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MEMORIES IN THE FOG

by S. Ray Granade
Memorial Day, 2004

In memory this morning I stand before The Wall. Fog shrouds the two of us, which somehow makes us at once more and less substantial, part of a world inhabited by a different long gray line than the one of which the military usually thinks. I have walked into this valley of death as Maya Lin intended, slowly exchanging the bustle of a major city for quietness and stillness. That quietness and stillness offer a touch of solitude even among strangers, a touch of solitude that prompts the memory and rolls back the years. I don't come for the awesomeness of the place, though that exists in abundance. I come, as thousands of others do, for one name.

Evergreen was then what it remains: a small county-seat town in south Alabama. Like Monroeville, Andalusia, Brewton, and Greenville around it, Evergreen existed on county government, a little light industry, and its status on the railroad as a market in a slowly-dying farming world. My youth there in the 1950s and early 1960s was an insular one that paid scant attention to the world beyond Montgomery and Mobile, the cities to our north and south on US Highway 31. Outside the constant of work, our world as youths revolved around school with its activities and hunting in the winter, or baseball, swimming, and fishing in the summer.

Memory is a strange creature, powerful but fragile. It summons up thoughts and experiences from disparate times and gives them a unity unhampered by temporal realities. So this morning, as I stand before The Wall, I see more than the name etched in the black granite and my form reflected from the polished surface. Three images flit across my consciousness, played there as if on the outdoor movie screen of my youth.

I see the baseball field in Evergreen, where a forever teen-aged Mike Fields checks the runner at first before staring from the pitcher's mound toward home. He is a good, workmanlike pitcher—worse than some, better than many. In memory he gets his strikeout in one of those innumerable games in an unending Southern summer not too far from the Gulf.

I also see an image I never really saw, but one so like so many others that it's real nonetheless. This one too is of a Southern summer not too far from the Gulf. The forever teen-aged Mike Fields is once again in uniform. Once again he glances from his elevated position towards a base. This time the uniform is green, the Gulf is that of Thailand where it joins the South China Sea, and Mike's elevated position is behind a machinegun on the back of a jeep that patrols the Mekong Delta. This time, I know, he will strike out when his jeep hits a mine.

The third image is closest to the present, so the feel is more solid. Like the first, it's personally real, but more singular and therefore sharper in detail. Again I stand before The Wall. It's my initial visit, the first time I've been able to make the pilgrimage. I've brought one of the baseballs with which we played. I've looked up Michael Fields, only to discover that I can't find his name. When I scan all the Fields entries I realize that, like me, he went by his middle name. There, close to the end, is Sgt. William Michael Fields. He's been dead over thirty years; May 12 was the anniversary.

Such a mixture of emotions as I pass one arm of The Wall, reach the depths of its apex, and start up the other! I don't dwell on the thousands of names engraved, and the millions of unlived years represented, there. I think only of Mike. I take out the baseball. Throwing it back to him across the years from behind the plate, I place it at the foot of his section of The Wall before stepping back. Having missed his funeral, I give him my final salute—the only one a noncom ever gets.

A couple who are my parents' ages stand to my right briefly, then move on. A couple with a young son visits another name on the section to my left. The boy sees the various offerings at The Wall and is intrigued. He picks up a toy soldier, a small flag, and Mike's baseball. With childhood's finders-keepers voice, he shows them to his parents, who sharply tell him to put them back where he found them.

I want to squat down by the boy, get my eyes level with his, and tell him that the baseball's there as a memento of a guy who was a year behind me in school. I want to tell him about a boy like him who was an average student but a rare baseball player: a pitcher who could hit. I want to tell him that I played ball with that boy, and that as unremarkable as we both were, we were friends. I want to share a little bit of Mike with this

stranger, to plant memories of Mike in another mind to grow there over the years.

But it's a different world from the one in which we grew up in Evergreen. In this world, strangers who talk to children are suspect at best. The coward in me triumphs, the teachable moment passes. Perhaps, as Shakespeare said, my cowardice is rooted in conscience. Perhaps it's merely survivor's guilt.

The point is, I know that memory is a strange creature, powerful but fragile, as insubstantial as the fog in which I stand. I know that I'll hold Mike in my memory, forever teen-aged, so long as God shall let that memory exist. But I also know that one day, sooner rather than later, my memory will fail. My war, and those of my generation who died there, will cease to reside in living memory. The names will become no more than words etched in polished granite. William Michael Fields will become just another name on The Wall, symbolizing no one in particular.

As I stand in the fog before The Wall this morning, the missed opportunity bothers me. I can rationalize it; I understand the desire to shield a child from death's reality as long as possible and thereby preserve some semblance of innocence. My problem is that Mike deserves—that all the Mikes whose names adorn The Wall deserve—better.