

San Jose State University

From the Selected Works of Gil J. Villagran

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Hi Rob, Viet Memorial

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/gil_villagran/85/

Hi Rob't,

I recall you once abbreviated your name as above, which I thought was cool. Do you still do so?

Anyway, about 20 years ago I took some gang involved teens to Washington, DC, to a youth AIDS Prevention conference, to show them a larger world than their gang infested barrio in East San Jose. While there, I took them to the Vietnam War Memorial wall with the names of all the 58,000 KIAs carved on the black granite.

It is quite moving to see all those names, even if one does not know any name of any veteran who was killed in the war. From one end to the other are more than several city blocks long. As I walked along, not reading the names, but just surveying the vast task of carving, with some powerful granite blasting tools, perhaps dozens of teams of workers, for weeks on end. Each panel has the names of all the soldiers killed in each year, from 1959 and early 1960s, the so-called "U.N.-Eisenhower-JFK advisers" to the ROTC, CIA, regular army lifers, and of course--on each year's panel, the majority of the names are of the draftees who were kidnapped by their own government, trained to kill those who had done them no harm. The last panels list the last unfortunate draftees killed toward the end of the 1970s.

As I reached the end of the Wall, tears welling in my eyes, hardly able to be absorbed by my red bandana trying to contain my bitter hatred of that illegal war. Then it dawned upon me that I did indeed know some names that must be on that god-damned wall! First, Bobby Rizzo, our fellow Santa Clara classmate since 7th grade. Later that afternoon, laying in the grass along the memorial, I recalled our times with Riz during our last years of high school and after, before he was drafted, we had some good, and even crazy times--partying, getting high, going to Santa Cruz, motorcycle riding, partying & getting high some more, (we did a lot of that), driving in your van to a concert in LA and dropping acid. It seems like our last time together was a final all night party before Bobby Rizzo got inducted and we accompanied him to the Greyhound Bus terminal the next morning. As he left for Basic Training at Ft. Lewis, WA--the last time we saw him...until his funeral back home at the Santa Clara cemetery, just blocks from our high school and ironically--across from his dad's apartment.

So I made an imprint of his name on the wall. While doing so on special strips given away for visitors, I then recalled that another of our classmates had also been killed in action. Steve Woodcock, who I knew from first grade at Scott Lane School, had also been killed, in the same year, Both were born in 1948, my birth year, both were killed in 1969, Woody on June 29, 1969 Riz on July 2, 1969, barely four days apart... But on each panel for that month and that year were hundreds of names of kids killed, most barely old enough to drive, in some states--not quite old enough to vote. Bob Dylan sang it well in With God on Our Side: "You don't count the dead with god on our side..."

So I intended to mail you the imprints of our long dead friends' names, but did not have your address all these years, so I finally put them in a folder, among many such folders in my bookcase, among many book cases—moved around, then in a closet, then lost for 30+ years. Then you moved to Arizona, so I thought I would never see or even hear from you. Then you called me three weeks ago, which I really appreciate, since we lived a half block away, me at 1995 Jackson St. and you at 1190

Reed St. (if my memory serves me well). from six years of age, until a few years after you returned to Santa Clara. We are both now 68 years old. Wow, where did the time go? How did the years add up?

But looking for something in a closet I had remodeled, re-organized, and then stuffed with who knows what last weekend, I found the pocket folder with the two imprints, along with two note cards and a postage stamp of MIA dog-tags which are sold in the kiosk at the memorial. At the kiosk they have several massive phone book type books with the names of all the soldiers killed during the war, alphabetically, with their dates of birth and of death. The dates on the paper strips are 1959, the first year our unofficial, **undeclared** war, and 1975, the final year of our still **undeclared** war.

So, Bobby, my still ever so fondly beloved best childhood and young adult friend, here is the letter I started to write you 30 years ago, so sad about our two friends killed by that ignoble war, along with 58,000+ others, and all the time at the memorial, extremely thankful that you survived and came home to your mom and dad, and your second family, the Villagran family that loved you also.

Take care of yourself and your family.

Your brother, Gil