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Coming together to honor a friend, a son and a veteran

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FORT WORTH — Some old memories simply don't fade away, not when they revolve around a high school classmate, Vietnam and a mother who lost her only son.

So on a Saturday morning, at a house in the Woodhaven neighborhood of Fort Worth, four 60-something men from the Class of '66 at South Oak Cliff High showed up at Martha Noah's door with a gift, a shadow box in memory of Victor Noah Jr., who didn't come home from Vietnam all right like they did.

"We're completing the recognition he deserved," said Don Lincoln, who led the effort to honor Victor, who died in 1975 of complications from his wounds.

The shadow box containing all the medals Victor earned, his Marine unit's patch and a folded flag explained only part of the reason Martha Noah was so moved by the visit from Lincoln, Rick Mitchell, Barry Hosford and Odis McLean. The biggest gift of all might have been the knowledge that Victor, and by extension her too, had never been forgotten.

"I feel honored by these boys," she said. "It's a great tribute to Victor, and they have shown great respect to me."

She felt, she said, as if Victor's journey was finally over.

The defining date in Victor's life turned out to be Jan. 31, 1968.

He was a different man on either side of that day.

Left in pain

In high school, Victor was a 6-foot-1, muscled, though still baby-faced, kid who worked part time in the mail room of *The Dallas Morning News* and loved to hitch rides with buddies cruising the streets of south Dallas.

"He made friends easily," said Lincoln, who lives in Austin. "He had a very cool, calm demeanor, just going with the flow. He didn't try to stand out."

He loved the JROTC outfit and served as one of the honor guard members, which helped convince him that he wanted to serve in the military. His older sister's husband, a Marine, convinced him even more with his talk of how tough the Marines were.

His mother and father signed the permission forms for him to enlist in the Corps after he graduated in May '66.

He was still only 17.

Less than a decade later, Victor was dead.

By the time his second wife, Irene, found him on the floor of their Dallas home on Sept. 10, 1975, three weeks shy of his 27th birthday, he was a much thinner man, hobbled to a great degree and tormented by excruciating, never-ending pain.

"You couldn't hardly touch his body," his older sister, Charlotte White, said. "He was so sensitive. His nerve endings had been damaged so badly."

The cause of death, according to the death certificate, was acute propoxyphene intoxication. The brand name was Darvon, a painkiller that Victor consumed by the handfuls.

His family is sure he accidentally overdosed.

"He was pretty doped up all the time trying to deal with the pain," his mother said. "The VA used to give out those Darvon to the men like candy."

He was buried a few days later at Moore Memorial Gardens Cemetery in Arlington, in a ceremony presided over by Hosford, who joined the Marines at the same time as Victor. "I've always felt guilty that I helped talk him into it," he said.

Up close and withering

Considering what happened to Victor in Vietnam, it was in many ways a miracle he lived as long as he did.

In late January of 1968, Victor's unit — Mike Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines — was sent into a village named Mai Xa Thi near the Cua Viet River to intercept the North Vietnamese, who were using the river to resupply the attack on Khe Sanh.

On Jan. 31, at first light, the Marines attacked a much larger NVA force, and the combat was up close and withering. Most of Victor's squad was killed or wounded, and he lay on his belly with shrapnel wounds for hours, telling his family that he played possum to stay alive.

At some point, as the NVA withdrew, a soldier stood over Victor and sprayed his rifle into Victor at point-blank range to make sure he was dead.

The next morning, as the Marines came to retrieve their dead, they discovered one of them alive: Victor. He had five gunshot wounds to his back.

(The North's Tet Offensive, which many regard as the pivotal moment when a majority of Americans turned against the war, began on the same day, Jan. 31.)

Moments of agony

As Victor started his journey west to the United States aboard hospital ships, two Marines came to see Martha Noah at her job at the Titcher's department store in Oak Cliff in early February.

"I was waiting on a customer in the linen department when I saw them coming up the escalator," she said. "I started crying. I thought he was dead. They told me he was severely injured, and they didn't know if he would live. To me, it has always been as if he died that day."

Victor spent a year in the hospital at Carswell Air Force Base, sometimes screaming in agony while awake and in terror while asleep.

"Mother, get down!" he yelled one time. "You're going to get hit!"

His sister Charlotte said tiny pieces of shrapnel worked their way out of his body for months.

"He relived the war constantly," she said. "And because he had pieces of metal coming out of his head, I'm convinced he also had a head injury."

In late 1968, only a couple of months after former classmate Rick Mitchell returned from his tour in Vietnam, Victor served as Mitchell's best man, using two canes to steady himself at the wedding.

"It was pretty bad," Mitchell said, his voice breaking. "It was difficult for his friends to see him."

Closing the loop

The men of South Oak Cliff High's Class of '66, many of whom had lost touch with one another over the decades, reconnected three years ago for their 40th reunion. As part of that event, they honored the memory of former classmates Victor Noah and Robert Hook, a Silver Star recipient killed in action in 1969.

The next year, they worked to get Victor's name read aloud at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., on "In Memory Day," which is for men whose deaths do not qualify them to be engraved on the Wall.

As the men continued to talk to Martha Noah, they learned that she had none of the medals and ribbons that Victor had earned. Half of them, such as the Presidential Unit Citation and Navy Unit Commendation, Victor never even knew he was entitled to wear.

Lincoln, a retired lieutenant commander in the Coast Guard, and classmate and Vietnam veteran J.D. Garoutte began the process to get Victor's record corrected and to get the government to replace the medals.

"I finally told her, 'Martha, I'm tired of waiting on the bureaucracy,'" Lincoln said. "I'm just going to conspire with some of the guys and go get it done."

He bought all the medals, a flag and a shadow box and arranged them just so. Then he waited for the opportunity to present them, with not only Victor's classmates but men who know Vietnam and what it could do to young men.

"What was I going to do? Hand her a bag full of medals?" Lincoln said. "It didn't seem very fitting. These needed to be assembled properly and delivered personally. We're trying to close the loop on something long overdue."