U.S. Marine Corps Brig. Gen. Daniel D. Yoo, left, the commanding general of Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego and the Western Recruiting Region, pins a Silver Star on Sgt. Phillip A. McCulloch Jr., a drill instructor with Company M, 3rd Recruit Training Battalion, at Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego in California Feb. 10, 2012. McCulloch was awarded the medal for his actions during a six-hour engagement with insurgent forces in the Sangin district in Afghanistan Jan. 8, 2011.

U.S. Marine Corps photo by Lance Cpl. Eric Quintanilla/Released

Conclusion: Finding Ralph
From the President

Ken Moore, President • Vietnam 1966-67 • US Army Cavalry

Well, we are one month closer to summer and I know we have all enjoyed the nice winter weather this year.

I just want to remind you that we are getting close to our annual dinner in April, and an important part of that are the Chapter awards for those members who have gone above and beyond working on the efforts of the Chapter. I would encourage all of you to think about those who you feel are deserving of awards and put their names in for consideration.

On February 4th I attended the NY State VVA meeting with Val and Jerry McDermott, and as part of that meeting I had the honor of making our annual donation to the NY State Service Officer program in the amount of $3,000. Please see Jerry’s report on the details of the meeting elsewhere in this issue.

As I have said in the past, I will not be running for President again this year and I would like to say it’s always been my pleasure to serve you over the years. I would encourage you to get involved in the Chapter. There is still lots of work to be done and I’m sure that your new President and Board will do a great job moving the Chapter forward.

A couple upcoming events I want to make you aware of are as follows:

Operation Local Soldier - March 30th at 6:00 PM at Merton Williams School in Hilton, NY (200 School Lane). Great event! Don’t miss the community and school honoring local military persons. This year’s event will honor SGT David Lemcke, MIA from the Vietnam war from Hilton who was returned home last November.

Our Annual Dinner at Golden Ponds in April. Your invitation will be in the mail in the next couple of weeks.

The Chapter will be having a fundraiser in December of 2012 hosted by radio station 102.7, the Legends. More information to follow in the upcoming months.

Till next month – Stay safe...Hug a vet! See you at the monthly meeting.
POW-MIA
Joe Peck, Chairperson

There are no new reports from the Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO) and Joint Prisoners of War/Missing in Action (JPAC) this month indicating the recovery or identification of any of our missing Americans from the Vietnam War. I know every effort is being made from all agencies to find and identify those who are still missing. I keep a watchful eye for developments concerning our unaccounted service men and women and will forward all information as it becomes available. Currently there are 1,677 missing Americans still unaccounted for from the Vietnam War.

We shall stay vigilant until they all come home.

There were reports of the recovery and identification of the following from other conflicts:

Cpl. Dick E. Osborne, US Army was reported missing Nov. 2, 1950 near Unsan, North Korea. He was accounted for on Jan. 27, 2012.

Pfc. Frank P. Jennings, US Army was reported missing Apr. 25, 1951 near Jeon-Gog, South Korea. He was accounted for on Jan. 18, 2012.

SFC. Edris A. Viers, US Army was reported missing Apr. 12, 1950 near Pongam-ni, South Korea. He was accounted for on Jan. 17, 2012.

Cpl. William P. Sluss, US Army was captured by enemy forces in Late Nov. 1950 near Kunu-ri, North Korea and was dies at POW Camp # 5 in Apr. 1951. He was accounted for on Jan. 17, 2012.

Sgt. Willie D. Hill, US Army was reported missing on Nov. 27, 1950 near Anju, North Korea. His remains were identified on Jan. 18, 2012. He was buried in his hometown of Catawaba, N.C. on Jan. 21, 2012.

Cpl. Robert J. Tucker, US army was reported missing on Nov. 27, 1950 near Kujan, North Korea. It was reported at a later date that he had died of a gunshot wound. His remains were identified on Jan. 11, 2012.

As our missing Americans are finally brought home to their awaiting families and Country, let us not forget the sacrifices that these and other men have made for our freedom and our way of life. This is what we as a Nation are proud of.

Welcome home Brothers! Rest in Peace.

Membership in VVA is the Right Choice

VVA is a "home of our own" - a community of fellowship with people who share your experiences, needs, and hopes for the future. Be as active as your time, talents, and interests allow. Or, simply be a proud member of VVA, knowing that your membership helps VVA work for you and your fellow Vietnam veterans. The VVA national organization keeps less than half of your membership dues. The rest stays at the state and local level to support programs and services for veterans and their families.

Membership includes a subscription to our award-winning newspapers, Between the Lines, The Veteran, and The Interchange, bringing you updates on issues and legislation affecting veterans, as well as unique articles on the people, places, and history of the Vietnam experience.

Families, friends, supporters, and veterans of other eras can join the Associates of Vietnam Veterans of America and receive the similar benefits.
FIT VET UPDATE
At the February meeting, the vets were a little leaner. By leaner, I mean there weren’t quite as many. True, some belts were a bit tighter and some did make a conscious effort to avoid the pizza. Really guys, couldn’t you at least have a salad there?

In total, the vets that participated in February (who also weighed in at last month’s kick-off) brought 42 fewer pounds through the door. Branch by branch, here is the update:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Branch</th>
<th>Total lbs. Lost</th>
<th>No. of Vets</th>
<th>Average lbs. Lost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ARMY</td>
<td>-12.9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>-.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAVY</td>
<td>-16.1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USAF</td>
<td>-6.0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-1.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>USMC</td>
<td>-5.0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-1.25</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

There are numerous diets out there – Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, South Beach, Nutrisystem, etc. Generally, the quickest way to weight loss is a simple formula: Eat less, exercise more!

If you’re looking for something to do on March 3rd, then stare at a flag for a little bit because it’s National Anthem Day!

**Why is this a holiday?**

Today is a holiday because The Star-Spangled Banner became the United States’ national anthem on this day in 1931. The song was written initially as a poem in 1814, by a lawyer, Francis Scott Key, after he saw the British Royal Navy attacking Fort McHenry during the War of 1812. He titled the poem “Defence of Fort McHenry.”

