

A Timeless Combat Veteran

A Vietnam veteran and VFW life member has spent his post-war years honoring the memory of fallen friends through his writing

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Being welcomed into John Musgrave's home in Baldwin City, Kansas, means entering a space of unusual permanence that he continues to preserve against the passage of time.

His living room shelves encase hundreds of old VCR tapes, DVDs and books. In the dimly lit corridors that follow, the walls carry the weight of his world, a dozen photographs and paintings of family and friends.

Musgrave, 74, refuses to forget the slightest detail about them. His life as a Marine and Purple Heart recipient, as well as a renowned poet and writer, has been a journey with peaks and valleys. But above all, it has been a devotion of love to all his buddies lost to the unforgiving wrath of combat. Both of his sons, Daniel J. and Rye, are even named after fellow Marines Daniel Cooney, Jay Van Velzen and Jim Rye.

"They sleep on my chest every night," said Musgrave, whose published memoir last year, "The Education of Corporal John Musgrave," received national acclaim. "They died for me, so I could continue to live for them. I have spent years writing about who they were and what an honor it was to know them."

'I GREW UP IN THE PRESENCE OF THEM'

Born and raised in Independence, Missouri, Musgrave's aspirations had always been tied to his heroes sitting across from him at the dinner table. His parents met during World War II, when his father served as a B-17 bomber pilot and his mother was a secretary at an aviation plant. He can still recall going with his father to the local VFW and hearing ordinary men sharing extraordinary stories about their time in the military.

One of his father's closest friends was a Marine during WWII, a crucial figure in Musgrave's choice to become a Marine himself.

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“Back in those days, you did not need to turn on the TV to see your heroes,” said Musgrave, a life member of VFW Post 6240 in Russell, Kan. “I grew up in the presence of them, listening to their stories with admiration.”

Eager to join legions of other young men in search of a fraction of the glory shared by his local heroes during WWII, Musgrave first tried to enlist in the Marine Corps in eighth grade. Turned down, he returned again as a lanky 17-year-old to join the fight in Vietnam.

He joined the Marine Corps through the Buddy Program in 1966, joining four friends from Van Horn High School in Independence. They attended boot camp at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego, Calif., where Musgrave recalled parting ways with almost two decades of civilian wiring in just 13 weeks.

“They didn’t just put 30 pounds of muscle on me, but they challenged me mentally and physically like something I had never experienced before,” Musgrave said. “You learned to never quit, never surrender. You learned to kill with purpose, and you walked away with a deep sense of loyalty for your buddies and the Marine Corps.”

‘TAKING A LIFE WAS A VERY INTIMATE EVENT’

The rewiring and lessons on how to inflict violence on the enemy prepared Musgrave for war, but it could never wholly prepare him to take another human’s life.

An avid moviegoer who enjoyed action films that often desensitized violence, Musgrave expected his own experiences to resemble the screen. But when he deployed to Vietnam in 1967 as an 18-year-old with the 1st Bn., 9th Marines, 3rd Marine Div., dubbed “The Walking Dead” because it lost so many men, he quickly learned the difference.

“All my favorite movie warriors killed people,” Musgrave said. “But actually taking a life was a very intimate event. I remember being close enough to listen to him plead in Vietnamese, gurgle blood as he tried to gasp for air. There was no denying his humanity.”

The event shook Musgrave, who quickly vowed never to take another life. But then the enemy killed one of Musgrave’s unit members, followed by another and then another.

“You forced yourself to think of them as objects,” Musgrave said. “They became ‘gooks’ and ‘dinks.’ We began to believe the only way to pave the road back home was with dead bodies. One NVA soldier you killed was one less that could kill you.”

Musgrave spent most of the little free time he had in the “bush” reading, particularly a war novel called “All Quiet On The Western Front” by a German World War I soldier. The book afforded him a visceral understanding of the predicament in which he found himself.

As his time in Vietnam continued, Musgrave grew aware that he was going to die in a

foreign land sodden with the blood of his enemies and buddies alike.

Though it was common for his fellow Marines to pencil in each individual day they had survived in a pocket calendar, Musgrave's hope for survival had waned and thus he stopped counting.

