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Morgan County veterans honored in "Letters from Tommy J"

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For the family of Tommy J. Holtzclaw, the 17 year old who went off to Vietnam and never returned, he was always a looming figure who was hard to remember but impossible to forget.

After Tommy graduated from O'Keefe High School in Atlanta, he joined the Marines, without the consent of his parents, and was sent to Vietnam.

His nieces, Connie C. Hughes and Terri C. Walker, who never knew their uncle, got the chance to get to know him after they went through the letters Tommy sent his family while he was away. While they always knew the letters existed, they were finally able to read them in full after their grandmother died in September 2006.

"I started reading letters and immediately saw a story," Walker said.

From there, Hughes and Walker began to compile the letters in the book, "Letters from Tommy J." In this process, they discovered what kind of young man their uncle was.

They learned that Tommy an articulate writer with a great senses of humor that never faltered, despite time spent in Vietnam. Throughout his letters, said Walker, he continually expressed a concern and love for his family friends back home. Although he was living under harsh conditions in a completely foreign country, he attempted to console his family by telling them not to worry about him. Those who knew Tommy also felt a love and concern for him. When Walker contacted Pat Hogan, Tommy's best friend, in order to get the letters that Tommy wrote to Hogan, Hogan responded with the letters and an attached message.

"P.S. After all these years, I still miss him," Hogan wrote.

For those who knew and loved Tommy, the book has granted a sense of both closure and relief. After Tommy died in Vietnam, Hughes said that Tommy's sister, Jean Campbell, fell to pieces and was unable to talk about him even years afterwards. From this book, she gained a sense of closure and

peace that she never knew before.

Through these letters and the book, Hughes said she achieved a feeling of relief. Her questions about her uncle and what kind of person he was were finally answered.

“He tried to get home all those years, and this book has finally brought him home,” Hughes said.

For all the soldiers, like Tommy, who never made it home; Connie said there are hundreds of soldiers picking up where they left off. Two of these soldiers are Clint and Dusty Sidwell, both Morgan County natives who the sisters have honored in this book. The sisters hope that from their book readers will come to understand and appreciate what these young men have given up to serve their country.

Walker said that while this book is not meant to be a political statement, it is meant to honor the servicemen who, despite their fears and their desire to be back home, put their lives at risk so that other people are protected.

- Courtesy of Morgan County Online
- <http://www.morgancountycitizen.com/>