

The VietNam Triple Deuce, Inc.

An Association of 2^{Bn} (Mech) 22nd Infantry Regiment VietNam Veterans

Editor: *Lynn William Dalpez*, C/2/22, 1965 - 1967

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(The following was sent in by **Dan Streit**, D/2/22.)

**Jim Nelson –Renaissance Man
by Terry Bailey**

Someone told me, “Every life has a story.” That comment has been verified as I have met and interviewed a broad sampling of people. I have heard stories of pain and stories of joy. I have heard stories of tremendous success and dismal failure. There are stories of being poor and getting rich and being rich and getting poor. As a writer, all I have to do is ask the right questions and set back and listen listen. Truly, each life does have a story. In rare instances, a life has more than one story. The life of Jim Nelson is a series of untold stories.

The term “Renaissance Man” came to mind as I came to know Jim Nelson. I looked that term up in the dictionary to make sure I was remembering correctly. I was. According to Webster’s, a Renaissance Man is a person of wide and varied interests. That is Jim Nelson. He is also a person of contradictions. For example:

His father has a B.A. from Princeton and a doctorate in philosophy from Colgate University. He mother graduated from the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. Jim has a certificate in Farm Mechanics from the Vocational School in Beloit.

He doesn’t hesitate to repair a motor of a farm tractor. Then again, those same hands become gentle and delicate in order to create superlative oil paintings, including a painting of Governor Pataki in New York’s Capitol for which he was

commissioned.

He spent several years studying art

and working at his own studio amid the hustle and bustle on Fifth Avenue in New York City. Now he and his wife Sharon live in his grandparent’s farmhouse on a dirt road in Jewell County.

During the Great Depression, his grandparents utilized a wind generator to provide electricity for their home before REA came to Jewell County. The wind turned the blades of the Wincharger, which generated electricity. The electricity was stored in a series of 2-volt glass batteries in their basement. Electricity was drawn from this bank of batteries to illuminate lights in the house and the barn. These batteries also powered a cream separator and several appliances in the house. When Jim returned home from Vietnam, he came to Jewell County Kansas to restart his life. He found the tower, the blades and the generator in a heap on the ground where it once proudly stood. He restored the blades and the generating head. He renovated the tower. He mounted the generating apparatus on top the tower. Wind power once again sparked to life. He then made an electric car and used the electricity generated by wind to charge its batteries.

Jim farms his 480-acre farm with tractors powered by recycled French Fry oil. Yes, that’s right, French Fry oil. That is not exactly a fuel the average wheat farmer might utilize.

Oh yes, did I mention that Jim and Sharon travel extensively in order to participate in one of their favorite passions; polka dancing. They are on a first name basis with the members of the bands that play at the Bohemian

“Deeds, not words.”

Halls of North Central Kansas and South Central Nebraska.

Perhaps the unusual aspects of Jim's birth influenced the path his life has taken. Jim's father received a doctoral degree in Philosophy from Colgate University in Ithaca New York. His mother graduated from the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston where she had studied violin. They met up and were married in 1942. Soon, his dad was sent to the European Theatre to prepare for the D-Day invasion on the beaches of Normandy. When his mother discovered she was expecting, she left Princeton, New Jersey and returned home to her parents' farm in Jewell County. Jim was born in the Mitchell County Hospital in Beloit on December 21, 1943.

When World War II ended, Jim's parents were reunited and looked about for a place to call home. In 1950, Jim's father was given consideration for one of two jobs in the United States for which his doctorate in Philosophy qualified him. He applied for and received a position as an assistant professor at the University of Colorado in Boulder. Jim grew up and attended school there, but spent many summers in Kansas, plowing wheat fields on his grandparent's farm.

In Jim's early teenage years he discovered two things. First, he learned that he possessed only moderate talent for drawing and painting. However, he felt a strong drive from within to develop his ability to its highest level. He became determined to reach and stretch whatever talent he possessed to its ultimate limit.

Jim also learned that his dad had suffered greatly during the McCarthy years in the mid 1950s. It seems as if the department in which he worked was heavily infiltrated with Communists or Communist sympathizers. Jim's dad refused to capitulate to their politics. Because he failed to "go along" with the Communists in the upper echelons of

his department, he was denied promotions and advancement up the career ladder.

When Jim graduated from high school, he traveled to Kansas to help plow his grandparents' wheat fields. He then went to Belleville and boarded a train headed for New York City. He wasn't exactly sure of where he was going or exactly what he would do when he got there. However, he was seventeen years young and optimistic.

Jim polished his art skills at the National Academy of Art for two years. It was during this period of his life that he was able to validate what he had always suspicioned. He was able to see from first hand experience that the modern art movement was a hoax. Jim remains a realist painter to this day.

He went to work for the highly regarded Raymond Loewy Industrial Design Firm. He settled into a studio on Fifth Avenue and painted superlative murals for Mr. Loewy. Not too bad for a kid who used to plow Kansas wheat fields in the hot July sun.

He became so well know that the president of the United States requested his assistance. In February of 1967, President Lyndon Johnson sent him a letter that said: *Greetings: You have been conscripted into the United States Army.* We all know the rest. He had been given an all expenses paid trip to that well-known paradise in Southeast Asia – Vietnam.

