

“I’m working on the questions you sent, I have some questions. Who are you? Who do you work for? What is your intent with this information?”

-Pat Sheern, 31 July 2017, email

I felt like it was an interrogation, just short of a spot light, dark room and partner cop. I had emailed him a week before, asking questions about a name I uncovered on a plaque that was in front of the Garnett High School building. I knew he was the younger brother. I knew he too was a veteran. I knew a little more about him than he did about me. I introduced myself. Gave him some of my volunteer credentials, then provided why I was asking. In two emails, I found the most interesting and unconventional friendship with stranger than I could have ever imagined.

I keep a binder, lovingly called “The Insomnia Binder,” where I record information that I’m researching. In that binder I had the name, ranks and serial number of his brother, James E Sheern and a friend John Shinkle. I had a copy of the Department of Defense Report on the Disaster of the USS Mt Hood. I had xeroxed copies of the High School yearbooks that mention both boys, always together. Where there was Sheern there was also Shinkle. I remember thinking it absolutely mind boggling that they went into the same service branch. That they went to basic training together and deployed together. Two boys grew up together in Garnett, enlisted together and died together as young men on the Mt. Hood.

Once my credentials passed his muster, Pat was tireless about keeping in contact. He wanted the copies of the USS Mt Hood Report that I had. He offered up insights about his family that are priceless parts of a grieving family’s story. He told me that his older brother Ralph Jr knew about his brother’s death before his parents did because he heard it through telecommunications in the Pacific. He said that he and his brother’s didn’t know that their father had served until after his death when they found the footlocker full of uniforms. He told me that his mother grieved for her son for the rest of her life. He said his father never really had closure because he had signed for his son to enlist early and felt like he might have been responsible for sending him to his death. He told me all of these things to help me finish a speech about the line of Sheerns and their friend Mr. Shinkle.

What I never imagined was what it meant to him to have his brother be remembered in a way that would have made Pat’s parents proud. That was pretty high praise no matter who issues it. I don’t think he could have understood what that meant for me, but what I learned from all that research pales in comparison to what I learned about Pat himself. Pat was born here in Garnett. He grew up in the shadows of his brothers and he too went to war, like his father and brothers.

Pat was a humble man when it came to his service. Per his Obituary, he served on the USS Hornet for 3 years as an electrician. The Hornet was a carrier and deployed to Vietnam regularly with the 7th Fleet off the coast of South Vietnam. As an electrician, Pat would have been involved in the “Fleet Rehabilitation and Modernization II” Program. He would have helped install AN/SQS-23 sonar equipment. She was responsible for escorting the attack carriers in the South China Sea and provide combat search and rescue. After Pat’s tour ended, the Hornet would go on to be the recovery vessel for the Apollo 11 Astronauts returning from the Moon.

Pat was like a lot of men from the Vietnam War and the previous wars for that matter. He didn’t talk a whole lot about his own service. I always got the impression that he didn’t think his contribution through service mattered. He’d always turn the conversation away from himself. He’d brag about his grandkids, say something about his father’s service that he’d learned. He would tell me how his own research about the Sheern Family Military history was coming. He’d ask me for contact information that I had that could help him. Anything he could do to *not* be the topic of the conversation. He was always wanting to know what new bits of information that I had learned or obtained about the veterans that had gone before him. Not barely a year ago we had been working on obtaining a non-redacted copy of the Mt Hood Report, which is like pulling teeth because the only ones that have been digitized are the

redacted ones. He would laugh about my struggle because clearly some poor file clerk was searching through paper that is twice my age looking for a needle in a haystack. Anytime we saw each other, he'd tell me another story. He was above all a brilliant story teller. He could keep you busy for hours listening to him, if you'd let him.

Over the last several years, I've featured many different people from Garnett and Anderson County. I've learned more about families and people who lived here in the last hundred years or so than I could have ever imagined possible. Along the way though, I've found some pretty amazing people that I get to call friends. Pat was certainly one of them. He'd probably blush if he knew I would be speaking about him. He'd find some way to weasel his story line out of my speech, but I know just as the sun shines and the sky is blue, that he'd be proud. If he were here, I'd see the white tufts of hair that he kept short over his ears that made his face look just the same as his picture on his banner. I'd see a wide grin below sparkling eyes, full of pride that even *his* story was being told and that he was *worthy* of remembering. It makes this Memorial Day all the more bittersweet. A year ago I saw him in this cemetery. Listening to my remarks and he made sure to see me afterwards to remind me that we still needed that blasted report. A year makes all the difference.

The moral in this reflection is this: Memorial Day is meant to be for the people that have gone before us. We should be thanking veterans daily for their selfless service, but Memorial Day in its genesis is about those no longer with us. Pat was someone I wish I could have had a few more meetings with. I wish I could have gotten more of his story. I wish I would have asked him just a few more questions, that is if I could have gotten a word in edgewise. Pat is the kind of man who I could have had more time to know and treasure. He's the kind of human that made the path of this historian a little brighter, and I am all the better for it.

Pat, I hope that when you look down here on us whom you've left behind, that you are smiling. I hope that I can keep saying the names of those who went before us. I promise that I will keep working to make sure that those same names are not forgotten. I also promise that I'm still waiting on that report. The last email I have from the Archivist says I should get it soon, and we both know what that means.