

War Stories
by Rick Larson

I didn't know Jim Spurley very well, but I liked him instantly. Jim was my step-father's cousin and also happened to be my family's milkman. I first met him when he came to the backdoor of our west side home in Madison, Wisconsin one morning in early August of 1968. I was home on leave prior to my departure to my new duty station aboard hospital ship called the USS Repose stationed off the coast of South Vietnam. I was sitting at the kitchen table with my mother and my step-father, Phil, when I heard the tinkling of the milk bottles in a wire basket and footsteps on our back porch. Jim tapped on the door and issued a happy greeting which immediately lightened the mood in our early morning kitchen. Phil smiled as he put down his newspaper and my mother launched for the screen door, pushed it open and invited him to come in.

"What a beautiful morning!" announced Jim as he squeezed through the doorway and put his milk bottles down on the linoleum floor. "How 'bout a cup of coffee, Jim," said my mother taking down a blue mug from the cupboard. "Guess that wouldn't hurt nothin'," he said. "I don't think old Mrs. Borden would mind," he added with a wink. "This is our boy, Rick," said Phil introducing me. I was still a little hungover from my night at a local dance club, but managed to work up a smile and shake his hand. "Rick's on leave from the Navy. He's going to Vietnam in a few days," he added. "Well, isn't that a coincidence. My boy Jim Junior just left last month. He's in the First Cavalry Division," said Jim proudly.

As we visited, Jim mentioned that he'd been in the infantry himself. "I was a paratrooper in the Army Air Corps," he said looking at Phil who'd served in the 9th Armored Engineers in both France and Germany. "We did the real fighting, not like Phil's outfit," said Jim with a impish smile. Phil knew when he was being ribbed and quickly retorted that his unit had captured the Remagen Bridge, which "made it safe for your division to finally leave your hotel rooms in Paris and invade Germany." Both men grinned broadly as they continued their good-natured sparring over who had done more to win the war. I always loved sitting there listening to World War II vets talk about their war. My uncle Mike was a famous for his war stories, and so was Phil's brother Bob who'd been a member of the ski patrol in Scandinavia. The stories were inevitably about having fun with their buddies, getting stuck on KP duty or participating in some senseless operation ordered by some out-of-touch officers. The stories usually ended with the discovery of a cache of wine or liquor and getting really drunk. Nobody ever got hurt.

After a few minutes jawing with Phil, Jim asked me about my orders. I told him I was going to a hospital ship stationed near the I-Corps. "It's near Danang," I told him, "off the coastline. They treat wounded soldiers and marines," I said repeating what I'd heard from corpsman who'd already been there. Jim started telling me that his son was in the 1st Cavalry Division operating around Quang Tri near where I was going. I could tell as he spoke that he was mighty proud of his boy. "I think he's in a pretty good unit. He's already made corporal," said Jim beaming at his son's promotions. "I only made it to PFC, myself," he added as he slugged down the last of his coffee and stood up to leave. Phil used the opening to tell how he'd made corporal which warranted an immediate reply from Jim.

“I suppose you want me to call you Corporal Phil, now. I hope you don’t mind if I don’t salute,” Jim said mischievously as he winked at me and headed out the door his milk basket in hand. I heard him start up his truck, grind the gears a little and speed off down the street. Phil picked up the newspaper again and my mother resumed washing morning dishes as the radio DJ on the local am radio station happily announced the weather report for the fourth of August.

I stayed at the table for a few more minutes until the lack of sleep hit me and I shuffled off to bed, where I stayed until early afternoon when I got up, took a shower and prepared for another night of drunk and disorderly conduct. I had three days left on my leave before I had to report to the flight to Danang and I was determined to party all the way to the airport.

That night, on my way home and definitely under the influence, a cop pulled me over for speeding and suspicion of driving drunk. He asked me the usual questions about why I was driving so fast and if I had anything to drink. I answered his questions and told him I was leaving for Vietnam in a couple days. I could immediately see the change in his face. It was like I’d said a code word that told him to back off. That code word I decided later was Vietnam. Instead of asking me more questions, he told me to slow down a little and go right home. I promised I would. Then in a kind voice he said, “Good luck in Vietnam, young man, and God bless you.” I was sincerely touched by the cop’s message and followed his driving instructions to the letter.

The next day when I woke up around noon, my mother asked me if I’d run an errand for her. She said she’d promised Jim some tomatoes and asked if I’d take them over to his house which was several blocks down the street. “Take a left at the end of the road, go over the bridge and you’ll see his house on the right,” she instructed.