Jim completed basic training at Fort Bliss, Texas. He then completed A.I.T. and jungle schooling at Fort Polk, Louisiana. Jim was then dispatched to Vietnam. He landed about sixty miles north of Saigon at Dau Tieng in September of 1967. Uncle Sam gave him a machine gun and sent him into the jungle on patrols.

So...into the jungle they went. During the monsoon season, they often waded knee deep through tropical mud. On

rare occasions, they would return to base camp and the semi-comfort of their bunkers. Most of the time, their assignment was a long-range patrol. On some missions, they would "push jungle" as far as they could go in a day. This was usually about 11 "clicks" which is about 7 miles. When they stopped for the night, they would arrange the tracks in a circle and set up their defensive perimeter. When this was done, they would fade into the jungle to search out the enemy. Most of the time, day and night, it was raining. The soldiers dealt with leaches, snakes, spiders, ants and other creepy crawly inhabitants of the jungle. The mosquitoes plagued them with no relief everywhere they went. They were re-supplied by helicopter. This meant they would stay in the jungle for months before returning to base camp. Like the jungle vermin, Jim and his comrades experienced ambushes, firefights, booby traps, and trip wires. These were the facts of life.

However, after a particularly brutal clash known as the Seven Day Battle of the Trapezoid, he was sent to investigate underground bunkers. In one of those bunkers, he discovered a watercolor paint set used by the North Vietnamese to draw maps. He liberated that Communist watercolor paint set and it became a loyal American paint set.

One thing does truly lead to another. Always the painter, Jim first used the watercolors to do simple sketches and battlefield paintings, trying to record this piece of his life. Jim had kept his art background a secret, but his sergeant noticed his work and asked him to draw maps on the backs of envelopes for use at headquarters. Officers up the chain of command became acquainted with his work. When an opening for the brigade draftsman became available, Jim was able to trade in his machine gun for drafting equipment. He drew sketches of battles, maps and operational overlays.

As he rose up the ladder of the command structure, he kept getting

transferred closer and closer to the Divisional Headquarters at Cu Chi. He no longer had to do patrol duty, but he now was assigned to liaison work as a jeep driver when not working with the drawings and sketches. When the TET Offensive exploded all across Vietnam in January of 1968, he was drawing maps that changed minute by minute. Jim said, "The work was extremely precise. I knew if I made a mistake, Americans soldiers could die or become seriously wounded."

General Glession requested Jim for the Combat Art Program he accepted. He spent his time doing maps, paintings, and daily action sketches and reports. During his last two months in the war zone, he painted forty oil paintings. These paintings were sent for permanent display at the 25th Division Museum at Honolulu, Hawaii. Unfortunately, most of them have been stolen from the museum. All in all, Jim Nelson spent 14 months in South Vietnam.

Upon his return to the states and his discharge from the Army, Jim delayed returning to a "normal" life. He took a tramp steamer to Europe. He spent six months copying the artwork of the Grand Masters in Spain, England, and France. He took an even slower boat home through some very bad Atlantic storms. He had lived very sparsely on the trip. Fresh from the jungle in Vietnam, even the most ordinary items seemed like luxuries. The entire trip, including, transportation, cost him nine hundred dollars.

Jim had hoped the trip to Europe would help him reorient to a "normal life." It hadn't. Boulder was not an option. Even though that was the place he had grown up, knowing the hell his dad had went through there made it unattractive. New York was a hotbed of antiwar sentiment. This negative attitude of the New Yorkers toward Vietnam Veterans made it clear he would not feel welcome there. Where was home?

Another question loomed over Jim like a black, Kansas thunderstorm. Actually it was a two-part question.

He wondered, "Can I paint anymore?" He also wondered, "Do I want to paint again?" He believed, at that time, that the answer to both questions was "No."

In the Wizard of Oz, Dorothy Gale comes to realize that there is no place like home. Jim Nelson, in 1969, came to that same conclusion. Home to him, was the wheat fields of North Central Kansas. He didn't click his heels, but he got there anyway. He returned to his grandparents' farm in Jewell County Kansas. He would operate their farm and attend school at the Beloit Vocational Technical School where he would study Farm Mechanics.

So...he returned to Kansas. He enrolled at the Vo-Tech and began learning how to repair farm machinery. In the evenings and on weekends, he attended to the needs of the farm. The roar of Vietnam became dimmer and dimmer. So did the memories of painting murals in New York.

When the school year concluded, Jim found work twelve miles away in Glen Elder. He began repairing a wide array of farm machinery at the local CASE dealership. One of his co-workers was another local boy who had also taken the free trip to Southeast Asia. Dan Reling was the sales manager and Jim was the mechanic. They spent their free time talking with one another.

Jim's life took a different course when an injury at work made it impossible to continue the physical demands of a mechanic's job. During his rehabilitation period, the owner of the local funeral home approached Jim. He had heard that Jim had once trained as an artist. He commissioned Jim to create a painting for the foyer of his funeral home. Having few other viable options, Jim took the job.

