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Button

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BUTTON

Chris Knaggs – MPP – May 2018

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I walked through the War Memorial, a high glass and marble monument situated on a hill overlooking the James River. The names of over 12,000 servicemen killed in combat since World War 2 adorn the Shrine of Memory. Each name is etched precisely in glass or marble, the best view in Richmond for the names of the dead. My wife has an uncle on that wall. Carlyn C. Thompson. His name is high up on the glass under the title of World War II. I look up at that name. Never knew him. Know little about him. Ran a jeep over a mine in New Guinea. Died just a few months before the war ended. I always make a point to look at the name and loudly say "Hello Carlyn Thompson". If no one is in the Memorial I talk to him about the events of the day. So far no response. That's probably a good thing.

As a volunteer docent I looked around the property. The commanding expanse of Richmond and the breaking James never tires. I picked up litter that drifts in from Jefferson Davis highway. To honor the dead the grounds must be spotless.

I looked for visitors to greet. Rounding into the shrine I saw a girl sitting on a marble bench, staring at her phone. The dappled light of the glass panels danced at sandaled feet. I prepared my standard greeting. "Welcome to the Virginia War Memorial. Can I help you? Are you from the area? Have you been here before? Are you a veteran? We have exhibits inside, bathrooms, water." I stopped short. It was only 40 degrees outside and wet. The girl, maybe twenty, white, slight, was covered in tattoos. She wore shorts and a sleeveless T-shirt. Metal pins poked from her ears, nose, cheeks and eyebrows. Possibly a hipster from the University. Many students lived in Oregon Hill across the highway. On nice days they came to sun or cut through the War Memorial to the river. It wasn't a nice day. She's came over to stare at a phone.

My first reaction was to step back, do an about face, and head inside to the safety of the main lobby. My inner voice said to quit being a chickenshit. You're not very brave for a 30-year Navy veteran. A customer is a customer – even one locked into a phone's glow. I walked over to begin my standard speech. Her short black hair and long bangs waved when she said, "Get lost, asshole." I stepped back, stuttering. The suddenness of the rude remark threw me off. She stuck out her tongue. Metal posts reflected light from the glass wall. Small metal marbles pinched on both sides of her cheeks. How could she talk? I counted five metal thingies in that derisive tongue. Hearing voices behind me I saw an honorable escape. Backing off I threw my hands up in surrender. She returned to the phone.

The voices came from a couple, early sixties, my generation. They were bundled up sensibly in coats, scarves and gloves. I was cold. My blue sport-coat, tie and spiffy War Memorial shirt were not warm enough. Looking up into the glass the couple mouthed names. Occasionally, at the Memorial, a relative showed up. Helping someone find a name is a satisfying part of the volunteer work. Approaching the couple, I launched into my speech. The nodding smiles and glimmer of understanding told me I had allies.

I walked the couple further into the Shrine of Memory. I pointed out the town of Bedford. A huge list of dead ran under that town's title - the single greatest loss of any community in World War II. Not sure that was exactly right, but it choked up visitors. Most of it happened within a few hours on D-Day. That adds spice to the story.

We walked together through the shrine slipping past the tattooed girl. Her eyes never left the phone – mine slyly never left her. A large white statue titled 'Memory' graces the far end of the chamber, perhaps the most photographed characteristic of the Virginia War Memorial. The couple took pictures. Everyone did. They asked me if I was a vet? I told them I was. Spent 30 years in the submarine force. They thanked me for my service. At that the girl rose up and screamed, "Don't thank him for his

service. They're all killers. His service is shit!" The slight girl walked over belligerently, ready for a fight. Fists curled, she stomped a foot hard, then spit. Before turning away, she flipped us all off. Actually, I think she flipped me off – the couple only got hit with friendly fire. At the end of the Memorial she lit a cigarette, took a drag, then threw the lit remainder on the Memorial floor. I couldn't speak. The couple couldn't speak. The girl did a double flip off. The underside of her arms had as many tattoos as the top. Holding the phone she sprinted across the highway.

I apologized to the couple. They worried about me. Was I offended, could they do anything for me? Hell yes, I was offended and pissed, but it happened so fast and unexpectedly I just stammered "Wow, wow. . . wow." Reactions had slowed in my dotage. I suggested we go inside to see the educational exhibits. A sad feeling of déjà vu' churned in my stomach. Just like coming home from Vietnam.