I knocked on the door of his green house with white shutters sitting next to a concrete bridge clutching a bag filled with perfectly ripe tomatoes from Phil’s garden. When the door opened, a tall woman in her early forties greeted me. She wore a beige dress and had neatly combed light brown hair. “Hi, I’m Rick. My mother, Pat, asked me to drop these off. Is Jim here?” I said. “You’re Pat’s boy,” she replied. “Come in, come in.” She told me to sit down then went to find her husband. The room was tidy, with a sofa, a couple of maroon overstuffed chairs and a coffee table. Off to one side was a fireplace that I could tell hadn’t been used in a long time. “How you doing young man?” said Jim entering the room, a toothy grin on his face. “I’m doing fine,” I said as I got up to shake his hand. “This is my wife, Eleanor,” said Jim. I turned and smiled. “You look just like your mother,” she said looking at Jim who nodded in agreement.

Eleanor had a pleasant, warm countenance that made me feel welcome. Their house was like ours, relaxed, friendly and warm. As we talked, I found out from Jim that Eleanor was also an Army veteran. They met during World War II when Jim was in training before he went overseas. I’d never met a woman veteran before and was tempted to ask her if she had stories like the ones I’d heard the men tell. “How about a soda or beer,” she asked. “Can you stay for a few minutes.” “Sure, for a few minutes,” I said. “A soda would be fine.” Eleanor left for the kitchen and then I remembered the bag of tomatoes. “Gee, I almost forgot. My mother asked me to drop these off.”

Jim opened the bag and smiled broadly. "These are beautiful. Beautiful. Nobody grows tomatoes like Phil," he said. When Eleanor came back with the drinks, he pulled a tomato from the bag and handed it to his wife. She oohed and ahhed like someone at the fireworks. "These are gorgeous. The first tomatoes of the season are always the best. Tell your mom and dad how much we appreciate them, won't you."

I told her I would and agreed that my step-father had an amazing green thumb, which he did. Then Eleanor asked me about the Navy and what I did. I told her I was a corpsman, "it's like a medic in the Army," I added to help her understand. Jim mentioned to her that I was going to Vietnam in a few days. When he did, I saw the smile leave her face and her eyes move over to a picture on the coffee table of her son in his army uniform.

"That's our boy," she said referring to the photograph. He left on June 23rd. I think he's at a place called Quang something." "Quang Tri," Jim said. "We've gotten a couple of letters from him already. He says it's not too bad where he is. He went to some kind a school for a week before joining his unit. He said it's really hot there." I admired the picture and handed it back to Eleanor. She took it, studied it lovingly for a few moments and put it back on the coffee table. I had a feeling it was time to leave and made an excuse about having something I needed to do. Together, we walked toward the door and when we arrived I saw Jim stop and reach for his wallet. "I know this is farfetched, but just in case you happen to run into Jim Junior, I want you two to have a drink on me," he said as he handed me a five dollar bill.

"I sure will. Definitely," I said, "I don't think our paths will cross, but if they do, I'll buy him one and tell him it's on you." Jim and his wife followed me out to my car. Jim shook my hand and smiled warmly as he told me to take care of myself. Eleanor held out here hand and then to my surprise, gave me a hug. When she released me, I saw her face was drawn and her eyes misty. Her expression remained that way as I backed out of the driveway. I saw them wave and walk back in the house hand in hand as I drove away.

Two days later, I boarded the Continental Airline jet at an Air Force Base in San Bernardino that would take me to Danang where I'd soon learn first hand about life on a ship, the ravages of war, smoking pot and prostitutes. I was assigned to the laboratory of the 600 bed floating hospital and worked with twelve other corpsmen performing blood tests, urinalysis and cultures for the wounded and ailing soldiers and civilians of the region. Two of our biggest jobs were diagnosing malaria infections and doing type and crossmatches for patients needing transfusions. The lab was located on the same deck as the Recovery Room and Operating Room. It was the place where seriously wounded soldiers and marines went after their initial treatment in the ship's triage. Occasionally, I'd take units of blood to the Recovery Room for what the corpsmen there called the bleeders. I remember going into the room after one load of badly wounded marines arrived and being sickened by the bloody horror of their shredded bodies. After so many years watching heroic World War II movies and hearing the stories from veterans, I was shocked at the brutal images of these young men lying on gurneys waiting to have their broken, twisted bodies pieced back together. There was nothing humorous about what I was witnessing. It was grizzly and awful and another chapter in my education about the true nature of war.

For any serviceman assigned to a war zone, mail is a real emotional life saver. I looked forward to the letters I got from my mother more than anyone else. Most of the time, she'd tell me about

family matters; relatives getting married or baptisms or someone's illness. She'd also include changes in our hometown including the anti-war activities that swept over campus at the University of Wisconsin. She told me about my cousin Jim who was with some infantry unit further south and how he'd extended his tour in Vietnam so he could get a rear echelon job. She added that she'd run into my friend Dennis, a Vietnam veteran, at a supermarket and he told her to say hello. Her letters always made home seem a little closer.

