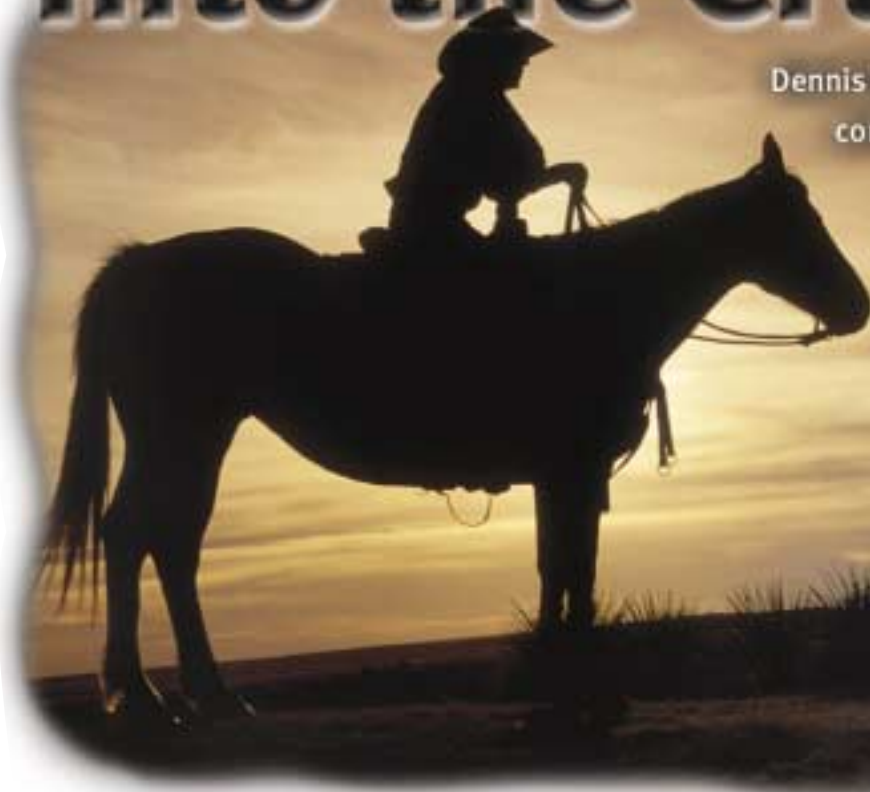


Into the Crucible

Dennis Ott knew the importance of
commitment, compassion
and courage.

personal essay by Eric Groot



Dennis Ott didn't tell me he'd served in Vietnam until last winter, well after he'd come under cancer's deadly grip. He knew his life would be a matter of a few weeks, perhaps a few months. We talked on the phone for 15 minutes or so, discussing everything from the weather to his sickness and his wartime exposure to Agent Orange.

"Eric," he asked, as we were saying our good-byes, "make me rich and famous, all right?"

"Maybe famous, Otter. But don't count on rich," I replied.

Awhile later, I bundled up a package of photos that I'd taken of him the previous summer. I sent them to a mutual friend in Palisade, Neb., who delivered them to the extended-care facility where Otter was spending his final days.

Memories

In retrospect, and given the circumstances, the photos were

pretty appropriate. They were of Otter on a horse, leaning forward in the saddle and clasping his reins. He was silhouetted against the sky. It was his last ride — the great sunset, the cowboy at the end of the trail.

I think that is the way Otter wanted people to remember him. It's certainly the way I will. He was all hat and all cowboy, one of the most courageous people I'll ever know.

At his funeral, his family told me how much he loved the photos. He had them framed and hung on the walls above his bed. His family placed them next to his coffin during the ceremony. After the funeral, Otter's brother approached me and requested a couple more copies of some of the pictures.

It was the highest compliment anyone ever gave me. Otter was a good man, a man of conviction, compassion and commitment to friends, family and community.

He was also a man of self-

admitted faults. He lived hard, probably drank too much and got in a few too many barroom brawls. But if you needed someone to help, he was the first one there.