I ran a movie for the couple. A 4D patriotic concoction full of strobe flashes and special effects. It even snowed. I didn't stay, I'd seen the movie a hundred times. I shivered; it may have been from finally warming up, but that girl had me wired for sound.

At the front desk, I said to John, another volunteer, John, "I just had the weirdest thing happen."

"I know. Tattoo Tilly. I saw it on the security monitor".

"Tattoo Tilly?"

"Yeah, Tattoo Tilly. The one with the iron works coming out of her mouth. Oh your first time with her? Hadn't realized that. Should've warned you. I won't even go out if she's there. The staff won't either. I changed my shift from Wednesday to avoid her. My luck, now she's coming on Thursdays." John was an Air Force veteran. I always told him he wasn't really part of a military service – just a golf club. He said, "Honestly, if the war didn't give me PTSD I've gotten it from that girl. A real piece of work."

I relaxed. It wasn't something I did. "So, is she homeless, or crazy?"

John wound up speaking non-stop. He had strong opinions about Tilly. The girl was a student at Virginia Commonwealth University. A proponent of every left-wing, freaked-up issue. Whales, slaves, renter's rights, Confederate monuments, even cat neutering were on her radar. The focus of her bile was all things military. She haunted the War Memorial, constantly giving shit to volunteers and visitors alike. Once she launched a bunch of crap on the Governor on Veterans Day. "I mean real crap, dog and pig poop. The cops took her away."

"So obviously she can be arrested."

"Not so much. It's her First Amendment right. Like I said, won't go out if she's there. No one will. Just avoid her, she's looking for trouble. Looking for a lawsuit. Looking for a free pay day. Luckily she usually just stares at that phone for hours on end. The only thing I do is watch on the monitor. Make sure she doesn't have a can of spray paint."

I walk behind the desk to sit. "I saw her throw a cigarette down in the Memorial. That's littering."

"Call the cops. They won't come. They want nothing to do with her."

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I didn't see Tilly for three weeks. On that day I led a class of high school students, good kids. They listened intently, no phones out, great questions. High school kids aren't normally jazzed by the whole history thing. I arrived at the statue, when Tilly came around the corner. She yelled, "Don't listen to him. He's a purveyor of death. This place is grounded in shit. They're just trying to get you to enlist. So you can kill innocents, take slaves, get rich." The tongue hardware slurred her screaming. The kids huddled towards the glass for safety. Tilly waved at the names. "They're all dead. Dead because guys like him wanted it that way." She pointed at me, "Don't let these fucking Nazis fool you!"

That did it. The Nazi slam was not free speech. “Shut up. Get out of here!” I surged forward, finger pointing. The kids now had their dander up. Suddenly obscenities came from them back at Tilly. The kids were protecting me – who would have thought? Tilly stammered words I didn’t quite get. Voices blended and grew louder. She took out her phone. Pushing it forward Tilly began to tape the confrontation. Behind me 20 phones came out recording Tilly. “Kids, go inside. Tell the front desk what happened. Have them call the cops.”

I didn’t leave. She stared. I stared back. Tilly blinked first. She screamed, “Screw you, screw you!”

“Do you want to talk about this?” I really didn’t want to talk about it. My goal was to keep her here until the police came. I spoke calmly, deliberately, measuring every word. “Obviously, this memorial upsets you.” I waved. “You must be cold. Let’s go into the sun. Take in the view, relax.” She had that same sleeveless shirt on – the same shorts.

“I’m not going out there with you. You’ll rape me. I know your type.”

“Look at me. My raping days are long over. See, no gun.” I motioned her towards the hill overlooking the James. “Let’s be cool. I know you’re smart. I heard you’re at the University. Please . . . please, no trouble. I’m only a volunteer.”

“A volunteer in death, you celebrate death!”

Trying to placate, I didn’t argue. No police yet. She stayed with me as I walked out of the shrine chamber onto the grounds.

The view of the James River opened fully. I found it inspiring. She took it in. Tilly smelled the air, city air cleaned by the river. Still too cold for my taste. No police yet.

She said, “What a waste of space. Condos could be built here.”