But then one day, I got a letter from my mother that blew me out of the water. "Dear Rick, I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but Jim, our milkman, stopped by today and told us that his son Jim Junior was killed in combat. He had less than a month to go before he came home from his tour. Phil and I are broken hearted for Jim and Eleanor. It's a terrible, terrible thing that's happened." She went to tell me that his parents were still waiting for his body to be shipped home and that they'd make arrangements for the funeral after it arrived. She also said how devastated they were. I could tell my mother had also been deeply affected by Jim Junior's death. Her last line was: "Please take care of yourself and be careful. We want you home in one piece." I sat for a long time trying to take it in. I remembered the picture of him in his dress uniform when I visited Jim and Eleanor before I left. I recalled his mother's worried look as she stared at the photograph and the money his dad had given me to buy a drink if our paths crossed. From all the carnage I'd already seen aboard the *Repose*, I knew war was a terrible thing. Their son's passing brought it a little closer to home for me.

I sat down and wrote my mother asking her to give Jim and Eleanor my deepest sympathies. I knew it wouldn't relieve their suffering, but I wanted to do something to let them know I cared about their loss.

A couple months later on August 8, 1969, my tour finally came to an end. I bid farewell to all the friends I'd made on the ship, went to personnel for my papers including my orders and hopped a Mike boat for shore. I boarded a commercial airliner and was off to the U.S. After eighteen uncomfortable hours in the plane, the stewardess announced that we should fasten our seat belts for the landing in San Francisco. I heard an audible exhale from the everyone of the passengers when we touched down. I made my way to the open door at the front of the plane just to look out on the skyline of San Francisco. I was almost giddy knowing that after a year in Vietnam I was back on American soil.

In spite of my lack of sleep, managed to get myself on a plane Madison. My long time friend Dennis met me at the airport with a couple of his work buddies and drove me home. My mother cried and hugged me when I walked in the door. Phil, my stepfather, shook my hand and welcomed me back. There were hugs and kisses all around. We drank beer and ate shrimp that Phil bought for this special occasion. Although I'd been traveling for over twenty-four hours, I was wide awake until early the next morning when I finally crashed on a regular mattress with sheets that smelled like perfumed laundry detergent.

A few days later, my parents organized a welcome home party. I'd never had a welcome home party before so I didn't know what to expect. The day was beautiful with clear skies and warm temperatures. Phil cooked his famous breaded chicken and my mother made her delicious German potato salad. I helped set up card tables, chairs and the food table before the guests

arrived. Phil made a sign that said "Welcome Home Rick" that he strung between a couple of tree branches. I helped him ice down and tap a half barrel of beer that he bought for the party. We poured a couple for ourselves and toasted my safe return home.

The party commenced at noon and by 1 p.m., thirty or thirty-five people had arrived and were sitting at tables scattered all over the lawn happily eating and visiting. There were family members and friends of my parents and friends of mine. All had come to welcome me back from the war. My Aunt Margaret arrived early and told me over and over how she prayed for me every night that I'd been gone. My Uncle Mike shook my hand for a solid minute before he headed for the half barrel to get drunk. Four members of Phil's family drove in from Mineral Point. His brother Don quickly started a penny ante poker game at one of the tables while his wife Gladys helped my mother in the kitchen. The Van Susterens came a little after 1:30. Catherine was my mother's cousin and had developed liver cancer while I was in Vietnam. Her complexion was a sickly shade of brown. They didn't stay long.

My younger cousins Dan and Tom arrived toting their baseball equipment and spent much of the day playing catch and shagging grounders. Around 2 pm, my high school buddies arrived. Dennis, Butch Rickey, both Vietnam vets and Jim Lutz, another Navy veteran filled up on food, beer and started a euchre game on the green felt topped card table that occupied the driveway near the welcome home sign. I was feeling really good about being home, but every once in a while I'd flash on the buddies I left back on the ship in Vietnam. They'd been my friends for a year and they were still there and the war was still going on. I wanted them here with me so we could have a gala party to welcome them home, too.

It didn't take long for my high school buddies to start a euchre game and I quickly joined in. We'd played this regional card game since we were freshmen in high school and all of us knew the game well. We played for quarters nonstop taking breaks only to get more beer, go to the bathroom or light cigarettes. I was up around three dollars when I got the hand that euchre dreams are made of...both bowers, plus the ace, king and ten of hearts. It's the royal flush of euchre, the hand I needed to win the game. But just as I was about to announce my lone hand, I saw a car pull up at the curb in front of our house and driver's side door slowly swing open. Then I saw Jim Spurley. His face is thinner than I remembered and his shoulders sagged. He looked up at our house, then trudged around the car to the passenger side where he opened the door for his wife Eleanor. She was wearing sunglasses and holding a tissue in one hand as she looked up at our gathering. They stood together for what seemed like a long time before Jim took her hand and led her to the driveway.