The lyrics were then put to the tune of ‘To Anacreon in Heaven,’ an English drinking song written by John Stafford Smith with words by Ralph Tomlinson, Esq. Tomlinson was president of the Anacreontic Society, a gentlemen’s club popular with upscale London boozers. Anacreon (563-478 B.C.) was a Greek poet known for his songs of wine and women.

There are actually four verses or stanzas to the song, but we more commonly only sing the first stanza as we gaze at the United States flag. In the fourth stanza of the song you’ll find where our national motto came from (In God We Trust) as it states “And this be our motto: In God is our Trust.” This became the US national motto in 1956.

The flag that inspired our national anthem was made by Mary Pickersgill and measured 30’ x 42’. It had 15 stripes and 15 stars as can now be viewed in The Smithsonian in Washington DC.

The Navy began officially using The Star-Spangled Banner in 1889 and President Herbert Hoover signed it in as the national anthem on March 3rd, 1931. And that’s how it all began!

**The Star Spangled Banner**

by Francis Scott Key, 1814

Oh, say can you see by the dawn’s early light
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight’s last gleaming?
Whose broad stripes and bright stars thru the perilous fight,
O’er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming?

And the rocket’s red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.
Oh, say does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

On the shore, dimly seen through the mists of the deep,
Where the foe’s haughty host in dread silence reposes,
What is that which the breeze, o’er the towering steep,
As it fitfully blows, half conceals, half discloses?

Now it catches the gleam of the morning’s first beam,
In full glory reflected now shines in the stream:
’Tis the star-spangled banner! Oh long may it wave
O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave!

And where is that band who so vauntingly swore
That the havoc of war and the battle’s confusion,
A home and a country should leave us no more!
Their blood has washed out their foul footsteps’ pollution.
No refuge could save the hireling and slave
From the terror of flight, or the gloom of the grave:
And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave
O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave!

Oh! thus be it ever, when freemen shall stand
Between their loved home and the war’s desolation!
Blest with victory and peace, may the hea’n rescued land
Praise the Power that hath made and preserved us a nation.
Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just,
And this be our motto: “In God is our trust.”
And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave
O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave!
The first meeting of 2012 to conduct NYS Council business and exchange information to 21 of 39 NYS Chapters of VVA attending was held on 2-4-2012. The 2012/2013 NYS VVA budget was presented, discussed and approved.

Discussions were conducted about continued sharing of chapter information to the NYS council website, www.nyvietnamvets.org, to further inform respective chapter members and other interested parties throughout the state. All veterans are encouraged to regularly browse the website to read the latest e-mail content of the NYS Council’s electronic newsletter, “The Interchange,” to keep current on what is happening with VVA chapters around the state, and view various committee reports. In April 2012, all NYS Council positions will be open for election. All state officers and district directors will be up for re-election.

A report by Dee Garcia, VVA Regional Rep at the VA Buffalo office, warned that delays in processing any claims or payments would be avoided if “change of address or change of contact phone numbers” were communicated promptly to the VA offices where you currently receive appointments. If you have moved, please update your contact info immediately to ensure prompt responses from the VA system. Ms. Garcia also stated that soon the VA will eliminate mailed compensation payments in favor of a DIRECT DEPOSIT payment to a financial institution.

President John Rowan addressed the NYS Council meeting to encourage all state chapters to canvas their respective membership to see if the ischemic heart disease presumptive declaration can be claimed by surviving spouses for Dependency and Indemnity Compensation program (DIC). Any and all spouses are urged to review their individual circumstance to see if they wish to file for such a claim.

Mr. Rowan also urged joint participation with other local service organizations, such as ELK, MOOSE LODGES, LIONS CLUB, ROTARY, and unions, to encourage such organizations to form “veteran committees or a veteran liaison” to focus veteran information to such memberships, whether that information be in the form of benefits, legislative efforts, community interest for overall improved awareness to veteran issues that daily come before all veterans in our communities.

Region II Director, Herb Worthington, discussed the new efforts by National VVA to collect personal accounts of the effects that Agent Orange may have had on our families. Health issues suffered by our children or grandchildren can be submitted to Ms. Mokie Porter (mpporter@vva.org).

Herb also wanted to remind any US Marine Corps member who was stationed at Camp LeJeune, NC before 1987 to enroll at the Camp LeJeune Historical Drinking Water Registry for possible service connection disability caused by water contamination of the drinking water supply sources.

Paul Narson, Chairman of the NYS Council membership committee gave the following info:

- VVA national members: 66,498
- NY State members: 5,387
- AVVA national members: 7,766
- NY State members: 624
- NY State has 6 of the top 25 chapters nationally in enrolled membership.

Grant Coates gave the following updates for POW/MIA as of yearend 2011: 1,678 POW/MIs still remain unaccounted for. There have been 684 “recoveries” since the end of the war from Vietnam. Joint efforts will continue to be mounted in Vietnam, the surrounding waters and other border counties where military operations were conducted, such as Laos and Cambodia. There are efforts underway to obtain as much DNA sampling from POW/MIA families and extended families as possible. In this effort, time is the real enemy to aid in the identification process.

Finally, Walt Schmidt, Agent Orange Chair, submitted info about the updated listings of US Navy ships that were considered to be exposed to Agent Orange while on duty in Vietnam’s waterways. A link to the VA website will reveal the updated ships and other useful data (www.va.gov).

Report from the VAVS Community Council Committee

Jerry McDermott

February 1, 2012 – The Veterans Service Center has enrolled 400 veterans since the FY 2012 started 10-1-11 (1st Qtr stats). A large portion of that number resulted from the Oct. 15-16, 2011, Greece Ridge Mall Veterans Outreach program that VVA Chapter #20 and our partners presented to the public. Also, Ms. Lisa Wild further stated that FY 2012 1st Qtr shows an increase of 18% for travel reimbursements to veterans participating in health care and compensation examination during the period Oct-Dec. 2011.

Hospice Volunteers are needed both at the VAMC at Canandaigua, NY (and also through Lifetime Care assistance programs) for local veterans who wish to speak with another veteran during critical stages when they are facing some end life issues. Training is provided to anyone who wishes to assist in this worthwhile program.

