

Agent Orange takes the life of Vietnam Vet

By Candy Richey

For many years, he was tough to be around. I spent many days with him in his desert oasis. He lived much like a hermit, but people were always coming to Shawn-Huber for help.

After Vietnam and the constant pain that was a part of his life, Shawn found relief in self medication, and was afraid to go to the government he served to get help.

In 1998 he was near death when our mother, Colleen Huber, rescued her son from that desert doom. She took him to the Veterans Administration hospital in Loma Linda, California. The doctors figured he was a lost cause, but through the love and insistence of his mother, they finally helped this lost Veteran of the Vietnam war.

She took him into her home, nursed him back to health. She then encouraged him to seek help with the other Veterans who had endured the same experiences in the quagmire of Vietnam. This counseling he received with a group of similar Vets, led by Houston Lewis, brought my brother back to the world for the first time in over 30 years.

He refound his love of music and began playing with jazz and bluegrass bands in the Temecula, California area. Many people followed the band's growth and popularity, and Shawn found the peace he so desperately needed. The peace was in his music, and he jumped in and "took life by the horns."

For the last four years he has been leading a life of which he always dreamed. Music, acceptance, and love of his family brought him slowly back to the person we knew before Vietnam. Thanks to Mom, our sister Melody and her husband Cal Brunsting, and the friends he found at the Veterans Hospital in Loma Linda, we had again found Shawn.

People from far and wide traveled to hear the band "Older Than Dirt" play in the Temecula Valley. Shawn with his bass, and on occasion with bass guitars, train whistles, harmonica, fiddle and mandolin entertained people constantly. An accomplished musician he was.

In Junior High Shawn was in the Los Angeles Honor Orchestra. We had many Saturdays when our family of six (small people) climbed into our 1959 Metro with Shawn's bass and drove from Orange County to Los Angeles for his practices. We were all very proud.

When he was in high school, he was invited to attend the Stan Kenton Jazz Clinic twice, an honor that he relished and from which he learned. There were other honors. In Oklahoma City he and his jazz band were featured on television.

Then came high school graduation and classes at the local community college. After a short time, he knew this was not what he wanted to be doing and dropped out. "You'll be drafted," Mom cried. "Probably," said Shawn. "But Dad did his duty, and if called, I will do mine as well." So he did.

Boot camp found Shawn with the medics much of the time, as his feet were always filled with blisters. But he graduated, and was sent to Vietnam.

"He was the smallest guy I ever saw who carried a machine gun," said Mike McCoy, one of his VA buddies. Shawn was proud of that accomplishment. At only 140 pounds or so, he led his platoon through the jungles, serving as a target for any sniper.

January 6, 1969, they were in the jungle near the Cambodian border when small arms fire and an explosion were felt. Shawn went flying up into the air and came down badly injured, struggling for his life. His radioman, Sgt. John Edwards from Compton, California, called for an immediate "dust off" because he was scared that Shawn wasn't going to make it. One was already dead from the booby trap.

Three weeks later he awoke to the amazement of the doctors, and was finally sent home covered in bandages from head to toe.

Physical recovery took about six months, but the emotional and mental recovery was to take his lifetime.

"It took all of us almost 30 years to admit that there was something wrong," said his friend Mike Prescott. Those friends of Shawn's helped him come back to a normal life.

The usual for a Vietnam vet is more than one marriage, anger, nightmares, and frustration that they cannot seem to find a balance in their lives. Many have resorted to drugs to "self medicate" and to try to ease the pain.

"We all carry the scars of friends left behind, and the questions of why we survived and many of those friends didn't," said Mike McCoy. "I once looked into the wallet of a Viet Cong I had killed and saw a photo of a pretty girl he wanted to go home to. We were no different than them... we all just wanted to go home."

In September, Shawn was diagnosed with a tumor in his chest wall. The good news was that it was intact when they took it and his lung out. The tumor had wrapped around the lung, virtually suffocating it. A few

America's Son

By Melody Brunsting and Candy Richey

He entered the room, eyes wide and round
Staring at the instrument that made the loudest sound
"Pick any one," Mom said, as she surveyed the room,
"Except THAT," she said pointing to drums that played
no tune.

Down but not beaten,
He saw standing against the wall
Something as big as he was
Maybe more than four feet tall.

A string bass he decided
Sang music to him
He shined a wry smile
And Mom knew she didn't win.

"You thought you could beat me
You thought you had won,"
At the age of 10 Shawn knew he wouldn't lose
Because he was America's son.