“You don’t seem like a condo type to me, Tilly.” I couldn’t tell where one tattoo ended and another began. A jumble, maybe some Chinese writing, a cat with fangs, sayings in Latin.

“My name is not Tilly. You’re trying to make fun of me. I’ve got my phone on. It’s listening.”

That surprised me. Thought the name Tattoo Tilly was real.

“Oh, sorry. Don’t know where I got that from. What is your name?”

She crossed her arms. “None of your business”

“Well, my name is Joe.” I shuffled forward onto the Walkway of Honor. The Walkway held memorial bricks. The bricks could be purchased by anyone. You spent a couple hundred dollars for a brick that cost \$25. You didn’t have to be dead to have a brick. Could say what you want; didn’t even have to be military related. The money went to the War Memorial educational foundation. I pointed to the James, “Pretty isn’t it?”

“It would be prettier without this monstrosity.” She motion towards the Memorial.

I kept looking for cops. For help. They could see me on the security monitor.

“Why do you come here if it upsets you so much? Word is that you’re the War Memorial’s most frequent flyer.”

“I do it to save people.” She glanced down at 300 memorial bricks. Veteran names graced most. A few organizations and companies had bought in. A couple memorialized cats or dogs. She pointed at two bricks, “Warmongers. Companies that make killing machines. Part of the military-industrial complex.”

In theory she had a point. These were bricks from General Dynamics and Boeing. But they lay next to ones from a local donut shop and a brewery.

“Military-industrial complex. Haven’t heard that one in about 30 years. Where did you get that?”

She let loose, like a spitting cobra. I got an earful. Her writing professor at VCU told her. He was Jewish, she said, and they know stuff. The whole military thing was a money conspiracy. This veteran love-fest kept the dollars flowing to the nation’s killers. She pointed to some painted rocks. “Look, you’re even brainwashing kids. The imperialist US Flag is over all of them!” The rocks, painted by school children, had a few flags, also bunny rabbits, kittens, and the James River. “I bet you even have classes for babies!” Mentally I conceded another partial point. The War Memorial did events for young children. Movies, coloring books, games, rock painting. Thought of it as fun, not orientation, but a point nevertheless. “Nazis. All you are Nazis, training new Nazis.”

That set me off. The hell with the phone.

Forcefully, I said, “Nigger.” It just came out.

Her eyes froze open, mouth dropped. She stepped back, stammered, and cried out, “How dare you. How dare you use that word!”

“That’s what it feels like!”

“Feel what? You racist pig!” She balled her fists.

“Calling a military man a Nazi is the same thing as calling an African American a nigger. So who’s the real racist here?” I made my right hand look like a pistol. I pointed at her head. I shot.

She seemed perplexed, maybe scared. She couldn’t speak. Raising a hand to point, she stopped, still stunned and confounded.

“The purpose of this place is to honor the fallen.” She opened her mouth but I put up a finger. I wanted to poke it in her eye. “I get your point. Technically this place is about the cost of war, but sometimes glorification sneaks in.”

Her metal-filled tongue very visible, she opened wide for another tirade. Again, words failed her. She’d been put off her game; being agreed with was unexpected. Then she threw a fit.

She stomped all over the bricks. “No, No, No, No!” The middle finger came up again. “I hate you, I hate all of you!” She motioned names on the wall. Pushing me aside, she ran full-tilt towards the highway. I lost her behind the Memorial.

Inside, I asked John about the cops.

“Not coming. Not for her. Unless she shoots someone.”

“Really? She caused a major disruption with the school kids.”

“Didn’t shoot any, did she? Anyway, you two looked like you were having a moment.”

I went to look for my high school kids in the theatre.

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Early that afternoon the War Memorial went quiet. It can get that way, spooky on the slow days. My wife’s uncle Carlyn Thompson stayed quiet, John had gone home. I sat alone at the desk. The War Memorial staff huddled in a meeting behind locked doors. I had the place to myself to catch up on reading, a book about the days after Japan’s surrender, a mere couple months after Carlyn was killed. Head down, I didn’t hear the woman come in. Surprised, I jumped up like I was doing something wrong. I stammered, then began my welcome speech.

The woman stopped me. “I’m looking for Button.”

“I don’t know of a Button. There’s a Baxter on the staff, but he’s in a meeting.”

