

Preface

NB: This page is from a message Ken wrote when he posted the story starting on the next page.

Bastogne.

My Uncle, Pvt. Guy Shoemaker, was trapped in a Catholic church basement with his platoon. The basement was a crypt and where the church wines were kept. The Germans couldn't get in and the Americans couldn't get out. The Germans tossed in a bunch of grenades that killed and wounded most of the Americans, then flooded the basement via a boarded up coal chute. My Uncle and one other GI were the only ones to survive.

They lived ten days on wine and what K rations they could find in knapsacks.

Uncle Guy never drew a sober breath after that, and committed suicide by hanging himself in a logging camp near Ely, MN back in the late sixties.

I posted a piece about him and the life celebration of my cousin quite some time back, but I attach it here just in case anyone is interested.

Yellow Ribbons

a short story by

Ken Kalish

It was early spring of 1969. A decorated young Viet Nam veteran in crisp Navy dress blues was there to say goodbye to an old friend, and to keep a promise to his uncle. He crushed back the lump in his throat as he placed a spray of yellow roses bound with yellow satin on the plain grey government-issue coffin shining in the warm Wisconsin sun. Inside the box was what remained of his cousin and childhood friend, David Hill, Specialist Fourth Class, United States Army; recipient of the Bronze star and Purple Heart, a son of the Winnebago people.

The sailor looked down at the wisp of yellow ribbon pinned to his sleeve and remembered the grey summer of 1957 when the grey and graying old men, all intermittently decorated with yellow, shuffle-danced an old step to the dum-dum-thump of old drums. None of the pretty young girls in red and blue dresses listened to the men's song, and the young men in their black and white and red and green and blue and brown finery had only grudgingly yielded these few minutes to those yellow-splashed elders. The sailor remembered another dance ten years earlier.

"Uncle," the twelve-year-old boy said, tugging at the sleeve of his mother's sister's husband, and when he was ignored he tried again, "Uncle?"

"What?"

The word stood there in the warm summer sun, heavy with anger, staring down at the boy. The man who spoke the word continued to watch the dance through jaundiced eyes, his whiskey-hard-rotten-toothed breath floating down like a silk scarf over the face of the boy.

"Who are they? The boy pointed at the dancers. "Those old guys, who are they?"

Welded to his uncle by great bear hugs, strawberries, and irrational drunken beatings, the boy could not see the age in the old man's face or his no-longer-black hair that flirted with every breeze. The boy took his first bite out of a sweetly tart heritage apple, one that might have come from a tree planted by Johnny Appleseed more than 100 years earlier.

The boy waited patiently. Sometimes, if there had been enough whiskey or enough fights with the wife, the answer would take hours. The boy knew if he asked again he would be hit, maybe with an open hand, but probably with a balled fist or a belt.

“They are men who have seen war.”

The words came so swiftly the boy hadn't even finished eating his apple.

Their music paused. One of the beribboned dancers grasped the boy's uncle by one shoulder and gazed into his eyes. The shoulder was the one with the odd puckered scar that showed where the bullet had come out that Christmas week of 1944 when German soldiers had trapped what was left of Uncle's company in an old church. They had been killed, all of them, except Uncle and a boy from Georgia.

Trapped there with the dead for ten days, the pair retained their sanity by drinking great quantities of wine and brandy stored by some good friars of the church.

“You drink too much, Guy. Your liver is going to kill you. You should dance with us.”

“If I drink enough, I don't have dreams. But if I drink enough, I can't dance.”

“You have dreams. You just don't remember them.”

“I remember. I remember too many dreams.” He gestured toward the boy without looking at him. “Look at this kid. Look at David over there. In my dreams, I see them out there shaking hands with death, being partners with it, sleeping with it. They're just kids.”

The dancer looked down at the boy, curious interest in his gaze.

“You dream about white kids?”

Uncle slapped the friendly hand from his shoulder without spilling a drop of his treasured brandy. Uncle's wasted, wiry body quivered with rage.

He's my nephew, asshole, just like my brother's kid!”

The dancer raised his hands, palms out, gently backing away.

“You should bury Bastogne, friend.”

Gentle touches were rare from Uncle Guy, and this one was memorable in many ways. Two hands grasped the boy’s shoulders and breath drawn from a cardboard liver slowly washed over him. Yellow eyes stared earnestly into those of the boy.

“You take care of your cousin. You bring him home. Promise me. You bring him home.”

The confused, terrified boy nodded. Uncle had never “asked” him for anything.

Uncle burped and tossed back another gulp of brandy, then got into an argument with another elder about the eating quality of dump bears.

Dave and the boy enlisted about two weeks apart in ’63. They went to Viet Nam in ’67. The boy brought David back to his people two weeks before Uncle hanged himself in the late spring of ’69.