

Wall of Memories

Remembering Red at 46E—Line 51

Several months ago my daughter invited me to accompany her on a two-day business trip to Washington, D.C. I readily accepted. And early on the first Saturday in February of 2005, Laura and I flew out of Orlando headed for Dulles Airport. Thankfully, we had added three extra days to tour our nation's capital. I was excited not only to spend time and see the sights with Laura, but also to fulfill a personal vow I made twenty-four years ago when the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was erected.

Stashing our luggage in our hotel room about three hours later, we set out for Pennsylvania Avenue; both eager to begin our visit in the city of memories. We happily wandered for hours. And as I walked down the steps of the Lincoln memorial my emotions began to build. My long-held promise was nearing an end, for just across the way was the granite wall.

"Sir," I addressed a guard near the entrance, "I graduated high school along with a tall, redheaded soldier whose name I'm sure is engraved on the wall." Supplying his last name, I asked if they were listed in alphabetical order. The guard explained they're listed by the war year, the month, and then the day of the week in which a man died.

"The numbered slabs start with one in this west section, the early war years of the late 50s, and move to the center; where they reverse going east to the war's end in 1975."

"I know his first name as well," I added.

"Ah," he replied, "then you've got three-quarters of the battle won!" He waved us onward, and as I stepped away I spotted a shiny penny on the sidewalk—Lincoln Memorial side up. I picked it up then slipped it into my coat pocket. "Check with the lady at the information booth," he added.

"There are several with that name," the woman said while typing, her brow furrowed as she stopped and pointed to her computer screen. She swung the consol around, and my daughter read the name.

"Do you know his middle initial, Mother?" Laura asked.

"No," I said, worried we'd fail without that one bit of information.

"Might it be, Lee?" Laura prodded. I shook my head in dismay. The woman tilted the screen toward me. I scanned the full name appearing in large print until my eyes automatically skipped to the welcome and familiar

words in much smaller print just below.

“Easton, Pa.!” I said, both eyes welling with tears. “Our home town!”

With a feeling of satisfaction and a smile on her face, the woman swung the screen away, and hit a few keys. A piece of white paper inched out of a printer. She ripped off the grocery store-like receipt and held it up.

“The slab numbers are listed at the bottom left corner. You’ll find his name located at 46 E and on Line 51.” She also handed me a piece of paper with a dark border running across the top showing the memorial’s title. “You may use this to make a rubbing of his name as a keepsake.”

Stepping away and clutching the small biographical paper in both hands, I scanned the precious text while Laura kept track of the numbers as we strode along.

“He was a captain in the air force,” I read aloud, my heart growing heavier with each step. “I didn’t remember that. I thought navy,” I added, recalling only the briefest account of what happened to him in the *Easton Express* newspaper sometime in 1968. “All I knew was that I’d read his Falcon F-4 Jet was shot down over enemy territory above an intended target near the Ho Chi Min Trail.” It was then I understood how much I did not know about this once energetic, happy young man; and many more questions arose. Are his parents alive to mourn him? Did he have any siblings or a wife and children to carry on his name? Where did he spend his college years? Where is he buried? On and on went my mind. Except to assume we’d probably exchanged brief greetings as students over the years, I later told Laura I could perfectly picture his face, but have scant recollection of Richard in any of my classes. I simply knew we’d spent the same six years at Wilson High School.

“We’ll start the eastward count here at the center,” Laura said. We hurried along until I saw something on the slip of paper that stopped me in my tracks.

“Oh, my word—it’s his birthday weekend!” I cried out, tears coursing down my face. “He was eight days younger than I.” Turning, I saw grief cross my youngest child’s face. “He died March 27, 1968. Your brother was only ten months old then, just a babe in our arms.”

Arriving at 46E, I perused the huge black granite block filled with names. Taking note of the tiny round indents located every tenth line, I counted—ten, twenty, thirty, and all too soon, fifty. . . . Overcome by a sense of dread, I slowly knelt, knowing just below I’d find that familiar name. Drawing a deep breath, I slid my fingers across to the very end of line 51. And there, after forty-eight long years, once again I met Richard Lee Whitteker—silently saying a prayer; remembering to give him my humble

thanks.

We set to work, rubbing the engraving with our only available instrument—a ball point pen. But soon found it was of no use. An elderly veteran happened by suggesting the two volunteers at center marker could supply a pencil. He went off to check. After several minutes we noticed a small crowd of tourists had gathered round the busy men. We headed there. The old vet saw us and explained our plight to one of them. He waved me over, wanting to know something about the serviceman whose name we'd located. I told him what I knew about a well-respected, high school classmate. Tears still evident, I again revealed it was his birthday. Growing quiet now along with the onlookers, the guide was well aware no further words were necessary when he handed me another sheet of white paper and a stub of graphite.

Over the years I've often read about and seen pictures of thousands of personal mementoes left at that poignant memorial. I counted only three that day. I had nothing for the young hero nicknamed Red, I silently fretted. Then remembering the beginning of our odyssey toward the memorial wall, I reached in my pocket and knelt to place that bright copper penny against the bottom of slab 46E, directly below the end of line 51—Lincoln Memorial side up.

“Your battle is over, so rest on in peace, Red,” I murmured; “for you are surely in grand company.”

Thus it was that on a beautiful, azure-blue winter afternoon I satisfied my wish to pay a debt of gratitude to a brave soul whom I had not seen since graduation day in June of 1957. Like so many of his fellow classmates, Red was a vibrant young man who proudly marched up to receive his diploma; undoubtedly filled with high hopes and dreams of a bright future—though fate eventually led him to war. Under his graduation photo in our yearbook, I've since found two of Red's life-wishes were that he wanted to attend Penn State College, and fly jet planes. He did just that. On that sad day in March of 1968, Capt. Richard Whitteker made the ultimate sacrifice; ensuring his family and all Americans, and including our first grandchild—son David's boy named Evan, now at age eight; and his five year old sister, Jeri Lynn—will live in freedom. I also learned Red had a beloved wife and two daughters—their second child born mere months after March of 1968.



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Visit: **The Virtual Wall** to learn more about: Richard “Red” Whitteker, who, on that fateful day, had finally earned the coveted position of “first-seat.” Also assigned for the first time as Red’s co-pilot, or “second-seat,” is 1st. Lt. James L. Badley, Jr.—another brave man who made the ultimate sacrifice. Find James straight above Red on 46E—end of line 2.

* Forever remembering the unselfish deeds of two brave heroes, keeping them alive in our hearts for generations to come . . .

Most sincerely, Marilyn Aagaard Martin
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