“No, this is a girl. I’m sorry, her real name is Amy.”

The woman continued; she was heavysset and her voice was a husky apology. “The police told me she would be here. She created a disturbance.”

“Oh, you mean Tilly?” Now the woman looked confused. “Oh yes, she was her. Yeah, there was a problem. But, no police. Last I saw she ran across the road.”

The woman leaned wearily on the front desk. A pant entered her voice. Her breathing was labored, or perhaps hyperventilating. “Can I sit down? I’m not well.”

I fell clumsily over the two chairs behind the desk. “Please come over here.” She came around, never letting go of the desk. She flopped down in the chair. I took her place at the counter.

“Do you need anything? Should I call someone? We have water.”

“No.” She began apologizing. Button, real name Amy, was a handful. Always protesting something, getting arrested or nearly arrested. Since her father died, it had been awful. Button hated everything. All Authority was branded evil. College should have given her balance, but it only made her more radical, upset, and hateful. The woman’s breaths came in despairing spurts. I left to get water. I hoped to get one of the staff to come out, I needed help. Someone with more empathy than I. There was no one to even wave at behind the glass door.

I brought the water. “My name is Joe. Tilly . . . sorry, I mean Amy, was a tad rough on a school group. She upset people, said a few things.”

A tear eased down the folds of the woman’s face. She sniffled with a slight snort. I handed her a rough paper towel we used to clean the desk. The woman hit her chest three times.

“I’m so sorry. I’m always saying sorry for her. She hates anything military. Well, she hates a lot of things, but war stuff the worst.”

“I sensed that. She spends a lot of time here though.”

“Sitting in the white building with the statue, looking at her phone?”

“Yes, the main shrine.” I pointed through the big glass windows of the atrium.

An overwhelming sadness settled on her like shroud of grief. I knew too many widows and now, surely, another sat in front of me.

“Button’s looking at a picture of her father. Maniac’s depression is what the doctors call it. When she gets down she stares at the picture endlessly. He died when Button was eight. A medical man with the Marine Corps. A corpse-man, something. Hard to keep that all straight. I don’t even know where Iraq is.”

I went for a book behind the desk. “My God, I bet he’s on the wall. Let me look it up!”

The woman grabbed my arm before I could get the book. “He’s not on the wall. Martin died in a truck accident, in Germany, on the way home. Button checked a long time ago.”

“I’m so sorry.” The War Memorial Wall contained only for those who died in combat. I let a minute of silence pass while the woman re-lived the pain. What a shithead I was.

She brightened and wiped her tears with the rough paper. “Button and her Dad were very close. She loved him so. They would plant flowers together. Her favorite was carnations. It always made me jealous.” Another painful memory curtained down her face, taking away the brightness. “Joining the service was a mistake for Martin. He never fit in. A strange man, I guess. He hated injustice, authority, hated a full-time job. At least he had trouble keeping one. He came from a military family. Father,

mother, brothers all served. We were losing our home, almost starving. Then he joined. Thought medicine would be a peaceful role. But the noise, death, the wounded, it all tore him up.”

I got more water. I gave her more of the rough paper, wishing I still carried a handkerchief.

“I’m being a burden. You don’t want to hear this. I need to find Button.”

The woman moved to rise, but fell back in the chair. “Sometimes when she gets crazy like this, I take her home for a few days. Try to feed her. She tells me every bit of food I eat is illegal or evil. We argue. Do you know I blamed her for Martin’s death? Can’t believe I said it. Told Button that Martin went into the military just to take care of her. That’s what I said. Didn’t mean it, but once you say these things, they don’t go away. We’ve never reconciled, not really. She’ll come home but we’ll argue. Sometimes the fighting wears her out. She’ll calm down, sleep a little, maybe even eat. The fighting almost kills me, but I deserve it. What am I going to do?” A soft, gurgling, wail escaped her throat.

What to say? I was terrible at emotional stuff. Not a hugger. Action had been my venue. I needed to do something but what? I offered a lame remark about maybe the VA could help.

