

Paws for a Wreath



Mark
NICHOLAS | A MAN of a CERTAIN AGE

I'm not a fighter. Apart from one unbalanced-hormone-driven fist fight with Jimmy Mormon in eighth grade, I've never fought anyone.

Ten years after that set-to, when I came home on leave from the Coast Guard, Jimmy happened to be home, too. We were standing around in my mother's kitchen one night, drinking beer with a bunch of our childhood buddies, and I asked him about the junior high school fight.

We both remembered that it was early in the morning and we were waiting for class to begin. He said something; I said something.

Suddenly, for some reason, he thought I was mad at him; I thought he was mad at me; and we both stomped down the steps and went outside.

The short version is that Jimmy wound up with a split lip and a bloody nose, and I got a serious-business black eye. (That will teach me to take off my Buddy Holly horn-rim glasses before I start trading punches with a guy three inches taller than I am, hormones or not.)

The kitchen reunion took place in 1975—soon after the fall of Saigon. I joined the Coast Guard in 1971 and did my entire five years in or close to North America. None of my friends, relatives or acquaintances went to or came back from the awfulness of Viet Nam, so all my recollections of the horrors

they endured are second-hand — listening to Walter Cronkite report the fighting at Da Nang or Khe San on the evening news or watching “Platoon” or “Apocalypse Now,” very much after the fact.

So, VA health care card that I carry in my wallet notwithstanding, I cannot even imagine the nastiness that those who are serving post-9/11 endured and continue to face every day.

Medical treatment has come a long way, and conditions that once were labeled shellshock and battle fatigue nowadays have proper, thoughtful diagnoses and treatments from the Veterans Administration care givers and administrators, who also, just by the way, take care of my medical needs all the time, just because I showed up and signed on.

And speaking of that, I have a hard time grasping the Coast Guard's new mission. Homeland Security? Carrying firearms and actually using them to enforce the law? That wasn't me.

In 1971, Nixon was president and the Guard was a branch of the Department of Transportation. I played saxophone in the band at boot camp, marching in spit-and-polish splendor under the California sun for a few weeks before going out to sea and then to landside bases for the next five years.

As far as guns, Uncle Paul taught me more about firearm safety than I learned from banging away all one morning at a target with a monstrous Model 1911 .45 caliber pistol. I missed rifle training on the M-16 because of a scheduling conflict, but Uncle Paul taught me to shoot a .22 Browning, so that's okay.

Anyhow, speaking of caregivers, let's go

back to the Oct. 4 edition of Gulf Breeze News and Glenda Caudle's article about Healing Paws for Warriors.

This is a wonderful, local organization that offers a helping hand and paw for veterans in need, giving support to the men and women who actually went out there and did something dangerous and valiant for our country. Then they came home, afterwards, very much the worse for wear.

Please, go back and read the piece, if you haven't, but the gist of it is that the marvelous and heroic people there expend a large amount of time and effort to train and synchronize valiant men and women with service dogs that might, otherwise, be thrown away, so that both veteran and animal are better prepared to reclaim their proper places in the world.

When you go to the Healing Paws web site, your heart will soar, like mine did, because the people there really, really care about people and dogs.

You can send these wonderful folks a check to help with the effort, or you can buy a wreath for 15 bucks that will be put on the last resting place of an American warrior. Or you can do both.

Either way, the Healing Paws cause gets money, a veteran and a dog get help, and you will feel wonderful.

That is all.

A man of a certain age, out.

To purchase a \$15 wreath, go to the Healing Paws for Warriors website and click on the link for Wreaths Across America.

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