"The guy had guts — guts way bigger than you'd ever think that little body could hold," said Chuck Schroeder, a close friend who'd known him for many years, at his eulogy. "Whether it was riding bad horses, picking up wild-eyed broncs or gathering wild cattle, when others would hesitate or squirrel, Otter would step in and take the risk to get the job done. It wasn't just reckless courage — well, usually it wasn't."

Friendship

I met Otter on a spring afternoon in 1994. Our friendship grew from that day forward, and when I made an occasional trip to Palisade, we'd stay up late into the night with friends, drinking cold beer or icy

margaritas and solving all the world's problems, if only someone would listen.

He had a rare, quietly confident quality. And his steady, unassuming presence made him ideal when I needed photographs of a cattleman at work. Livestock sensed the ease of his nature, and I never saw them unsettled in his presence.

It was a delight to work with such a cool, levelheaded person who didn't mind having thousands of photographs taken of him. He did this to help me out, not out of vanity. He enjoyed the process of working with friends, not just the product of having his mugshot in print.

When I paused to reload my camera, he'd light up a cigarette. We'd gaze across the valley, scan the row of cottonwood trees along the river and listen to the songs of meadowlarks.

We talked about cows, cowboys, politics and his days as

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a bronc rider. He asked questions about photography and writing.

But he never mentioned the war.

Sacrifice

Perhaps somewhere, on some level, he knew it was something that eventually would kill him. Remaining clear of the bullets and shrapnel that shredded many of his buddies, he came home alive, but he brought with him the sinister seeds of his demise.

Exposed to Agent Orange, the deadly herbicide the military used to clear the jungle canopy, the cancer in Otter's body began to spread, first down his spinal cord, then into his organs, until it was too late.

While the war has slipped into the pages of history for many, it remains very real for Otter's daughter, son and grandbaby.

My family still bears the scars of the conflict, although I was too young at the time to grasp much of its meaning. One of my most vivid memories of childhood was a fistfight that broke out between my dad and my uncle, who had bitter disagreements over whether our country should be involved in the conflict.

It took a decade before they spoke to each other again, and even now, a quarter century after the last of the U.S. troops were airlifted from Saigon, they rarely have much to do with each other.

These wounds of Vietnam remained open and unhealed as we waited for the procession to arrive at the cemetery. It was a hot July morning, and the sun had baked the grass among the headstones.

So many

The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) color guard, a collection of seven or eight veterans, gathered in the shade of a cedar tree. One of them smoked a cigarette. One propped his arm against the tree. All of them peered over their shoulders every few seconds to see if the hearse was coming.

When it did arrive — bringing with it about 200

people from town — the old soldiers came to order, lining up with flags unfurled and rifles shouldered tightly against their bodies.

I thought about these men and the sacrifices they'd made. I wondered what they'd seen, what painful secrets they, too, held deep down.

My thoughts then turned to Otter's newborn granddaughter. I wondered if she'd ever fully comprehend the sacrifice her grandpa had made or if she'd ever fully understand how a conflict so long ago has profoundly touched her today at such a tender age.

So many men had jumped into the crucible of Vietnam, I thought. So many didn't come home. So many didn't have the chance to become fathers, let alone grandpas.

In this regard, Otter was fortunate. But growing up without a grandpa wouldn't be so lucky for the baby.

When the doctors gave Otter three weeks to live last fall, he forced himself to live another seven months — just long enough to see his grandbaby. In his final days, he took her to Wal-Mart, toddling up and down the aisles in his electric wheelchair, showering her with toys and clothes, a lifetime of love in a single afternoon.

Then, a couple of days later, Otter let his life go.

I hope his grandbaby grows up to fully appreciate the man her grandpa was, to know the importance of commitment, compassion and courage, and to comprehend why some sacrifices must be made.

Perhaps most importantly, I hope that someday she can see in the photographs what kind of man her grandpa truly was: A father. A cowboy. A man who loved his country.

"Vaya con dios, old pardner," Schroeder said in the closing remarks of his eulogy. "God needs a good hand, too."

REFERENCE



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► Who to contact for help with marketing Angus cattle or for information about Association programs

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