



**CAPTAIN JOE HODGES:
Catkiller Zulu, 3rd Platoon, DaNang,
1966-67:**



Wow! What a testimony of a meaningful life and of courage. Joe Hodges sent this in yesterday. As I contemplated his mind-set as he wrote this letter, I came to admire him for merely putting it down on paper, and much more for sending it to me and writing, "...feel free to share with anyone." Joe, I do

admire your courage, attitude, and love of family. I am certain all who read this will share my feelings, as you so gracefully shared your story. Speaking for your fraternal brothers, the Catkillers and Friends, I add that we not only wish you well, but also send a hug in the same spirit as did your friend, Miller Griffin. God be with you and your family. Don Ricks, Editor

"Don,

My name is Joe Hodges, and I was in DaNang June '66 to June '67. Please add my name to your email list and to the Quarterly CATCOM newsletter mailing list. My call sign was "Catkiller Zulu." I had brain cancer surgery in early April of this year, and I have written a short story concerning how Vietnam helped get me ready for this problem. I put the story in this email. Feel free to share it with anyone, if you like it.

Thanks,
Joe"

Facing Fear, Vietnam and Brain Cancer

By Joe Hodges

"In June of 1966, I was on a plane headed for Vietnam. We that had just left Clark Air Force Base in the Philippine Islands, and up to that point the conversation by almost everyone had been easy and sometimes loud. However, when the pilot said our next stop was Saigon, South Vietnam, everything went quiet. I sat there thinking about the last few days before I took this flight. I had said goodbye to my sister, Linda, my mother, and my father in Verona, Mississippi. Linda and Mother cried. To see Mother crying was out of the ordinary. I had never known her to cry about anything, except the loss of my older sister and the death of her brother, Carl, in World War II. She simply would never say much about those two things. Daddy gave me a hug and said be careful. My wife, Barbara, and I left for North Carrollton where she would stay while I was gone. She was expecting our first child, and her mother was there to help. Leaving her was very difficult, far beyond what I can put into words. After I spent a few days with Barbara, her Uncle Elmer took me to the Greenwood Airport to start this journey. It was tough for me to leave them, but I now know that it was much tougher for them to see me leave. I realized that I was headed into a war, but I didn't know exactly where in Vietnam I was going or what I would be doing.

After reaching Saigon I was processed into the country. On the

second day I ran into the young man that had sat by me on the plane. I asked him what he had been doing, and he told me that they had almost taken him off the plane and put him on guard duty. I asked him if he had seen any VC. He said no but that he had shot at anything that made a noise. Later, I ran into a fellow flight school class member named Palmer Haines. Palmer was one of those young men that every man wanted as a friend, and almost every woman wanted. He was a good looking young man with a great personality, and he was just plain fun to be around. The next day Palmer and I headed north. When we reached NhaTrang, we were picked up at the airport by a young soldier driving a three-quarter-ton truck, with an open bed. He told us that it was too bad that we didn't have rifles and bulletproof vests, because vehicles on the road we were going to take were almost always under constant attack. Palmer and I got our knives out and sat ready to repel any attackers that reached the truck. I later realized that the driver did not have a rifle and a bulletproof vest, so he must have really enjoyed the show that Palmer and I put on with our knives. My knife was not even sharp at that time.

From Nha Trang we went on to Da Nang. There we saw Ray Alexander, a fellow flight class member, and I ran into Major Richardson who had been one of my ROTC instructors at Mississippi State. We said, "Go Dawgs!" and had a good conversation about MSU.

After one night in Da Nang we moved on to Hue Phu Bai, where the headquarters of the 220th Aviation Company was located. The 220th was a small fixed wing airplane company. We flew planes that we called Birddogs, L-19s or O-1s and our nickname was Catkillers. Where that nickname came from is a mystery to me. On the first day there Palmer and I went in to visit with Major Smalley, the company commander. He first told Palmer that his entire West Point class had just been promoted to Captain. He seemed a little upset that they had been promoted so soon. Palmer did not care how Major Smalley felt about the promotions, he was happy about it. He then turned to me and said, "You have friends in high places."