The National Suicide Prevention Hot Line as reached a new monthly record for incoming calls. The number tops 16,000 phone contacts per month for helping veterans, or their families in crisis. For tech savvy vets there is also a “text support” number that is free of charge and anonymous. The short code # to use is: 838255 (Vetalk). This can be used from any mobile devise if vets in crisis prefer to use “texting” as a way to reach out for assistance.

Finally, the Care Giver Support Phone line has been used over 20,000 times since its inaugural debut in late summer of 2011.
With our Annual Dinner coming up in April, it is time to think about those who serve the Chapter as well as all veterans. There are several awards given each year – and we are fortunate to have many in both our Chapter and our community who work diligently to serve veterans. Consider those around you and nominate them for one or more of the following awards:

**COMMUNITY SERVICE AWARD**
The Community Service Award recognizes a group, organization or individual who has demonstrated a strong sense of community service and who favorably recognizes and relates to Vietnam Veterans’ issues.
My nomination for this award is ____________________________________ because _______________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________________________

**VETERANS’ SERVICE AWARD**
The Veterans’ Service Award recognizes an individual who has demonstrated outstanding dedication in improving the condition of Vietnam Veterans and/or the community. (There may be up to 3 Veterans’ Service Awards presented annually.)
My nomination for this award is ____________________________________ because _______________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________________________

**THE ROGER ROBACH AWARD**
The Roger Robach Award is given to an individual who has spent a minimum of ten years working for the betterment of all veterans in New York State.
My nomination for this award is ____________________________________ because _______________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

**DON AND RORI MURRELL HUMANITARIAN AWARD**
The Don and Rori Murrell Humanitarian Award is given to an individual who has accomplished an extraordinary effort on behalf of active duty military personnel and/or veterans and their families. (All individuals are to be considered for this reward regardless of Chapter or veteran affiliation.)
My nomination for this award is ____________________________________ because _______________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

Please consider nominating those who you feel are deserving of these awards and submit your nominations to the Secretary, Joe Peck at jpeck2@rochester.rr.com. You can also email Kathy Gleason at kathy14470@msn.com for an electronic version of these nomination forms. Deadline for all nominations is March 15.
NOMINATING COMMITTEE

Chuck Macaluso, Chair

General Membership Meeting March 8, 2012 -
Meet the Candidates Night at the Italian American Sports Club

Positions for nominations:
Four Executive (4) - President, Vice-President,
Secretary, Treasurer
Three Board (3) – Directors

The “new” Nominating Committee will also be elected by the membership that evening. A “to date” slate of candidates will be finalized by February 15 and published in the March issue of the BTL.

In order to vote in the Annual Election, voters must be a member for at least 30 days.

Only paid members with a DD214 on file by February 28 of previous fiscal year are eligible to vote. (For example - February 28, 2012 to vote April 2012).

A quorum is defined as 10% of VVA 20 membership as of 28 February of the previous fiscal year. Voting for candidates will take place between 6:30 PM till 7:30 PM, after which no new ballots will be taken and votes will be tabulated.

According to the National VVA Constitution, “Additional persons may be nominated by any member at the Annual Meeting.” These candidates will fall under the category of Floor Nominations.

Floor nominated candidates can only receive votes from members present at Annual Meeting. (A “Special Note” stating such will be placed March and April BTL issues.)

The slated candidates for this year (as of 2/12) are as follows:

Officer Positions
President Valentino Gatto
Vice-President Chuck Macaluso
Secretary Joe Peck
Treasurer Alan Frisa

Director Positions
Dan Corona
Rosemary Rossi-Williams
Hank Wallace

New York State Council Representatives
Fred Elliott Ken Moore
Valentino Gatto Nick DeLeo
Jerry McDermott Chuck Macaluso

Each candidate will address the membership at the March meeting stating their reasons for seeking an elected position.

Any member interested in running for any of the above mentioned positions, please contact one of the following Nominating Committee members:
Chuck Macaluso 225-8288
Dan Corona 406-6108
Pat Pudetti 753-6040

Editor's Note: Bios and photos of candidates will be in next month’s BTL.

FRONT & CENTER

NEW YORK STATE SENATE

Senator
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Charles Rabidoux USMC 1957-61

FRONT & CENTER

Do you know a veteran who is homeless?

The VA’s National Homeless Veterans Hotline

The Hotline is staffed at the Canandaigua VA Medical Center in conjunction with the National Suicide Prevention services. Studies show a huge correlation with needs required by one or the other services provided at the time of the call.

1-877-424-3838
24/7 365 days/per year

BETWEEN THE LINES | 7
And now for the conclusion of the story...

finding RALPH
by Vito Scarpetta

CHAPTER 11

The weather for April and May was outstanding. Each day was better than the last, and June was starting out just the same, that is until June tenth, of course. The day started out sunny with clouds moving in and a chance of rain for the upstate region, but as I drove further south, the skies turned cloudy very quickly and by the time I reached Mike's apartment just before twelve-thirty, the skies were steel gray with a very good chance of a deluge of biblical proportions.

I pulled into his parking lot across the road from his apartment complex. I didn’t see Mike and wasn’t sure if I was in the right parking lot. I called him on my cell phone and he answered. “Where are you?”

“The GPS said that I have ‘arrived at my destination,’ but I don’t know where you are. I’m in a parking lot next to a gray truck.”

“Hey, that’s my truck. I see you. I’m across the street, see me? I’m waving my arm.” I looked across and there he was waving. I shut the car off and walked over to his apartment. As I got closer, I could see that Mike had changed as we all did I suppose, but it was something that I wasn’t fully prepared for. Mike was built like a bull when we were in the Navy, but he put on some weight and lost some hair and had some wrinkles. It wasn't the 18 year old Mike, but it was Mike just the same. I’m sure he was thinking the same about me.

“Geez, you look great.” I said.

“Hey, you too. Shit, you haven’t changed a bit.”

We shook hands, hugged and patted each other’s backs.

“Come on, let’s get going before it starts pouring.”