In November 1967, after 11 months and 17 days in Vietnam, Musgrave's prophecy almost became a reality. While helping a downed Marine during an ambush at Con Thien, a combat base located near the Vietnamese Demilitarized Zone, Musgrave was shot through the chest.

He was escorted out by medevac, enduring countless surgeries and months of physical therapy at Quantico Naval Hospital in Quantico, Va., before being medically discharged in 1969 at 20 years old.

'THAT'S WHEN I STARTED TO WRITE'

While recuperating in the hospital, Musgrave was influenced by an antiwar novel called "Johnny Got His Gun," which eerily revealed his current reality. Filled with emotions and needing to make sense of his time in Vietnam, he wrote his first post-war poem.

"I had a hard time focusing enough to write something long, but I had learned about the economy of words through poetry in high school," Musgrave said. "I wanted to write about heroism and glory, but I was shocked that the first thing I wrote was from the perspective of a 16-year-old pregnant widow burying her 18-year-old Marine husband."

Unwilling to listen and interpret his conflicting thoughts about the war, Musgrave fell victim to excessive drinking in order to drown the anti-war noise and social unrest. What had once been Musgrave's vision of parades and cheers welcoming him home like it had WWII veterans was now replaced with insults, unjust accusations and neglect. His distaste for politics grew with the way politicians had managed the war, and the abandonment of plans to retreat from Vietnam by President Richard Nixon in 1969. For Musgrave, who considered suicide like so many unwelcomed Vietnam veterans, the unfolding of the war and his post-military career was pushing him toward a breaking point.

"That's when I started to seriously write," Musgrave said. "It was my way to let out the pain and understand how screwed up I was. With every poem, I was gaining some control over my experiences."

'COMBAT IS COMBAT'

Musgrave enrolled at Baker University in Baldwin City, joined Vietnam Veterans Against The War and continued to fight off his suicidal tendencies, writing away to keep his mental wounds from overcoming him. Then in 1980, he went on a blind date to meet his fate.

"I didn't even want to go," Musgrave said. "But boy am I glad I did. My wife, Shannon, is one

of the best things that ever happened to me. She was a nurse, and I worshipped the ground [nurses] walked on because of what they had done for me personally. But she was also raised in a military household. She understood me. Her dad had served two tours in Vietnam himself.”

Though Musgrave had continued to write countless poems laden with the harsh, bloody and bleak realities of war, he had kept them hidden from the public for fear of judgment.

But with the encouragement of friends and family, in 2009, he published an award-winning collection of Vietnam War poems dubbed “Notes to the Man Who Shot Me.”

While his poetry comes from experiences during and following his 11-month tour in Vietnam, the candid and poignant works paint a picture of the timelessness of combat. As a result, his poetry remains popular among Vietnam veterans and veterans of the wars and conflicts that followed.

“Combat is combat,” Musgrave said. “I’ve learned as much reading memoirs from WWI and Civil War soldiers as I have from my own experiences. Most of us veterans just want to find a way to cope with and control our memories. We want to find our way home.”

‘TO DO THAT MEANT THE WORLD TO ME’

Musgrave’s honest depictions of war and its lasting effects on veterans prompted filmmakers Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, who interviewed Musgrave for their 2017 documentary “The Vietnam War,” to urge him to write a memoir.

In a foreword to Musgrave’s 2021 memoir, the renowned documentarians write that of all the people they spoke to, “none touched us more deeply than John Musgrave,” whose stories were “humbling, overwhelming and life-altering.”

But the documentarians were not the first to notice Musgrave’s impact as a timeless voice for combat veterans everywhere.

In 2001, the VFW unveiled Musgrave as the model for its 400-pound “Citizen Soldier” sculpture. The granite sculpture, which was created by Jim Brothers, remains an attraction for those visiting VFW headquarters in Kansas City, Missouri.

“I loved Jim,” said Musgrave of Brothers, who passed away in 2013. “Being asked by him to serve as the model for this sculpture at such a lead organization like VFW was a great honor. To just have him choose to do that meant the world to me.”

Musgrave remains an active voice in raising suicide awareness on behalf of veterans, having worked over the years with other veterans in suicide-prevention programs such as the National Veteran’s Wellness and Healing Center, as well as the U.S. Army’s Worldwide

Stand-Down for Suicide Awareness.

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