Major Richardson had called and asked that I be sent back to Da Nang. I was surprised. Major Smalley began to tell us what our mission was. We would fly in support of the Marines, Special Forces, Navy Swift boat bases, South Vietnam troops, and any other group that needed our help. As he was talking I looked over his shoulder and saw that a small lizard that had bitten into a large moth. The moth was still alive and trying to fly away. The small lizard was hanging by his toenails to the screen wire. Neither the lizard nor the moth seemed to be able to win

this battle. A philosophical question came to me. Which one am I, the lizard or the moth? I don't remember much of what Major Smalley said after that question popped into my mind. It is a question that I still have not answered.

Back to Da Nang I went. In Da Nang, the Catkillers first stayed in an old hotel in the city. This hotel was not like the Holiday Inn. The water was brown, and the rooms were not air-conditioned. In fact, the ceiling fan in my room moved so slowly that I could put my head in and out the blades as it turned.

My first roommate was our platoon leader, Captain Ben Hartman. He was good soldier and a good man. Very early he proclaimed to me that he was the *Undefeated Jacks Champion of Vietnam*. At first, I didn't understand that claim, but later I understood and proclaimed myself to be the *Undefeated Darts Champion of Vietnam*.

There are times in life when you need to be the best at something! For the first few days Ben gave me easy flights, just up and down the coast. Since our little airport, known as Marble Mountain Airfield, sat on the beach there was little chance that I would get lost or hurt. Then the real war started for me, as I began to fly into much more dangerous areas.

On one flight I saw a Vietnamese man walk from the mountain jungle into an open field, and I thought, 'I am the 1960 Tupelo High School's Friendliest Boy, so I'll drop down low and wave at this man.' As I got very close I saw him point a rifle at me and fire.

I am not sure what I had expected, but this almost put me in shock. Over the next couple of weeks I became very aware that I might not live through the war. Fear of dying took control of my mind; I was more concerned about living than I was about anything else. I could not do my job in the way that I should. Then one day I had a long talk with myself. After much thought I realized that I could not let fear rule my mind. I had to be smart enough to not let fear drive me crazy. I did want to live and go home, but I did not want to go home with my mind twisted beyond repair. There were many times afterwards when I was scared, but that fear did not rule my thoughts. After that decision, I did my job in a way that let me establish a combat record that I have been quietly proud of in the years that have followed.

Forty-two years later, in January of 2008, I begin to have trouble remembering things. At first I thought I was just getting old. As the memory loss increased, I became more worried about it. In March my loss of memory became really bad. Bad to the point that I was convinced I was in the early stages of Alzheimer's. After an examination, Dr. Mike Duckworth told me that I did not have Alzheimer's, and he would find

out what my problem was.

That made me very happy. He arranged for me to have an MRI. I completed that on a Thursday, and he called on Friday. He said that Barbara and I needed to come to his office that day. In his office he explained to us that I had a brain tumor, and the placement and the size of the tumor would require that it be removed. That day at our request he helped us arrange a visit at UAB in Birmingham, on the coming Tuesday.

On Tuesday, after some additional tests, the surgeon explained that he would perform the surgery on Wednesday. I was still not very scared, and I told him that he could do it that afternoon if he wanted to. After the surgery on Wednesday, and time in the Neurology IUC, I spent an additional day in the hospital and then was released. I had an appointment back with the surgeon in a few days.

When Barbara and I went back the kind and soft-spoken surgeon said, "You have a very aggressive kind of cancer called glioblastoma, and we could not remove it all." That statement killed all my positive thoughts. This was not what I expected. I thought that they would remove the tumor, and after a short period of time I would be back doing what I had been doing since I retired: Drinking coffee at the Holiday Inn almost every day with a bunch of my buddies, doing volunteer for the MSU Bulldog Club, fishing when I wanted to at Lake Norris or on the river, deer hunting a bunch, going to every MSU sporting event, and most importantly visiting with my children and grandchildren.