“OK, I’m all set, just have to get my bags and we’re off. You’re sure you don’t want me to drive? The truck is really very comfortable.”

“No, let’s go, come on. I’ll drive the first thousand miles, then you can take over,” I said laughing and as I picked up one of his suit cases, I grunted. “Shit! What the fuck you got in this suit case? Are you staying for good?”

“Just my clothes and stuff.”

“Damn, you’re worse than my wife.”

We put his suit cases in my trunk, got in the car, turned on the GPS, keyed in Danny’s address and heard the GPS say, “Turn right, drive point two miles then turn left,” and we were off.

The deluge didn’t start until after we stopped for lunch. We were in New Jersey when it hit, and the rain continued until we got to West Virginia. We stopped for dinner along the way and finally stopped for the night in Jonesville, North Carolina. The next morning we went up to the motel office and had their continental free breakfast. It was free, but not very tasty or “continental,” so we left and stopped on the way at a Micky D’s and had a quick breakfast sandwich.

We were more than halfway to Danny’s, and the urge to go faster increased as we got closer. I was curious to see if Danny had changed as much as Mike or I had. I know I changed from the photos taken in nineteen sixty-seven, but I’ve always been told that I haven’t changed, and not surprisingly, I believed them or wanted to believe them. There goes that aging thing again. I could feel that aging vortex pulling me in and me fighting it. Just relax Vito, it’s going to happen whether you fight it or not. You can’t win, you’re not Dorian Gray. There isn’t a portrait in the attic aging for you.

As Mike and Danny spoke of their journeys I looked at each of them and could see how they aged and tried to pull the younger version out of their faces. I could get glimpses of the younger versions, but the old ones kept popping back.

CHAPTER 12

The hours and miles couldn’t go fast enough, but soon we entered the panhandle from Alabama. According to the GPS, we had less than an hour to go. The land was flat, green and hot. Small towns flew by and in the late afternoon we saw the Milton town limit sign. Five minutes later, Danny’s street, then Danny’s driveway. We made it. Danny wasn’t waiting outside for us on the driveway and I could understand that when I got out of the car. It was hot! Hot enough to suck the air out of your lungs. I rang the doorbell, feeling very anxious. Danny opened the door and, once again, it wasn’t the nineteen sixty-seven Danny, but the two thousand ten Danny. Yeah, he put on weight, but his eyes didn’t change, they were still the same old Danny’s eyes. Mike and I took turns hugging and backslapping Danny as we got out of the heat and into his air-conditioned house. Couldn’t imagine living here without air-conditioning.

After bringing our bags into our rooms, Danny offered us something to drink and after that drive it was welcomed. We sat at the kitchen table and drank his homemade ice tea. It was cool and refreshing and hit the spot.

“Well, how the hell are you guys?” Danny asked, and we each began to tell our stories of the past forty-three years. What happened to who, who married, who got divorced, how many children did we have, how many grandchildren, who was getting married, who was working, who was retired? It was like a smorgasbord of stories and events to come. As Mike and Danny spoke of their journeys I looked at each of them and could see how they aged and tried to pull the younger version out of their faces. I could get glimpses of the younger versions, but the old ones kept popping back. Yeah, the stories we told were of younger days, but the words were coming out of older mouths. But after a while it didn’t matter. Who gives a shit how old we are? We were lucky enough to make it this far without too much aggravation and loss of limbs. The important thing was we made a commitment to get together after all these years and we did. It was like old times.

“Smells good, what’s on for dinner?” Mike said.

“I’m making a pot roast with gravy, potatoes, okra. Nah, I’m kidding. You guys don’t eat okra.”

“Hey, if you fry that stuff. I’ll eat it. You certified to cook? Did Angie show you how?” I said.

“Hey, I can cook, been cooking for years and we’re still alive. And besides Angie is the worker now and I’m the homebody person. Got to have dinner on the table when she comes home or else. But no, we’re not having okra tonight. I also made corn and beans.”

It was almost 5:30 when Danny’s wife, Angie came home from work. Angie greeted us with a beaming smile and hugs, like we were old friends. I liked her instantly.

“Hi hope you don’t mind us staying here. I told Danny that Mike and I would get a motel room.”

“No. No. It’s fine. We have the room and besides, it’ll give ya’ll more time to talk. I don’t mind a bit. Danny hasn’t stopped talking about you two since you decided to come down and I feel like I know you already. Hey Dan, is dinner ready, I’m starving?”

Dinner was very good and Danny turned out to be an excellent cook. After dinner we went out to the front yard and Danny watered the very parched and not so green grass while Mike and I watched. We continued our talking about the Maury and the guys. The
conversation moved back into the house and we talked about what we would do for the next couple of days.

“I’d like to take a ride to Foley to see if we can find anything about Ralph. What do you think?” I asked Danny.

“Well, we could. It’s about an hour and a half drive.”

“Oh, that long?” After driving down from New York I didn’t feel like getting back into the car and driving. Danny suggested that we take a tour of Milton and the Naval Air Base at Whiting Field.

“Sounds good. We can check out Foley on Saturday,” I said.

That night we spent fifteen minutes trying to remember the rules for Spades, a card game that we played all the time on the ship. It was pathetic and funny to watch the three of us trying to remember the rules of a card game that we played practically every day. After a while we finally agreed that we had it correctly and began playing. Mike broke out the Johnny Walker Black Label that he brought with him for this occasion. I’m not a scotch drinker, but after several hands it wasn’t tasting too bad. Surprisingly, after several hours, I won the game.

The next day, Friday, we drove out to Whiting Field and toured the base. Danny worked the Ship Store while he was stationed there and finally retired from the Navy. From the base we drove to “downtown” Milton and stopped at the Veterans Memorial by the river. The memorial was a tribute to the men and women in the Armed Forces from the Milton area. The grounds were kept neat and clean and peaceful. From Whiting Field we drove to the Pensacola Naval Complex. This base was much larger than Whiting Field. We walked through the Ships Store and bought some ‘Navy’ stuff. I was looking for the familiar Navy blue dungarees and denim clothing, but Danny said that the Navy changed all of work dress code to a blue camouflage that looked nothing like what we wore back in the day. As I was looking through the racks of clothing, I looked up and a few rows ahead of me Mike and Danny were goofing off and laughing about something. I couldn’t help but stare thinking how they looked now compared to when we were together forty-three years ago. The same horsing around, not caring about what’s around the corner. Their laughing and shoving was the same even now. I plowed through the new and improved Navy clothing, not seeing anything that I liked and figured we weren’t the only things that changed in the past forty-three years. Now I had to get used to a new Navy.