She waved me off, fanning herself with a ringless hand. “Don’t worry about us. We get a partial pension from Marty’s service. Do you know Button is on a scholarship from the American Legion? She doesn’t know that. Thinks it is from those border doctor guys. If she knew, she’d reject it. I couldn’t afford to send her to VCU without it.” Putting her fingers up to her lips in the silence sign she continued, “Don’t ever tell her and God don’t tell the American Legion. A buddy of Marty’s arranged the whole thing. Mabel was Marty’s nickname in the Marines. I don’t know why. I heard from a bunch of them. They thought the world of Mabel. Said he was a great doc but very weird. Marines are honest. If the Legion knew about her, they’d go crazy. She has a reputation all over the area. She’d go crazy, they’d go crazy. Please say nothing.”

I promised it would be my secret.

The woman looked around the atrium filled with quotes from famous Virginians, mostly military. A model airplane caught her attention, then a collection of military coins. "This is a nice place.

Our happiest moments were down in Charleston. Marty was at the Naval Hospital there. We had a home in military housing. Oh, the flowers we grew. Azaleas, roses and carnations. Button thrived, lots of programs for kids. Marty didn't fit in but he made a go of it." Silence followed, a pleasant memory lost quickly. "Then he ended up with the Marines in Iraq. Wrong place for him. He hated authority but couldn't say no to it. That was his family talking there. We were in Charleston when the news about Marty came in. People were very nice, supported us, cried with us, but it changed Button. That little girl never came back to me."

She attempted to get up again. I rushed over to grab an arm to get her on her feet and holding onto the desk. "I'm exhausted. Don't get out much. Seems like the only time I do is to deal with Button."

I followed her around the desk. She might fall; the heavy breathing scared me. "This was nice, Joe. To talk to an adult, someone who understands, who listens." No one ever told me I was understanding or a good listener.

She wavered to the front door. I hurried ahead. "Sorry I didn't get your name. Rude of me. I'm not good with names."

The woman grabbed my outstretched hand in both of hers. She held tightly, apology in the grip. "I'm Winifred Morgan. Live on the South Side near the old grain mill. If you're ever there say hello. Just ask for Winnie. Winifred wouldn't mean anything to them." A world of nicknames I thought. Winnie, Tattoo Tilly and me, Joe the Jerk.

I helped her into the old Buick. The backseat was gone, the chrome trim peeling. I waved goodbye to Winifred. Again, she begged me for silence. As far as Button was concerned, we never met.

For three weeks I looked for Tilly, Button - I settled on Amy. That was her given name. Never saw her. Other volunteers reported that she still haunted the Memorial. Still cursed at volunteers and guests. Still stared at her phone.

On Wednesday morning I filled in for another volunteer. The Volunteers were mostly old men, we're always getting sick, and dying. I came around into the Shrine and saw Amy. Same sleeveless t-shirt on, more tattered, maybe dirtier. Same black shorts as before, but with warmer weather not so out-of-place. I spied new hardware: pins in the fleshy part of her hand between thumb and forefinger.

I moved slowly, maybe give her time to see me and leave. Immediately she jumped up onto two tattooed feet. "You racist pig, you racist pig!"

"Easy - just saying hello. Just cruising through."

I walked past smiling, but uncomfortable. She stomped one foot hard several times. Going around the Memory statue I grabbed a cigarette butt, then checked the eternal flame; in high winds it wasn't always so eternal.

I turned towards the city overlook. From behind I was grabbed forcefully on the shoulder, "I talked to my professor. He told me calling someone a Nazi was nothing close to using the N word."

"Do I need to say it out loud?"

"No!" She yelled like the mere mention of the word might cause global warming. "The professor says you're just trying to confuse me. Nazis do that. They confuse the truth. They . . ."

I touched Amy on the forehead. The action surprised her. I looked in her eyes. In a deep, authoritarian voice I said, "What did I say, what did I say?" I was forceful, menacing, almost dangerous. I could be dangerous. Had been in the past. Being old didn't make that go away.

Meekly, calmer, leaning away from my finger she said, "No Nazi bullshit." I could see her mother in Amy. One a child self-mutilated, one eating herself into an early grave. Their eyes both reflected the green tint of the James River.

Unexpectedly she followed me to the Walk of Honor. I sensed her seething, her hissing, heavy breathing. I turned to a girl ready to spring, on the balls of her feet, preparing for battle. My hands down and folded, almost prayer-like, I said, "Let me show you something. It will be of interest, I think. And no, I'm not going to rape you or expose myself."