Jim's work found widespread appeal in North Central Kansas. He began getting offers from other funeral homes seeking his work. After a while, banks began to show interest in

his work. In these early years, western scenes his most popular topic. Next came the churches, seeking biblical scenes.

Jim's work is completed on commission and approval. This means potential clients contact him with an idea. Using sketches and verbal descriptions, Jim does the painting. When completed, he presents it to the client. Jim claims that because of the method he uses to apply the paint to the canvas, his work is guaranteed for 300 years. I guess I'll just have to take his word on that.

Throughout this time of working as a mechanic, his injury, and his return to painting, Jim continued to operate the wheat farm. It was during this time that Jim discovered the wind generator lying in a heap at the base of the tower where it stood during the 1920s and 1930s. Parts for antique equipment such as this were simply not available in 1970. He cleaned and repaired what he could. When he found a part that was beyond repair, Jim created a new one with his own hands. After a while, the tower had been repaired and the blades of the wind generator were turning in the breeze, creating thirty-two volts of electricity with every revolution.

Jim has a friend who reflected on possible uses for oil used in deep fat fryers in restaurants. To the best of their knowledge, when that oil is discarded it has little value. Jim's friend began to experiment with possible uses for this readily available and seemingly worthless commodity. He discovered that with straining and cleaning, the oil could be used to power diesel engines. Standard diesel fuel and French Fry oil can be used separately. It is also possible to mix them together in one tank. While this seems outrageous, they have not yet discovered any damage to the engine or loss of power. Perhaps the most exciting factor is that this recycled French Fry oil has a price tag of eight cents a gallon.

Not wanting to be pigeonholed as a "funeral home-church-bank" painter,

Jim sought commissions to do portraits. He found them and they soon occupied the bulk of his efforts. He painted a 33-foot mural for Frank Shorter, the gold medallist at the Munich Olympics in 1972. He was commissioned to paint a portrait of the former first lady, Barbara Bush. Medal of Honor recipient, Gary Beikirch, was the subject of one of his portraits. Jim points to the painting of Governor George Pataki as perhaps his best. It is on display at the New York state capitol in Albany. For 18 years, Jim spent his winters in Vancouver, British Columbia painting commission portraits. Working through the Hudson Bay Department Stores, he completed over 3,000 works during his time in Canada.

A lifelong dream for Jim was realized in 2003 with the publishing of a book containing his Vietnam War paintings. This effort is a compilation of 66 paintings that he completed while in Vietnam and over the years since the end of the war. Jim asked his friends to tell their stories by sending their biographies for inclusion in the book. Each and every one responded to his call for help without hesitation. He said that it is his wish that every reader of his book come away with the feeling that our Vietnam Veterans are worthy men and women, deserving of the honors that all previous Veterans enjoyed after returning from America's wars.

A recent book *Dog Soldier Justice; The Ordeal of Susana Alderdice On The Kansas Indian War* contains Jim Nelson's work on both the front and back covers. This book, written Professor Jeff Broome, is a work of history that deals with renegade Cheyenne warriors. Given the debasing of Dog Soldiers, these outcast Indians terrorized settlements, farmsteads, and hunters in the North Central Kansas area in 1869. Susanna Alderdice was kidnapped and held captive for 44 days before she was killed.

When he is not painting in his studio, you might find Jim working on his electric car. Putting his mechanical

training to good use, Jim has modified a golf cart frame into a car powered by an electrical motor. The electrical motor draws its power from two batteries that are charged from the vintage wind generator. Currently, the car can travel about 15 miles before running out of electricity. Jim continues to tweak the capabilities of his contrivance. He has visions of electrical powered cars cruising across Kansas on I-70. Jim believes a series of wind generating stations similar to truck stops, could serve as recharging points for the electrical cars.

Jim finally settled down and got married in 1992. His wife, Sharon, was a rural mail carrier in Lincoln, Kansas. They reside today in his grandparents' home in rural Jewell County Kansas. Cooking is her passion. She has over a hundred cookbooks but really does not need them anymore. All the recipes are safely stored away in her head for easy reference.

You might stop by and see Jim and Sharon if you are in the area. However, if it is raining you may possibly bypass the trip to their house. You would have to travel one half mile of dirt road which becomes heavily rutted during rainy periods. On the other hand, if it is a nice cheerful day, they may be on the golf course in nearby Mankato enjoying an afternoon in the sun together.

If you are considering an evening visit, you might not find them at home. They may be off in Wilbur, Nebraska dancing a schottische to Bob Blecka and the Bouncing Czechs. Then again, they may be at the Czech Opera House in Wilson, Kansas doing a quick step polka or dancing a waltz to Barefoot Becky or the Rhythm Aces.

If you do catch him at home, Jim could be out in the field tilling the soil with his diesel tractor powered with recycled French Fry oil. He could be in the garage, working on his electric car trying to increase it's range to 20 or 25 miles on one charge of the batteries. Then again, he might be

secluded in his studio, putting the finishing touches on a MASH unit operating room scene that is headed for the Combat Medical Museum at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas.

That is Jim Nelson. He could be here doing this. He could be there doing that. He is a man of many talents and interests. He is, indeed, a Renaissance Man.

The End