It was almost one thirty. We were hungry, so we stopped for lunch before heading back to Danny’s. While we were eating, I thought about Ralph and maybe taking a trip to Foley to see if we could find anything new about where he might be. What if we did find him? What if he was completely different from what I remembered him to be? What if he hit the drugs and got really fucked up? I remembered Danny saying that Ralph was a hippie before he joined the Navy, so he could have gone back to that shit. I doubted it, he was too sick when he left to go do something stupid like that. But what if, what if he died? How would we find out, drive around looking through headstones in the town cemetery? I didn’t want to drive all the way down here just to find Ralph’s headstone. I had a picture of Ralph in my head that I hoped would still be the same, with some wrinkles of course, but just the same old boy that left the ship in Subic Bay. Something made me not want to find Ralph and spoil the whole picture I had of him. I had found Mike, Danny, Tonie and Mack and they confirmed that we had moved on and left the nineteen year olds behind. That was enough for now I guess. Let Ralph be the nineteen year old link confirmed that we had moved on and left the nineteen year olds behind.

“About an hour or so.”

“What do you think?” I said to Mike.

“I really don’t feel like sitting in the car for another hour, but if you guys want to go I’m in. You’re driving Danny, what do you want to do?” Mike said.

“Hey, it’s up to you two. I don’t mind.”

It sounded like neither one of them were up to the drive and at that moment I wasn’t leaning towards it myself.

“Yeah man we get traffic.”

“You get traffic here?” I joked.

“I’m only kidding. I was asking because Mike and I want to take you two out for dinner. Our treat. Where would Angie like to eat dinner, anywhere special?”

“No way, we’re treating you out for dinner and that’s it.” Mike said.

“Now you don’t have to do that. We could grill something here.”

“No way, we’re treating you out for dinner and that’s it.” Mike said.

“All right, but let me see what Angie planned for tonight first.” Danny called Angie and after a few minutes he hung up and said, “Well, she would love to go out for dinner, but not tonight. How about grilling tonight and tomorrow we can go out. She wants to go to the beach tomorrow morning then out to her favorite seafood restaurant, Wintzell’s Oyster House. It’s a restaurant chain from Alabama.”

We agreed and had grilled burgers with all the fixings that night. After dinner we talked a bit more, looked at pictures and cruise books then played another game of Spades while Angie watched a movie. I won again and was starting to develop a taste for Scotch on the rocks.

The next morning started out hot. We drove to the beach, south of Milton. The air was hot, the pavement was hot, the boardwalk was even hotter. It was even hot in the bath and changing rooms, but believe it or not, the sand was cool. I couldn’t believe it, but it was. We carried our lunch bags and cooler down to the beach as quick as we could and looked for some place to set up the umbrellas and blankets. The sand was binding white and pure, but the trickling waves coming in from the Gulf was starting to show the effects of the BP oil spill off the shore of Louisiana. The seaweed was breaking up and coming ashore in thick clumps leaving a green stain on the sand. I went in up to my waist, but didn’t like the feeling of the seaweed so I went back to the blanket and put on more lotion. It looked like the seaweed didn’t bother most people at the beach and they stayed in the water until the dead fish started coming in. Then some of the lesser beach worshippers started leaving the water. We watched as crews of State workers in their white overalls and yellow rubber gloves walked up and down the shore picking up samples of seaweed and dead fish. What a shame. You could see from the snow white sand and the soft incoming surf that these beaches were at some time, pristine and beautiful to swim in or just look at. Hopefully in time, they will be back to their natural beauty.

We stayed on the beach for several hours then packed and drove along the beach road until we stopped at a beach themed store with a very peculiar name, Geronimo’s Outpost. Here the tourists were out in force, the stores and their wares were just what I needed in order for me to return home. After getting scalped and losing a lot of my money to Geronimo, we left Geronimo’s and headed for a quick snack/lunch before driving home for a shower and rest stop.

Next on the agenda was dinner and this time we were going out. We were all in the mood for fish so we headed out to their favorite fish restaurant, Wintzell’s Oyster House. Wintzell’s is a seafood restaurant chain from The next day, Friday, we drove out to Whiting Field and toured the base. Danny worked the Ship Store while he was stationed there and finally retired from the Navy. From the base we drove to “downtown” Milton and stopped at the Veterans Memorial by the river.
Alabama and being from the South, everything, and I mean everything was fried! Now I have to admit at some point in my life I did enjoy fried food, but at this time in my life my stomach had a hard time remembering how to handle fried food. Mike and I ordered the sampler platter and when it arrived I was almost sorry I ordered it, it was huge! I was still a little full from lunch, but the platter looked so good in spite of it being a fried bounty. All the fish, oysters, clams, crabs, okra and hushpuppies were arranged on the platter along with the accoutrements just waiting for me to dig in. I did. It was good and tasty, but later that night...

After eating we drove to a nearby mall for a Starbucks and looked for more souvenirs to bring home. That night we played spades again and unbelievably, I won again and without the help of a scotch and water. After the game, Mike and I packed our bags in preparation for the long trip home in the morning.

CHAPTER 13

I looked down the alphabetical list of graduates and there I found; William Ralph McKibbon. I was hesitated for a moment afraid to see what I would find.

After a quick breakfast and hugs all around we each promised that we would be at the Maury reunion on October 2011 in Norfolk, Virginia and would call at least once a month to keep in touch. I felt sad and somewhat discombobulated about leaving; for two reasons: One, leaving Danny and Angie, who were perfect hosts to two guys that they hadn’t seen in 43 years; two, we were leaving without finding Ralph, and I felt like I let Ralph down and me too for that matter. I think Danny must have sensed that or maybe I mentioned something earlier, but he said, “Don’t worry, I’ll look for Ralph. I’ll drive over to Foley and see what I can find.”