Now, I thought, this will not happen. I did not hear or understand anything else that the doctors had to say that day. It is a good thing that Barbara was with me. I'm sure that she was every bit a shocked as I was, but on that day she was much stronger than I was and listened well to what they had planned for me. After one more night with our son Paul and his wife Cyndi in Birmingham, Barbara and I headed home to Columbus. I could hardly talk or think.

After a couple of days in Columbus my friend and fellow State Farmer, Miller Griffin, came to see me. Just a few short years ago Miller went through more major health problems in a short time than most people have in a lifetime, so when he talks about how to deal with health problems I listen. We first talked about our grandchildren, then MSU sports, followed by State Farm stuff. As he was about to leave he slid forward in his chair and said, "I have watched you deal with a lot of problems in your life. You have always done the right thing and survived. You will do the right thing with this cancer and survive. As he

left he gave me a big hug.

After Miller left, I thought about what he said. His words took me back to a time in my life when Miller and I did not know each other. His words reminded me of my Vietnam decision: not to let fear drive me crazy. Major Smalley and Ben Hartman were killed in their second Vietnam tours, and three of my fellow Catkillers died during my tour; and so my fear of dying was legitimate, but I did not let it rule my thoughts. That fear of dying in those days was much like my fear of dying from brain cancer. On the day that Miller visited I decided to make that decision again. That does not mean that I won't have any fear of what may happen to me because of this cancer, but I will not let that fear rule my life. We will all die of something so each of us needs to enjoy today. I am quietly proud of my Vietnam record, and I hope that when my time to go comes, next year or twenty years from now or even another forty two from now, that my family and friends will be quietly proud of the way I handled this problem in my life. "

CATKILLER JOE HODGES, DECEASED:

In memory of Joe Hodges: Catkiller Joe Hodges died today, 15 December 2009, after a lengthy battle with brain cancer. We send condolences to his family, friends, and comrades.

Notification letter from Joe's roommate in Vietnam, Ray Alexander:

"Sad to report that Joe Hodges died of brain cancer this morning at 9:18 am in Columbus, Mississippi.

Among his other accomplishments, Joe was awarded the Silver Star for an action south of Da Nang in which he provided cover and air support to protect a Marine unit from a much larger NVA force.

After leaving the Army in 1969, Joe started a career in the insurance business. He retired recently from State Farm with nearly 40 years of service.

He is survived by his wife, Barbara, daughter Allison (Jack) Horner of Mobile, AL, son Paul (Cyndi) of Birmingham, AL and sister, Linda Jamieson (David) of Point Clear, AL ,several grandchildren and many, many friends.

Joe attended the Catkiller Reunions in Las Vegas (2003) and League City (2006).

To know Joe was to recognize his slow drawl, his quick wit and his intensely loyal friendship. He was one of the good guys—a "second generation" Catkiller who really made his year in Vietnam count.

Regards,
Ray Alexander

Catkiller Whisky”

Comments:

I have just read your newsletter, which included a letter from Joe Hodges. I am married to his sister Linda, and Joe has been a close friend for almost 28 years. I want to thank you for publishing his thoughts on serving in Viet Nam and his battle with brain cancer. Unfortunately it saddens me to tell you that Joe passed away yesterday morning at about 9:30 AM. My wife Linda and his wife Barbara were with him.

His funeral will be on Friday of this week and I know of two of his closest friends and former comrades in arms will travel across county to be there. I don't think that there is anything other than serving in combat that makes men closer to one and other. Again thank you for publishing his letter. Joe was a good man and he will be missed.

Dave Jamieson,
Fairhope, AL

Thanks for the info about Joe. He was a platoon member in Da Nang while I was there, great guy, just like the letter indicates.

Norm MacPhee

What a touching story. As I was reading Joe's story, he mentioned Ben Hartman. We were classmates in flight school. Do I recall that Ben died in a Beaver crash in the central highlands? I was in the 221st Jan 66 – Jan 67.

Bob Gee, Shotgun 22