for them around the state because I had gotten so close to them,” said Jones. “They knew
that was the way I was raised, so I could talk to them and get some interesting stories from them.”

In recent years the Veterans’ Home began having trouble finding local ministers to perform religious services on a regular basis. Jones grabbed the opportunity as his chance to share his faith with fellow veterans. He began hosting communion services in the chapel on Thursday afternoons before the weekly bingo game.

“Thursday is my big day,” said Jones, who usually stays for both activities.

Fourteen years have passed since Jones’s original visit to the Veterans’ Home. He doesn’t expect to quit anytime soon.

“They need to know that what they did – whether it was for a year, six months, three years, or a career – they need to know that they have not been forgotten,” he said.

“That’s as much my job as it is somebody who wasn’t in the military.”

“It’s not a big deal. It’s just something that I felt like I needed to do. Paying it forward.”
CONCLUSION

I began this thesis adventure planning to interview former soldiers from different wars at the Veterans Administration facility here in Oxford, Mississippi. Over time, however, I realized that the challenge of collecting stories from an assisted living community might be too great. It became apparent that many residents of the VA home were no longer capable of expressing their feelings in any depth or, more importantly, even capable of pulling consistently accurate memories from their aging minds. Therefore, I was forced to go outside the VA home to find other veterans in the Oxford area. I was also very interested in comparing experiences of Vietnam vets and World War II or Korean vets and to do that, I had to search outside the VA home as well. I also had to be careful to check out the accuracy of wartime recollections. For example, I had to discard an interview with one World War II veteran, an Army nurse, age 93, because some parts of her story did not check out. She either stretched the truth or has begun to imagine she did things that never actually happened. On the other hand, the interviews with Thomas Jones, Floyd Metts and Lee Jones - three people of very different backgrounds and experiences - provide valuable insights into what soldiers went through, how they handled it and their experiences when they made the often difficult transition from combat to civilian life.

Much has been written over the years about PTSD and about the horrors of combat. Likewise, much has been written about the long-term effects of combat on soldiers when they return home. If interviews with a handful of local soldiers from two
different wars count for anything, however, it is that each case is different. Different people go off to war with different backgrounds, different habits both good and bad, different tendencies, different home lives and family lives, different strengths and weaknesses. The three veterans about which I wrote had vastly different experiences and processed their return in different ways.

Thomas Jones, the Vietnam vet, abused drugs during his time in Vietnam. He described an atmosphere in which discipline was ragged and drug use was tolerated, an experience that has been corroborated frequently by books on this war, which took place at a time of escalating drug use in America. He had a tough family life growing up. He loved his parents and their time together, but he was clearly affected by their frequent moves and the need to keep changing schools and towns. He impregnated his girlfriend of recent vintage and had to get married quickly before going off to war. Is it any wonder the marriage broke up when he returned and discovered he was suffering from PTSD?

Floyd Metts, the World War II pilot, went through hellish events in the air and yet it did not seem to bother him when he returned home. He remained grounded in his faith and principles during his service and looks back on his time at war humbly. He recounts it with great precision and wonderful detail, as if he were talking about a baseball game or a thrilling movie. Metts lived a successful life, ran a business, and at the age of 93, he remains perfectly happy in his retirement.

Lee Jones, the colonel who thrived in Vietnam, got promoted and went on to have a military career. He could easily have had a much different experience, having spent so much time in guerilla warfare with the Montagnard tribesmen in the Central Highlands. But he handled it all coolly, by his description, and had no trouble transitioning to
civilian life when he returned home. He loved the military, remains quite patriotic and volunteers to sit and talk with vets at the VA home. He does it out of loyalty to those who served and out of the goodness of his heart.

As the stories unfold, it becomes clear that the background of each veteran had a great impact on how he handled the war and his return home. Maybe the only similarity is the solid Christian faith each man claims today, though the roads leading to this lifestyle varied greatly. Ultimately, I found that each man possessed a great deal of wisdom learned through life experiences, as I believe all men and women do. I am humbled to have the opportunity to share the wisdom of Thomas Jones, Floyd Metts and Lee Jones by writing their stories.
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