I felt somewhat relieved, but still felt like I let both Ralph and myself down. I didn’t complete my task, or did I? I looked at Danny and Mike and although they looked like themselves, they did look older and different from the pictures I had back home. The pictures that pulled me back to nineteen sixty-seven. What the hell? Was I finding Ralph or was I trying to find me like Geri said I was? Who knows. I just know now that I found Mike, Danny, Tonie and Mack and I didn’t want to lose them again. I couldn’t wait another forty-three years to go by before we got together again. I guess I loved these guys in the same way I loved my childhood friends back in New England. It was young and the world was less complicated.

I felt a lump in my throat. “Thanks Danny. Let me know if you need any help with that. Call me. Any time you want to.”

“I will. You take care now.”

We stared at each other for a second or two then I pulled him to me and we hugged goodbye again.

I moved aside and Mike did the same as I said my goodbyes and kissed Angie’s cheek. “I know you’ll take care of this guy, really get tough and make sure he quits smoking.”

“Yes, I’ll try, but you know how thick headed he is.”

I reached into my bag. “Here, this is for you.” I gave Angie a sparkly tie bag with a bracelet inside that she admired as she helped me pick out a sparkly tie that I wore that night for Angelina and a few things for Geri and my daughters at Geronimo’s yesterday. “Mike and I would like to thank you for putting up with us and letting us borrow your husband for a few days.”

“Why thank you, it’s beautiful.” She said. “I’ll think of you and Mike every time I wear it.”

Mike and I got in the car and drove off. It was a quiet Sunday morning, it felt like it was going to be another hot day already. We drove through town with little or no traffic on route 87, to route 31 then to the interstate and headed back home. I was thankful that Mike liked driving, the road was long and tiring for me. After another overnight layover, this time in Virginia, we made it back to Mike’s place mid-day on Monday. Mike did most of the driving and I napped so I’d be ready to drive once I left him at his apartment.

“You know we never did find Ralph.”

“Hey, no sweat, Danny said he would follow up and drive over to Foley.”

“Yeah, I know, but I feel like I let him down. I...we should have gone to Foley while we were down there. We were only an hour or so away.”

“Let’s see what Danny finds out. Don’t worry.’

“I’m not worrying, just a little disappointed with myself. Should have...”

“Hey, you have a long drive ahead of you.”

“Yeah, see you. Hey, don’t forget, next time you go see your son in Ohio, stop by.”

After saying our goodbyes and promising to call, I left and drove home.

CHAPTER 14

I sent a letter to Danny and Angie just to see how they were doing.

June 28, 2010

Hello Angie and Danny,

We’ll be almost 2 weeks since our historic meeting. Time sure does fly by. I am really happy that I woke up three months ago and decided to find you, Mike, Tonie and Ralph. I wish I was 100 percent successful, but Ralph is still among the missing. I hope he is enjoying life and I’d like to think that maybe he is thinking of us somewhere here on earth. Danny, if you have the time and not too busy keeping up with your grass, maybe you could drop by Robertsdale on your way back home, and see if anyone knows where Ralph is.

I put together some of our pictures for you and one for Mike, hope you like it. You can put it in your “snore” room so Angie won’t complain about it conflicting with her decor. (only kidding Angie)

I’ve been keeping up with the oil spill stories and can’t imagine how bad those pristine beaches now look. Glad we had a chance to see them before the oil invasion.

You guys have to have a ride up here, you’ll love it. We have rolling hills and a lot of green grass. No sand, just grass and trees. It doesn’t get cold until late October so you have a wide window of opportunity to see some really pretty country.

Let me know how Tonie’s visit went or if he made it back. Maybe someday we can all get together. If not soon, then by the time we have our next US Maury reunion in 2011.

Stay healthy, keep in touch, and thanks again for letting Mike and I stay in your home. We enjoyed your southern hospitality.

Vito

CHAPTER 15

Several months later, after talking on the phone with Danny for almost an hour, I had a feeling that led me to the internet. I Googled Ralph, maybe I’d get lucky. I keyed into the Google search box; ‘W. Ralph McKibbon, Foley Alabama’ which I’ve done before, but this time “Class of ‘65” pops up and thought, funny I never saw this before. I remembered that Ralph was about my age and I graduated in 1965 so I click on it. I looked down the alphabetical list of graduates and there I found; William Ralph McKibbon. I was hesitated for a moment afraid to see what I would find. My fingers were on the mouse, but not
Bereavement Focus Group

Second Wednesday of Every Month
6:30 - 7:30 pm

Next Meeting: Wednesday, March 14
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Rochester, NY 14609

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marianne.w.sernoffsky.ctr@us.army.mil
or
Christina Griffith at 585-338-7400, x2225
christina.m.griffith@us.army.mil

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Second Edition

I clicked on his highlighted name and up pops a very young picture of Ralph with his Prophecy and his Class Will. It read; ‘Ralph McKibbon still wants a new car. And Ralph McKibbon leaves his fictitious P.E. Excuses to Bobby Walker’. Moving it, I took another breath and moved the mouse over Ralph’s name. I clicked on his highlighted name and up pops a very young picture of Ralph with his Prophecy and his Class Will. It read; ‘Ralph McKibbon still wants a new car. And Ralph McKibbon leaves his fictitious P.E. Excuses to Bobby Walker’. But something that I was least expecting and blew my findings away was the word under Ralph’s picture, “Deceased.”

I just stared at the word “Deceased,” watched it blur and wilted it to go away, thinking that it couldn’t be true and that the boy in the picture was not dead, but alive somewhere playing pool, sweet talking the ladies and drinking a beer. But it was. There wasn’t any more information about Ralph. I needed to find out more about his death, how, when and where did he die. I tried looking up Ralph’s friend, Bobby Walker on the alumni listing to see if I could contact him, but he wasn’t there. I had to find out how he died and where and who was there with him when he finally did die. Good ole boy, Ralph. I hope he died smiling.