We were standing close enough for me to smack her. I wanted to. She took out her weapon of choice, the phone. I pointed down. "Take a picture of this." Her toes almost touched the brick. On it, new letters read:

HM3 MARTIN MORGAN
FOR MY DAD
LOVE BUTTON

Amy didn't comprehend the words at first. "What?" Her phone slipped back into a front pocket. She knelt to touch the words, ran her hands across them slowly. She stood. I awaited my congratulations and thanks. She kicked me hard in the shin, twice.

"You sonofabitch. You sonofabitch. Now you've made him one of you. My dad is not a war criminal. My dad is not one of these animals." She motioned around the War Memorial. She made to kick me again, but I jumped back stuttering apologies she never heard. Now she was crying, spitting, snorting obscenities I never heard from a sailor. She ran away but not before flipping me off. Not once, but a hundred times in a windmill of middle fingers.

For months I kept expecting to see the brick demolished, broken into red dust. Whenever I checked it was still there. I thought I was doing a good thing; no good deed goes unpunished, as they say. I thought it might bring closure, thought it... well, I didn't think. Joe the Jerk. A name on a wall is not closure, it's just a name on a wall. Same for bricks.

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Curious, I Googled Amy Morgan. Her name was often followed by comments: 'Whack, ugly, communist, whore-bitch.' Amy had her own webpage, and there the comments were worse, like self-abuse, worse than tattoos and pins. I found her Dad's name and an offhand reference to the nickname 'Button'. It covered my use of it on the brick, but I still had broken the mother's confidence. Why did I interfere? It wasn't my way. Never be nice again. Joe the Jerk.

I ran into Amy twice by accident. A Tuesday the first time, again filling in for someone. I turned the Memorial corner and there she was, on the bench, phone in hand. I didn't get close. I had a prepared speech, apologies mostly, some explanations, but seeing me, she stood and shied away. No words, no middle fingers, but she broke for the street. Another day, getting out my car, we almost fell over each other. I couldn't get my speech out. Those green eyes bored into me, then she ran down the hill to the river so fast she stumbled, went down on one knee, and rolled. She held her stomach, wind knocked out, but she soldiered on never looking back. I watched the running tattoos all the way to the river.

I did see Amy on the news. One report was about taking down Confederate monuments; Amy was for that. Another broadcast was on the disproportionate incarceration rate of minorities; she was against that. Some of what she said made sense, but the anger was distracting. The stations were more interested in Amy's unusual look than her opinions.

By midsummer, my guilt had subsided. A lesson learned about Interference in another's life. The world was not a TV sitcom. John and I sat at the desk greeting a steady stream of visitors. We closed at five so the crowds were thinning out. John indicated one of the security monitors: "Well, there's Tilly." I started. I didn't want anyone to know what I had done with the unasked-for brick. If Amy came in to yell at me the secret would be out.

On the Walk of Honor, Amy kneeled. I knew it. She waited until I was on duty to destroy the brick. Well fine. I wouldn't stop her. John tapped the glass saying, "You know she's been less of a pain in the ass lately. Still don't like going near her, but no one's reported any verbal abuse. She spends time on the walkway. Must like the view. Seen her a couple times just sitting cross-legged on the bricks. Must be doing some Hari Krishna meditation thing."

I resisted going outside. I watched the monitor closely. Wishful thinking, but maybe, just maybe she had kissed that brick. Then, as suddenly, she sprang up, looked up at the security camera and raised her middle finger. John and I jumped back in our seats. John said, "Same old Tilly."

After she left I went to the walkway. Wind whipped around the shrine and back down the hill. The Morgan brick was fine. Wishful thinking made it appear cleaner than the other bricks. A single white flower blew up the bricks spinning around looking for a home. Had Amy brought it? More wishful thinking, but it wasn't a carnation, just an escapee from an old floral wreath. I retrieved one of the painted stones, one with a U.S Flag. I grabbed up the flower, and thought twice. No American Flag, but one with a picture of the James. I pinned the flower on HM3 Morgan's brick with the rock. In the wind I heard a voice. The voice of my wife's uncle Carlyn C. Thompson. The breeze brought the words, "Now you understand. Come over for a talk."