I heard someone at the card table joke that I was taking a long time to bid my hand. Without answering, I put down my cards, excused myself and got up to go meet the two new arrivals. My mother must have seen Jim and Eleanor, too, because we met each other on the way to welcome our guests. My mother's face was as serious as I'd seen it since returning from Vietnam. Like me, she knew the awful pain the Spurley's were enduring and their courage to come to welcome me home. "Jim, Eleanor," I heard my mother say warmly. "I'm so glad you came." "Hello Pat," said Jim forcing a smile. Eleanor didn't say anything. She just stood next to Jim gripping his hand and looking nowhere in particular. I stood behind my mother nervously watching her attend to our new arrivals. I wasn't sure how to act or what to say to the parents of

a young man recently killed in the same war I'd just returned from. It was Jim who broke the ice. "Hello and welcome home, young man," he said trying to be cheerful. I stepped forward, shook his hand and tried to be cheerful, too, but all I truly felt was sadness. I thanked them for coming and said it was great to be home, which I quickly regretted. Eleanor took off her sunglasses and reached out for my hand. Her eyes were red and watery and her face was etched with wrinkles. Together, Jim and Eleanor looked like the saddest two people on the face of the earth.

I heard Phil's voice as he charged down the driveway to greet the new arrivals. Jim seemed glad to see Phil and for a few moments became visibly more animated. My mother moved closer to Eleanor and gave her a hug while she whispered something to her. I saw Eleanor pull a tissue from her purse and wipe her eyes lightly as she took a deep breath and whispered something to my mother. As they chatted I noticed my welcome home sign fluttering in the light wind and pondered the cruel scene of happy parents and sad ones visiting in our gravel driveway. I wondered why I was spared and other boy wasn't. I knew that all over America there were parents celebrating the return of their sons while thousands of others were mourning the loss of theirs. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason to it. It was just the luck of the draw in some terrible, deadly card game.

I heard Phil urge Jim and Eleanor to come up to the house, have some food and stay for a while. "We can't stay," I heard Jim say shaking his head, "we're on our way to visit Jimmy." I watched Jim take his wife's hand and squeeze it then he turned to me and told me again how happy he is that I made it home safely. Then Eleanor pulled her hand away from her husband and gave me a kiss on the cheek. I didn't know what to do or say. I stood and watched the two distraught parents in silence as they headed for their car and slowly drove away.

Later, my mother told me that Jim and Eleanor went to the cemetery every day to visit their boy's grave. "Every day?" I asked to make sure I'd heard it right. "Everyday," my mother replied. One can only imagine the depth of the grief that would cause someone to visit their son's grave every day at a place called Sunset Memory Gardens.

Four months later, I was discharged from the Navy. I enrolled in college and became an anti-war activist hoping to end the conflict and bring my brothers home. I saw Jim Spurley once during that time when he visited my parents' house where I lived. I had started growing my hair long and wore anti-war buttons and peace symbols on my clothes. Jim greeted me cordially, but when he saw my anti-war attire, he chilled. When I started talking about ending the war, I could tell by his face that he didn't approve. I decided not to press the matter. The war had cost him his only son and I didn't intend to add to the terrible load he was carrying. I figured he was like a lot of World War II vets. When your country called, you went. You didn't ask questions. Questions were dangerous. You might find out things you didn't want to know; that the war in Vietnam was a mistake and that we had no business being there. You might discover that your government had been lying about the war. You might start to wonder about the endless bombing, the death toll and the split it had created in our own country. Worst of all, you might begin to wonder if your only son had lost his life for nothing. Some questions were better left alone.

That was the last time I saw Jim. I graduated from college, got a job, got married and had a family, all the things that their son probably would have done had he lived. I took care of my parents when they got old, saw them through their final days and buried them in the same cemetery where Jim Junior had been laid to rest. In the back of my mind, I wondered if Jim and Eleanor would attend their funerals or send a card, but they didn't.

This year on Memorial Day, I visited my parents' grave. While there I decided to find Jim Junior's resting place and pay my respects. It took only a few minutes to locate the flat bronze marker. It was covered in grass clippings, which I quickly brushed away. His name was etched across the top: Sergeant James V. Spurley. In silence, I stood and reflected on all that had happened so many years before. I recalled meeting his father in my parents' kitchen and listening to him and my step-father tell their amusing war stories. Sergeant Spurley's story wasn't anything like theirs. His story ended tragically on Landing Zone Jamie, May 12, 1969 when he left his bunker to get ammunition during an intense NVA attack. At the time, he was a soldier in Company C, 7th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division. He was posthumously awarded a Bronze Star and Purple Heart. He was only twenty years old when he died.