I had to share this with Mike, Danny and Tonie. Mike was working so I called Danny, “Danny, I found Ralph.”

“What? Where did you find him?” he said.

“Well, I didn’t exactly find him. He’s dead.”

The line was quiet for a few seconds and then Danny said, “Where, what happened?” I began to tell him what I went through and the results.

“The will that he wrote back then, well, that sounds like Ralph, he never did like P.E. or any strenuous work. Shit, you know Ralph. Damn! I have to drive through Foley real soon and check with the school. Maybe they will be able to tell me some things about Ralph. I mean somebody had to call them or tell them that he was dead. Maybe they have a record of what happened.”

“I wish you would. Shit. I wish Mike and I were back there, we’d come with you,” I replied.

“I know and would love to have you guys down here with me, but I understand, Damn, that just about ruined my day. Thanks,” He said half joking.

“Sorry, but I couldn’t keep this to myself, I had to share it with someone and you answered the phone first.”

I called Tonie next, but no one answered so I left a message on his machine for him to call me. Mike was working, so I held off on calling him to let him know until that evening.

Later that evening, Tonie called back just as I was dialing Mike’s number and I told him what I found. He was saddened by the news, more so I think because of his own medical condition. He knew how vulnerable people could be at this age, but thanked me anyway for letting him know. I called Mike and got him as he walked through the door.

“Hey, what’s happening?” He said.

“Just get home?”

“Yeah, long day. What’s up?”

“Well, I found Ralph.”

“You’re shitting me? Where did you find him? Is he still in Foley? I’m sure you told him we were down there. Did he curse you out for not driving over?”

“Nope, none of the above. Ralph is dead. Well, according to his school web site. I called Danny this morning and...” I went over the whole story and told him that I called Danny and Tonie to let them know.

“Yeah, we still don’t know the particulars, how and when. Danny said he would follow up and find out. Damn. It would be something if Ralph died recently. I mean, maybe it was him giving me some kind of signal from wherever to contact you guys. You know, after we drove down and all, I stopped having that feeling.”

“What feeling?”

“I told you. I felt like I had to find you, Danny, Ralph and Tonie. What the hell, why would I have those strong feelings and then nothing?”

“I don’t know, but you’re freaking me out.”

We said nothing for several seconds. “Well, let me go. I have some things I have to get to on my ‘to do’ list.”

“What are you talking about. It’s 10:15 at night. Who works on a “to do” list at this hour? Are you pissed at me?”

“No, no, just a little disappointed with myself for not looking for Ralph when we were down there.”

“Would you stop that shit! What fucking difference would it have made? He was probably dead and buried long before we got there.”

I thought about it. “Yeah, you’re probably right, but I just can’t help thinking that he wanted us to find him, his grave stone, something, some effort by his old friends. But you’re right, no use beating myself up for not going to look for him.”

And that’s the way we ended it. As far as I was concerned we didn’t really confirm that Ralph was dead. Could have been a mistake by the webmaster at Ralph’s high school. And if we leave it at that and not pursue the “Deceased” under the picture of that skinny kid at Foley High School, as far as I was concerned, Ralph could still be among the living, alive and well. He could still be out there, playing pool, drinking a beer, brushing aside his long straight “graying” hair from his eyes, calling his next shot and making it. Yeah, and I could be nineteen again.

Epilogue

I had stopped re-reading the pages of this epic journey in December. I was looking for things that I missed or just looking for something else to say, but I knew that I was just stalling, I wasn’t quite ready to say goodbye to the project. I don’t know why, but I just wasn’t ready. Maybe because I didn’t know what to do with it once I finished. Who knows? Several months later I finally had to admit that the story was finished and I had to have someone edit it for grammatical and spelling errors. I printed a copy for my daughter Michele to read and edit for me. She is very good at editing and writing and felt she would do a fine job. After a little prodding she finally returned the edited copies. It was a bloody mess, a lot of red ink. There were numerous grammatical and spelling errors to be corrected as well as clearing up or putting some more substance in some of the events. I then gave a copy to my youngest daughter, Nicole for her review and found that she needed a lot more prodding, but she came through with some good comments.

So after I finally got back my edited drafts, a few more months went by as I made all the corrections and re-read the final draft again, and about this time Spring happens and I was busy with around-the-house get-ready for spring projects.

It was early May when I opened up the file on the iMac and reread it again. The story was ready. But ready for what? I thought. What was I going to do with this? Who would care enough to even read it? Then one day in the mail I received a copy of my local Chapter 20 Viet Nam Veterans monthly newsletter. There was a featured article about someone who was in Viet Nam and his short story. Then it hit me; I could publish the story in the newsletter. Viet Nam Vets could be the audience interested in reading my story. They could be wondering what happened to their buddies and what they were doing, but never took the time, didn’t know how or just couldn’t find them. We could publish several chapters each month in the newsletter if it was too long for one edition. I’d like that. So I contacted the editor and mentioned it to her. She was interested in reading the draft. Being an author herself, she directed me to a website that published her story.

It was early June. I was going through the process of reading the publisher’s website and getting release documents from the major characters in the book when I received a call from Danny.

“Hey Vito, Angie found Ralph.”

“What?” “I didn’t know if he was pulling my leg or what. Did Angie really find Ralph alive and well and talked to him? Is that what he meant? I felt my pulse racing as I thought of the positive. Ralph was alive.
"Where is he, did she talk to him" I said.

"Well, no. She didn’t talk to him, she found his grave. Ralph is buried in Barrancas National Cemetery right here in Pensacola. We drove by it several times when you and Mike were down here. I never thought of him being buried here. Ralph died in 1972. He was born on April 10 and died on April 8. He was just twenty-five years old.

"What.....how did she find him? What made Angie look in Barrancas Cemetery?"

Danny started to tell me how, but I stopped him. "Angie’s not home now is she? I’ll call back tonight and talk to her and find out just what she did, like an interview."

"I could tell you what she did."

"No. If you don’t mind I’d like to hear Angie tell me."

