

By Denise Orsini

My father is a Vietnam veteran, but unless you were part of our family, you probably wouldn't know that. He doesn't talk about it - ever. If you bring up his military service, he'll acknowledge it, but he has never, in my memory, talked about it openly and without invitation.

He was wounded there, and for his wounds he received the Purple Heart, which he keeps in a dusty box in the back of his dresser. I saw it once, when I was young and snooping around as kids do. My mom yelled at me to leave it alone, as it was Daddy's medal and very important. I remember asking my dad what was so important about it. He wouldn't answer me.

In 1995, my parents came from New Mexico to visit me here in Pennsylvania for the first time. As part of their visit, we spent a day in Washington, where Dad was wowed by the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, and Mom got the thrill of her life going inside the Washington Monument.

We made our way down the mall to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, where my father stood silent and staring at the wall inscribed with names. I asked him if he wanted to take pictures, since he'd been videotaping and snapping away all day. No, he simply said. I didn't push it. Finally, I got up the nerve to ask him if he had any friends on the wall. He replied that, no, he was pretty lucky. Almost all his unit made it back alive.

He paused, then looked down. "I suppose Jim is up there."

"Jim?"

"He was my sergeant."

I got Jim's last name, then I went to the memorial's guidebook to look up the reference, and found the panel his name was inscribed on. As I pointed it out, I saw Dad's eyes move over the name, and I waited - for the tears, for the story, for whatever he wanted to share.

What I got was anger. A muscle in his jaw started twitching and his lips thinned to nonexistent lines as he went stone silent.

"C'mon," he finally spat out. "Let's go." He turned on his heel and walked brusquely away. I followed him, shooting quizzical glances at my mother, who wisely stayed silent as we all walked toward the Lincoln Memorial.

Dad didn't speak again for more than an hour, and that jaw didn't stop flexing. We finally sat down for lunch somewhere, and while Dad was up getting our food with my husband, Mom leaned across the table. "Jim was Daddy's sergeant," she said in a hushed tone.

"I know. I guess it's kind of painful for him to remember," I said.

"It's not just that, honey. Jim was killed in the same attack that got your Daddy wounded. He was due to go home three weeks after that."

"How awful!"

"He didn't die right away, so he was in the hospital next to your Daddy for awhile. When he finally died, his seat on the plane was given to your Daddy, who was next in line to rotate out. So you see?" she said. "Daddy got to go home because he got Jim's seat."

She slid back into her seat as Dad and my husband returned. I saw that my father's jaw had stopped ticking, and he was actually joking around again, which was good. But I also saw something in my father I never thought to look for before. He wasn't just Dad anymore. He was an angry, wounded man who carried with him - for more than 30 years - the guilt of taking a dead man's seat on a plane.

My father is only one of many who, on Memorial Day, will remember those who didn't make it home. Or those who did make it home, but left a large piece of themselves (literally or figuratively) behind in a foxhole somewhere.

For Dad, and for all those who fight still today, I remember. And I'll always remember how my father looked, staring up at that name etched into the marble. One name of so many names, but not just a name to him.

Denise Orsini lives and writes in Morgantown.