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Kevin O'Hara: A glorious day at the Country Club



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By Kevin O'Hara

PITTSFIELD — On a sparkling October Sunday, 98 Berkshire County veterans gathered to enjoy the 2nd annual "Veterans Appreciation Golf Day" hosted by the Country Club of Pittsfield. For any golf enthusiast, a day at the Country Club is like a child being called from his local playground to spend the day at Six Flags.

Upon our arrival we were treated like dignitaries. Bags were taken from our shoulders to golf carts, and we were pleasantly directed to the club's historic wraparound porch draped in festive red, white, and blue bunting. There club professional Eric Mabee gave each of us a handsome commemorative coin that doubled as a ball marker.

Club members, who had played earlier that morning just to clear the way for our 1 p.m. shotgun start, thanked us for our service. Matt and Hannah Keator had even brought their children along. Said Matt: "We wanted our kids to see who the real heroes are."

Everything but a flyover

Over a fabulous lunch hosted by general manager Missy Aitken and served by head chef Jim Lowe, board member Tom Mooney told us how this special day came to be.

"It was a glorious Fourth last summer," he began, "and I was playing with Andy Meisberger, an Army vet who'd served in Iraq. It suddenly came to mind that we should be doing something special for our veterans. So we brought up the idea of a free golf day to our club president, Greg Knight, and he gave us the green light without hesitation."

After lunch, we circled the 18th green to watch longtime member, Moody Brown, 92, who served in the Army during World War II, take the ceremonial first putt — a putt that signaled the start of our own round. The golf course itself was in immaculate condition, and a beer tent with snacks was centrally-located. Said one happy soldier, "These guys have thought of everything but a flyover!"

My foursome consisted of Jim Clark, Peter Blake, and Bob "Doc" Miller. Jim, a Pittsfield native, is currently director of Veteran Services for central Berkshire County. A West Point grad, he retired as Lt. Colonel following multiple tours of duty in the Middle East. Peter worked "electronic intelligence" for the Air Force during the Vietnam War, and was stationed on the Aleutian Islands in the Bering Sea. "We were so isolated on Shemya," he told us, "that a few guys in my squadron actually volunteered for Vietnam."

I countered with a wry grin, "You think that's crazy. I volunteered for Vietnam after 18 months in Texas!"

I shared my cart with Doc Miller, a career Navy corpsman, who served in Vietnam in 1969-'70, the same time I did. At 82, he's as spry as any 30-year old, and consistently drove the ball 170 yards dead center. He regaled me with so many war stories that our golf cart had morphed into a jeep by the 5th hole.

"I watched Ken Burn's Vietnam, and it was well done," said Doc. "My only gripe was that his documentary failed to mention all the 'friendship building' we did over there. Every Sunday without fail, I worked alongside a Vietnamese doctor, risking our necks while visiting the sick in a half-dozen villages, including Quong Xuien ; a swampy, inhospitable place 30 clicks from Saigon. There are hundreds of stories like mine but, regrettably, few are told. That's why we were so maligned when we came home."

Doc's impassioned statement brought to mind my close friend, William "Sam" Samolis. Sam and I had met at Bergstrom AFB in Texas, and when we shipped out to different bases in Vietnam, we pledged to meet up if given the chance. Fortunately, I was able to visit Sam seven times from my airfield at Cam Ranh Bay, 240 miles north of his assigned base, Tan Son Nhut in Saigon.

On my second visit to the "Paris of the Orient," Sam took me to the waterfront to visit a hodgepodge of street urchins living in shipping crates along the quay. When spotting my friend, they ran toward him calling, "Sam! Sam!" Sam, in turn, didn't disappoint. Not only did he bring treats, but he amazed them all by pulling coins from behind their ears.

Sam then introduced me to one of his favorites, Willie Joe, a young boy taking care of his little sister. Sam had nicknamed him after the star footballer, Joe Willie Namath, for Willie had an exceptional arm, and could throw a perfect spiral pass.

On my last visit to Saigon, we organized a footloose football game along the quay, which consisted of two dozen waifs, and an unlikely assortment of spectators: weary cyclo drivers, ARVN soldiers, giggling schoolgirls, and orange-robed monks.

Into the foul waters

But our uproarious game came to an abrupt halt when our lone wiffle football splashed into the filthy Saigon River.

Game over. Wrong! Willie Joe turned to Sam with a grin, "No problem, Sam," and to our horror, he dove headlong into those foul, fetid waters, only to come up grinning, football in hand.

Before Sam rotated back to the states, he arranged for another caretaker to take his place, and this caring succession for Willie and his quayside gang continued for another year or more.

I recently asked Sam, now living in Washington State, what he ever thought became of Willie Joe.

"Being an urchin, he was probably insignificant to the new Communist regime," said Sam. "Willie might have survived all the re-education camps and is still there today. I like to think he made it out as a boat person, and is now involved in a fine business on the West Coast. He'd now be in his 50s, so even if we saw him today, I doubt we'd recognize him. But for me, I'll always remember him as that endearing little urchin who could throw a perfect football pass."

A distant shout shook me from my reverie. It was Doc Miller. "Hey, Kev, you still playing golf, or are you already thinking about the 19th hole?"

I snapped from my daydream to see both Jim and Peter up ahead on the green, twirling putters in hand. I reined in my far-flung thoughts and focused on my longtime nemesis — a white, round-dimpled golf ball — that I sent whistling through the crisp autumn air to God knows where.

Kevin O'Hara is a long-time contributor to The Eagle. Visit his new website, [thedonkeyman.com](#)

PHOTO CAPTION: Willie Joe and Sam, Saigon, March, 1970

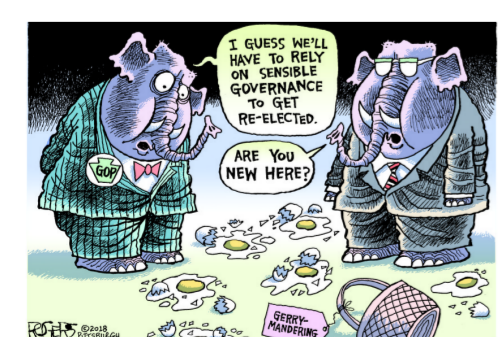
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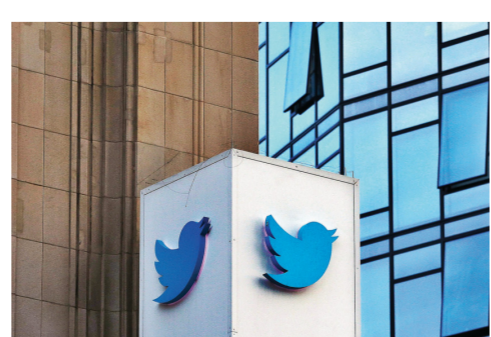
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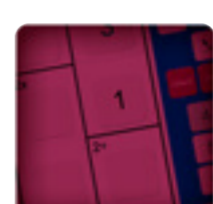
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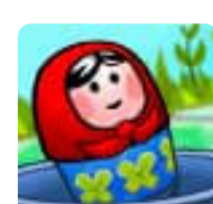
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