"Okay. Angie should be home from work around 5:30 or so."

"All right. I’ll call back. Thanks for calling and letting me know."

I didn’t call that evening but did call on the following Saturday. Danny answered the phone. "Hey Dan, how are you? Is Angie available to talk?"

"Sure, I’ll get her. She’s talking with her brother, he’s visiting with us."

"Hey, I can call back tomorrow or the next day."

"No, no she’s right here."

Angie got on the phone. "Hello Vito, how are you?"

"Just fine and you?"

"Okay"

"So Angie, a year, almost to the day after we left, you found Ralph. How did you do it? What made you look for him in Pensacola?"

"Well, after reading your story I thought there had to be a way to find Ralph through the internet, so I Googled his name and up came several McKibbons. One was a doctor in North Carolina."

"Yes, I called him last year. He was surprised that there was a McKibbon in Alabama. No relations though."

Angie continued. "Anyway, I somehow got a connection to Barrancas National Cemetery in Pensacola and found an alphabetical listing of military personnel interned there. And there he was; W. Ralph McKibbon, born April 10, 1947, died April 8, 1972."

"Well, you know Angie, this makes you the heroine of the story. You found Ralph. It also means that I have to add an epilogue to the story. But it’s worth it, at least we know that Ralph is officially buried at a veterans national cemetery."

"Yes, it’s sad that he died so young, but now we know. Danny said he will go to Barrancas and take a picture of the grave site and send it to you. He’s also going to try to find out a little more about how he died."

We ended the call.

I sat back in my chair and pulled up the story on my iMac. I began writing this epilogue. I started thinking, it all made sense now. The reason I felt the way I did a year ago. The strong pull to find my shipmates, and to find Ralph. Somehow, Ralph wanted all of us to find him. He may have started with me, from where ever he is, or maybe he tried other friends and they weren’t successful or maybe they were. Who knows? I like to think he wanted to be found by us, Danny, Mike and I, his old shipmates. He got me going, gave me the urge to find him. He didn’t want to be forgotten in a grave in Barrancas National Cemetery. He wanted us to know where he was. I know it sounds kind of far-fetched, and I don’t believe in spirits, but I have no other explanation. Why after forty-three years did I get that urge? And then, after I set things in motion last year, contacted my shipmates, drove down to Danny’s, drove to Pensacola and passed Barrancas National Cemetery, why did the feelings I had been feeling all along just stop? I like to believe it was because Ralph knew we were on the right track and getting close. He knew we would eventually find him so he let us be.

Ralph was found.

In memory of
W. Ralph McKibbon
1947 – 1972

Ralph in 1965.
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Valentino Gatto .. vgetto@rochester.rr.com · 227-2741
Joe Peck .................. jpeck2@rochester.rr.com · 734-9046 (c)
Ray Melens .................. rmelens@aol.com · 392-2079

DIRECTORS
Lou Cavicchioli .................. lcavic243@gmail.com · 757-412-8485
Dan Corona .. nycorona@juno.com · 406-6108 (c)
Mike General .................. mwgeneral@aol.com · 227-4383 (h)
Tom Hetherington .................. vhether@aol.com · 964-7964 (h)
Chuck Macaluso, GRVM .. chuckmac66@yahoo.com · 225-8288 (h)
Jerry McDermott .................. jmcdermott@murphyolan.com · 313-8188 (c)
Don Nealon .................. dnealon1@rochester.rr.com · 392-6052 (h)
Dick Oleksy .................. roleksy@yahoo.com · 663-5255 (h)
Pat Pudetti .................. patrickusmc1@yahoo.com · 753-6040 (w)
Ron Trovato .................. Ronbo215@gmail.com · 544-8470 (h)
Hank Wallace .................. whwnbt@rit.edu · 334-5352 (h)

STATE COUNCIL
Nick DeLeo .................. ndeleo52@yahoo.com · 334-7043 (h)
Fred Elliott .................. felliott@rochester.rr.com · 288-5756
Valentino Gatto .................. vgatto@rochester.rr.com · 227-2741
Ken Moore .................. 17CAV@rochester.rr.com · 392-0269 (h) · 576-9000 (c)
Jerry McDermott .................. jmcdermott@murphyolan.com · 313-8188 (c)
Pat Pudetti .................. patrickusmc1@yahoo.com · 753-6040 (w)

REGION 2 DIRECTOR
Herb Worthington .................. hwornington1@comcast.net

COMMITTEE CONTACTS
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MARCH 2012

3 SAT  • National Anthem Day*
5 MON  • Board of Directors, 7:00 pm
8 THU  • General Membership Meeting, 6:30 pm (Italian American Sports Club, 1250 Buffalo Road)
11 SUN  • Daylight Savings Time - Spring Forward!
14 WED  • Bereavement Focus Group, 6:30 pm, Army Strong Community Center, 2035 Goodman St. North, Suite 103, Rochester, NY 14609 (for more information call Marianne at 585-339-3308)
17 SAT  • St. Patrick’s Day
30 FRI  • Operation Local Soldier, 6:00 pm at Merton Williams School in Hilton, NY (200 School Lane)
31 SAT  • US ordered the first combat troops to Vietnam on March 31, 1965

*Francis Scott Key wrote “The Star-Spangled Banner” on September 14, 1814. The song officially became the United States national anthem in on March 3, 1931. March 3rd of every year is observed as National Anthem Day.

And where is that band who so vauntingly swore
That the havoc of war and the battle's confusion,
A home and a country should leave us no more!
Their blood has washed out their foul footsteps' pollution.
No refuge could save the hireling and slave
From the terror of flight, or the gloom of the grave:
And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!*

- The Star-Spangled Banner, Francis Scott Key

MEETINGS

BOD
March 5, April 2, May 7, June 4, July 2,
August 6, September 10, October 1,
November 5, December 3

NYSC Meetings Owego, NY
March 24, June 16, September 29

Membership
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March 8, April 12, May 10, June 14, July 12,
August 9, September 13, October 11,
November 8, December 13

Vietnam Veterans of America
Chapter 20, Rochester, NY
P.O. Box 12580
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