

B Company Honors Matthew O. McKnight in Auburn, AL

--Andy Vaart

On March 29, 2018, six members of B Company attended a ceremony at Auburn High School that commemorated the service of veterans of the Vietnam War. Included in the ceremony was the unveiling of a portrait of Matthew O. McKnight that was presented to the MOI of the Auburn University NROTC unit, Maj. Daniel Murphy.



The portrait, painted by Barbara Davis (right), was the result of an earlier commemoration of an Auburn NROTC graduate of 1963, Capt. Robert Hubbard, USMC, who was killed in Hue in February 1968 while serving as the deputy chief of CIA pacification efforts in Thua Thien Province. Andy Vaart attended that ceremony as a CIA representative presenting a letter publicly acknowledging Hubbard's role for the first time.

During the days surrounding the February event, Andy noted that there was nothing in the NROTC unit's spaces to mark Matt's death in October 1967 during Operation Medina in Quang Tri Province. John Davis, the artist's husband and architect of the Hubbard commemoration, took up the challenge, and his artist wife produced the above portrait for presentation at the Auburn High School "Coming Home" event last week in front of an audience of about 600 Vietnam War veterans and their families.

The six comrades of B Company — Bob Lange, Dick Hulslander, Tom Nequette, Lou Pierce, Roger Daniel, and me — were joined by Matt's sister Isobel Anderson, 11 years Matt's junior, and her husband, Tim, in the presentation ceremony.



(Enjoying lunch before the Auburn High School event. Left: Tom Nequette, Tim Anderson, Dick Hulslander, Lou Pierce. Right: Roger Daniel, Isobel Anderson, Bob Lange, Andy Vaart)

This micromini-reunion was important for several tangible and symbolic reasons. For Isobel, this connection to her brother's colleagues 50 years later was touching and truly important. Here is her thank you note to the B Company detachment:

I didn't want to let Easter pass without writing to say thank you, again, for all you have done.

Dearest Bob, Andy, Roger, Tom, Lou, and (my favorite story teller) Dick, I really do not know how to begin to express how much I appreciate your presence in Auburn this week. The depth and breadth of your warmth, loyalty, and compassion is something rarely experienced. Truly you have given the gift of yourselves.

In John Davis' introduction, he mentioned Operation Medina. I knew the location of Matt's death and remembered hearing the description that he was killed by "mortar fragments to the head and chest," however, this was the first time I ever remember hearing any mention of a specific battle or confrontation. When Tim and I arrived in Gainesville Friday evening, we walked out to have a quick dinner. When we returned to our hotel room, we

both started trying to dig up whatever we could find on Operation Medina, Quang Tri. We read, and we cried, and we cried.

We've ordered a couple of books about Viet Nam, and I plan to contact the authors of a couple of the articles we read in which his name appears. I spent some time this afternoon going through and rereading Matt's letters.

I am very glad to know more about Matt's life and although it's so very painful, I feel it's important to know about his death. I just never, ever questioned how it all happened. My mother was coping the best she could, grieving and parenting two young children -I really don't think she knew the details surrounding Matt's death. We spoke about Matt all the time, but it was in terms of missing him, remembering him.

The way I tend to cope with sadness and despair is by trying to reframe with gratitude. I didn't have to dig very deep on Friday night because of the joy of meeting some of the finest men ever the previous day. I drew on the comfort and strength you all provided me, standing on that stage. I will always and forever be thankful for you.

Thank you for your willingness to share your history, for your loyalty to Matthew, and for being the Marines you are.

If you're ever in the Orlando area, we would love to see you.

With all of my love,

Isobel

For those of us in attendance, we were touched as well, with words hard to find.

From Bob Lange:

For me, it is that we lived our motto, Semper Fidelis, to our Nation, to each other as Marines, and to the families of Marines.

From Tom Nequette:

How fast the distance and time of 50 years can disappear. You just picked up where you left off. You simply understood each other, no questions, simply amazing.

The interest in understanding what it was that young Marine officers learned and treasured which Matt's sister Isobel expressed and appreciated was heartwarming for me.

The value of the bond is deep and the ability to express it to others is impossible.

From Dick Hulslander:

Time with fellow B Company Marines was like having a beer 50 years ago. We just "picked up an interrupted conversation." We all look a little different, B Company are still energetic, patriotic people.

Was astounded by all aspects of Auburn High School. It renewed my dwindled faith that America does have a back bone and decency.

Meeting Isobel reminded me of what wonderful people the surviving close kin of KIA's are. I have had similar experiences with KIA's from my own battery and others where I was the notifying officer. These are truly heroic people who are very under recognized.

You and I discussed the uncomfortable feelings of being recognized as "heroes." Isobel and Denise, sister of Cpl. Benny West W-1-12 KIA, and others like them are, to me, real heroes as are KIA's and serious WIA's. Maybe "hero" has become just another worn out word, rather like "war" which is frequently used to describe athletic contests.

But most importantly, IT WAS A WONDERFUL TIME WITH REALLY FINE PEOPLE, to wit, B COMPANY MARINES.

And from me, all of the above and more.

Semper fi,

Andy