Just turned eighteen
When he was called to fight
In the Viet Nam war
Many said wasn't right.

"I'll be fine" he said
"As a soldier I will go,
Just in time to see
The Bob Hope Show."

Just after Christmas 1969
In a leach-ridden mire
Riverines patrolled when
Suddenly they took fire.

Just who tripped the mine
No one can really say.
Shawn only knew he was lucky
To come home alive that day.

"You thought you could beat me.
You thought you had won.
But I knew I would defeat you.
Because I am America's son.

The following years
America's son was to find
The world wasn't what he thought
And many times was unkind.

He struggled and toiled
Through life's greatest tests
And found he just didn't fit
With American society's best.

He married and divorced,
Twice they say,
But none say he failed
It was not his way.

It was the war that
Left scars long thought gone
It wasn't until his friends at VA
Helped him come home.

He refound his music
Of which he was supreme
And found the life
He thought was just a dream.

"You thought you could beat me
You thought you had won,"
At age 50 he found he was
Indeed America's son.

Though 30 years past
The war was not done
Because Agent Orange
Was to test America's son.

They found a tumor
Inside his chest wall
Doctors took it out
And thought that was all.

Then the stomach hurt
And hurt him some more
So two quarts of blood
Were pumped from that sore.

That wasn't all
This time he would fight
Just three days later
They found another blight.

So into his head they bore
They took out a mass
But said there were two more
And his time would go fast.

He kept up the fight
Said this could not be
"Mom, it's just not right,
So much I want to see."

Take life by the horns
Was his battle cry
He did just that
Til the day he was to die.

Now he's leading the band
Up in the clouds
Telling us all to take life by the horns
Stand and be proud.

"You thought you could beat me
You thought you had won,"
At age 55 Agent Orange and Vietnam
Took America's son.



weeks later he went through one session of chemo therapy. This set off a massive bleeding in his stomach. They pumped two quarts of blood, cauterized the bleeding part and sent him home.

Just a few days later he fell while in the bathroom. His weakness from the previous events left him barely able to stand. Both my sister and mother were unable to get him up and called an ambulance. After arriving at the hospital, they took pictures of his head and found another bleeding tumor.

Rushed to Loma Linda Medical Center, they did brain surgery to save his life. Two hours later and he would not have survived. The surgery left him much more talkative than ever in his life, seemed to take away his inhibitions.

Then I flew home to be with my family. Shawn was not doing well, they had found two more brain tumors and the diagnosis was now sarcoma. Very bad news. They moved him to a palliative care unit and told us to expect him to not make it.

We believe in hope. As long as he was breathing, there was hope. Mike and Mike came to visit, and actually got him up, walked to the window to see the ducks and water fountains, and feel good about himself. They did this again Saturday, but Sunday he was too tired to exert the energy. Other friends visited, Myra, Larry and Patty Anderson, and Houston Lewis.

Melody stayed Sunday night, and by midnight she knew the end was near. Mom and I arrived Monday morning, then his son Shawn Jr. arrived. "You had better call Brandie," I said. He did, and at 3:23 p.m., with Mom, Shawn Jr., daughter Brandie and me at his side, Shawn took the final journey.

He requested to be buried at Riverside National Cemetery, with military honors. He received that, and much more. At the church service and cemetery, many friends came to say goodbye. The love that came from them all was an affirmation of the love that he gave. "You can't have a friend until you are one." Shawn had plenty.

Shawn had a tough battle for over 30 years of his life. Even in the dark days, his main mission in life was to help people. Many times he gave his last dollar, or the clothes off his back to someone who he figured needed it more. Mom rescued him from a trailer in the desert located on a friend's land. He was homeless, dirty, and direly ill. It was her determination that he live that bought us the last five years.

The big thing she provided was to give Shawn the opportunity to get well. With the Vets at Loma Linda and a sense of accomplishment, Shawn found his way home. His final years were a time of accomplishment, respect, and dignity. He had found the peace that efficiently eluded him for so long. People from far and wide respected him as a human being and as a musician. He went out on top, as a winner.

If anything can be learned from this, it is to give all of our Veterans, especially our Vietnam era Vets, the utmost respect, and unconditional love. They have given their lives for our freedom... how can one ask for more?

If you have a family member who is a Vietnam era vet who is having troubles, please get the help of the Veterans Hospital in Vancouver or Portland. Not only counseling, but also to be sure that Agent Orange isn't ravaging their bodies. There is help. Call.