

September 8, 2003, Ford Ord

We are here to spend a weekend with my son, Tomás and his soon to be wife, Mindy. Tomás is a history professor at CSUMB and his destiny has brought us “full circle” to where my husband and I began *our* life as partners, **Fort Ord**.

As we drive through the desolate broken roads that are lined with deteriorating barracks and structures from WWII and beyond my heart is aching because I am in search of something and I am not sure what.

I am sitting next to my husband Tommy, and I look over at his beautiful face that has aged gracefully. I find every line in his face to be a work of art, with eyes that sometimes twinkle, but always betray an aura of sadness that has been there since he came home from Vietnam. I want closure for him, I am searching *with* him, and I am not sure what it is I feel in my soul we are looking for. It is a quest I think, to find some sort of honor, some sort of recognition, a remnant of my husband’s innocence as a young man.

It is a military ghost town that beckons us as Tomás slowly drives us through broken paved streets. He in his silence understands our spirits and reverently drives through the roads, we are looking we think for something that will trigger a memory for my husband of a place where he once walked and lived.

From March 4, 1969 through October 1969 my husband lived at Fort Ord. This is where he had Basic Training, Advanced Infantry Training and lived as a “hold over” until he received orders for Vietnam in October of that year.

On July 19, 1969 Tommy and I got married, with the full knowledge that our love would have to help us see this through “unknown” journey. He left the base in October and I put him on a plane in LAX to be shipped to Vietnam on November 21, 1969.

November 21, 1969 was the darkest day of my life. I had to let go. Tommy was to face his darkest period of his life *without* me. I could not save him. I could not spare him. My best efforts got him “hold over” status for a few months, but I could not prevent what Tommy had sensed would be the inevitable. I stood there watching him board the plane, holding his mother in my arms who was moaning and crying. This was her second son she was sending to Vietnam. She feared he might not be so lucky as the first to come home intact. I held onto her, praying that my husband would return.

I am stirred from my memories by the soft crushing sound of pebbles, weeds and branches our car is driving over as I stare once more at these dying buildings that once housed millions of young men. I keep on asking Tomás to stop. I must take pictures; I must record images before they meet their fate to be torn down, demolished for the new structures that will be built. I feel the need to *preserve their existence* to honor the many men that went through here and never returned. Where is the memorial? Where is the house or building that will store the history of this once magnificent base? I can find none and that hurts me and I sense this is part of the *empty* feeling that Tommy and I are both experiencing. This is an unspoken intuition for me. So many times in my life as a wife of a veteran I have felt pain and emptiness that I know is just a small glimmer of what my precious husband must be feeling.

Ours has been a journey of faith together. I have felt so many times Tommy's spirit he keeps quietly "in check" and yet I know there are parts of his soul and memories etched in his heart that he never releases. There are experiences carved in the core of his soul, like countless of veterans who have been to war that he has locked in his heart. War is hell on earth, this I know.

Only those who have survived war truly understand, the human carnage, the trauma that will forever haunt their existence, float into the present through *flashbacks*, night sweats, and sudden *moaning* that manages to escape from a nightmare. All I can do is mourn this alteration in my husband's spirit, pray for healing and reaffirm why we are partners for life. It occurs to me that I, too, was his destiny.

On our drive up Tommy mentioned he arrived at Fort Ord in the evening. My first thought was, imagine how many men had to be processed in the Los Angeles induction center that it took all f\_ \_ \_ ing day to get them processed! Without being told I sensed that the drive in that bus must have been in *silence*. What fears, loneliness, trepidations must have torn at these young men? Tommy was 20 years old and I am sure most ranged in age from 18 through early 20's. Tommy was drafted.

The draft made young men victims. They were powerless over their lives. They had to report for duty. It occurs to me it is almost like being enslaved. Tommy had no power to get out of this assignment to become a soldier. He had no choice in the matter. In a free country, there was no freedom for young men who were classified 1-A. They were deemed fit for duty. Reflecting on the spirit, tenacity, ego of a young man of 20 I fell in love with, the pain of having to surrender this is incomprehensible to me. One more time I am humbled by the realization of what Tommy has survived. I mourn the youth that he left on this *sacred* ground of Fort Ord.

*Sacred*. What a powerful word. Why do I think this ground I am driving on is hollow ground? I am trying to understand why these feelings that struggle to erupt from my soul also frighten me. I am feeling the *loss*. The loss of innocence, the loss of thousands of men who trained for war and never came back. So many of these men were babies, especially in WWII and Vietnam.

I feel burdened, my heart is aching, and I have a knot in my throat that is burning, but I cannot cry, because I am holding myself in check. I am not allowing myself to process these images I am capturing on film. Tommy thinks he has found some familiar places. We retrace our drive, we stop and walk, I snap pictures.

As our time of touring ends, I feel silence, I feel sorry that I could not say for sure this was the *place* we stood and took pictures when I drove up to see Tommy during basic training. I think that is what I am sorry about, but I am not sure. I feel sadness that Tommy couldn't truly ascertain that he found his barracks. It occurs to him that his building is no longer there. We find steps, no buildings on a street where his home once stood. Tomás drives us out of the base and I feel drained, my heart is aching for Tommy, for us, but our life has been good. I sit behind my son, Tomás and realize that he represents the future that Tommy and I have helped create. Our children are our legacy, but so is the Vietnam experience.

We are back home. I am finding the need to write these thoughts on my experience of returning to Fort Ord with Tommy. What was I looking for with Tommy? What was Tommy looking for?

It occurs to me last night as I am speaking with our youngest daughter Emily on the phone. Dad and I have opened the past with the wisdom of the present. It has been overwhelming and it will probably take days, weeks, and perhaps months to reflect and comprehend at some spiritual level for myself and maybe this is true for Tommy as well.

This morning I awaken and think I know why *I want a memorial to honor Fort Ord*. My husband left his innocence on that base where he trained for war. The soul of the young man of 20 that trained on those beaches and rough terrain to become skilled at surviving a war stayed at Fort Ord.

Tommy left that base that was home for several months, took a leave and left for Vietnam, never to return again with the same innocence and purity of soul a young man of 20 possesses.

Tommy was one of thousands of men who surrendered their free will to serve their country with the reverence of what patriotism represented to them. He was a product of the baby boomer generation. We were raised to love, honor and respect our country and responding to the draft was not something Tommy and countless of young men like him questioned.

Part of me stayed at Fort Ord this weekend. It is only fitting that we made our trip back on Veteran's Day Weekend of 2003. Today I grasp the magnitude of war, I fully embrace the experience my husband lived through and feel a reverence for his life and thank God that we have survived together for 34 years of marriage. *He was my destiny as well*. Through the eyes of faith, all the moments of why we stayed together make sense. For I can appreciate, honor and respect the sacrifice Tommy made so long ago.

Fort Ord is the keeper of the pieces of young men's souls - souls that were once innocent, naïve, and pure. These young men were transformed into soldiers - men of honor, obedience to God and country. Together they were to live, care for each other and die. Those lucky enough to return perhaps will come back to *seek* on the hollow grounds of Fort Ord like we did.

I guess there can never be closure for those of us who have shared our lives with the soldiers we will always love and cherish. This trip was an opportunity for me to acknowledge the sacrifice my husband made and to honor the man he has chosen to become as husband, father and friend. For Tommy I don't think there will ever be true closure because part of his soul will always live on at Fort Ord.