

Jeri Rowe: After war, a veteran kept on fighting

Sunday, November 8, 2009

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News & Record

GREENSBORO — We'll celebrate Veterans Day on Wednesday with a collective salute to all our soldiers past and present.

Here's one to remember: James Roscoe Davis.

He was 17 when he was drafted into the Army and given a parachute and a gun to fight the enemy in Southeast Asia.

He earned a Purple Heart for the two bullets lodged just beneath his scalp. He also got lost in the jungle for 27 days, living on bugs, tree bark and snakes he killed and ate raw.

He saw his buddies torn apart by bullets and watched young children offer his fellow soldiers shoeboxes purported to be gifts. The shoeboxes contained live grenades.

Davis could never shake those memories.

In December 1965, he left Greensboro. He was a Dudley High grad, a well-built teenager with a rolling gait, known for his creased jeans, dress shirts and shined shoes.

The day he left for Vietnam, Roscoe circled his big family together — he had 13 brothers and sisters — and told them all the same thing: "You be good. I'll be back soon."

He sent back letters, talked briefly about what he saw and sometimes ended with this one request: "Please pray for me because I am really in a war."

In the summer of 1967, on the day he came back, he walked into his house in his uniform. He had his helmet, his duffel bag and a distant stare his little brother, Dwight, will never forget.

"The light had gone out of his eyes," Dwight says today. "He came back like an empty man, like he was walking around in a shell."

Roscoe was never the same.

There were times he'd pick up a broomstick, hold it up like a rifle and yell so loud his frightened younger siblings would race next door as his mom told him, "Roscoe, put it down. You're going to be all right."

There were times he'd grab a dinner plate from one of his siblings and scarf down every morsel of food as if he hadn't eaten for weeks.

And then there's 1975.

The fiancé of his younger sister, Pearl, barged into his family's house in a drunken rage. He had attacked her in the past. And it seemed he wanted to attack her again.

"Be cool, man," Roscoe told him. "Be cool."

Roscoe pinned him on his mother's sofa until the police came at least 10 minutes later. Pearl's fiancé, the father of her three children, died. Roscoe was sent to prison and served three years for involuntary manslaughter.

Pearl grieved for a decade over her fiancé's death. She forgave Roscoe. So did her children. Eventually.

In 1978 , Roscoe got out. He wanted to be a college professor. He couldn't get a job. He was a felon, convicted of killing somebody. And he was tormented by Southeast Asia. He couldn't shake the images from his head.

Or Agent Orange.

He saw that jungle-killing chemical defoliant everywhere in Vietnam. He told people he breathed it and saw it on the ground, on the leaves and on the water buffalo he and his fellow soldiers had to eat.

He blamed Agent Orange for his ailments: his diabetes, his schizophrenia, his high blood pressure, his cirrhosis.

He sued the federal government, and he complained every time he went to the Veterans Administration hospitals in Durham and Salisbury. But his complaints went nowhere.

He got about \$900 a month — \$400 from the military; \$500 for disability – and spent much of it on alcohol and drugs.

His life was one big disconnect. He spent weeks in mental hospitals, and his family would see him disappear for years at a time.

When he talked, Roscoe mumbled and growled. He made up words. He told people he was Italian, went to Harvard and once played baseball for the New York Yankees.

And he told them he lived on the streets.

That's when his former probation officer, Daniel McDuffie , spotted him a few years back. Roscoe was in a Greensboro homeless shelter.

"Roscoe, what are you doing here?" McDuffie asked him.

"I live here, and I'm homeless," Roscoe told him.

McDuffie helped run All Stars Group , a private agency geared to help drug addicts, alcoholics and the mentally ill. People just like Roscoe.

Roscoe refused to take medication for his schizophrenia. But All Stars' caseworkers got Roscoe back into counseling, found him housing and drove him back and forth to the VA Hospital in Salisbury to see his doctors .

They watched Roscoe walk in as the old soldier, shoulders back, head held high.

Roscoe had started to change.

He attended his brother Dwight's church and started seeing his family again, hanging close like a security guard at his family's two businesses: Pearl's beauty salon and the barber shop next door owned by her son, Lamont.

"Nephew, I need you," Roscoe once told Lamont. "You helped me come out of my condition."

In January , All Stars found Roscoe a hotel room. Roscoe felt settled, at peace. He wasn't homeless. He wasn't trying to score drugs. He wasn't yelling with a broomstick in his hand.

And he had found his daughter.

The last time he saw her, she was no more than 6 or 7. During one of his flashbacks, he had put a gun to her head. His daughter never saw him again.

Until January.

She had been looking for him for the past few years because she wanted to get a handle on her past. And by chance, on her way to a mental health appointment, she saw him sitting on a brick wall downtown.

"Daddy?" she asked.

"Baby Girl?" he responded.

Lisa Ross had found her father.

They talked every day and saw each other several times a week. She even brought over plates of food to his hotel room. And always, he'd be out front with a cup of coffee in his hand.

"Give Daddy some sugar," he'd tell her.

He had plans. He kept telling her that one day he would get his settlement money from the government for his Agent Orange ailments, and he'd buy a house and settle down so they all could be a family.

"Baby Girl," he'd tell her, "Just hold on. You just hold on."

She did. He didn't.

He died Oct. 2, 18 days after his 63rd birthday. He was found in his hotel room, taken down by a heart attack. He had died in his sleep.

At his memorial, Roscoe's baby brother, Dwight, gave the eulogy. Dwight is now 51, a minister. He talked about the fog clearing, the hard memory of Southeast Asia gone.

Meanwhile, Roscoe's daughter read a poem she wrote. She called it "Never Too Late."

Today, Ross is 39, a single mother of two. She keeps in her purse her dad's VA identification card. It's her reminder of who he was and what he meant to her.

James Roscoe Davis: father and grandfather, brother and uncle, soldier and decorated war veteran. A man to remember.

Never too late.

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Lisa Ross' poem to her father

Never Too Late

As long as you have breath in your body,
It's never too late,
To right the wrongs
And correct the mistakes.

As long as you have breath in your body,
It's never too late,
To cry the tears
that heal the broken hearts that do break.

As long as you have breath in your body,
It's never too late
To laugh the laugh of happiness and smile
A smile that's pleased.

It was never too late
For me and you, Dad
This, God has shown me.

Now, you've passed,
And my heart feels pain.
In due time, I'll heal and
Start to maintain.

That I owe you
For you gave me change,
A chance to see what I could not see.

That it's never too late
It wasn't too late at all.
For me.

— *Lisa Ross*